



Hopes, Fears, & Reality

A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN CHARTER SCHOOLS IN 2011

Robin J. Lake and Betheny Gross, Editors

Center on Reinventing Public Education
University of Washington Bothell

January 2012

Chapter 3

Equal Access: Creating Fair and Transparent Assignment Systems

Tom DeWire

Those of us involved in expanding Baltimore City’s school choice program throughout the past several years have come to learn that, while school systems approach the design and implementation of choice programs differently, all school systems face common questions and challenges. How can choice be set up to align with the values of the school district and the families in the district? What assignment system will ensure the best fit for all students? What makes the choice process fair?

Until Maryland’s charter school law was adopted in 2003 (Maryland Public Charter School Act, 2003), Baltimore City Public Schools offered very limited school choice, primarily only for high achievers. Choice expanded as a result of the charter school law and because of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s small schools initiative, which turned all of the district’s high schools into schools of choice in 2004–05 (Neuman-Sheldon, 2005). By 2009, there were 42 charter schools in operation in Maryland, 33 of them in Baltimore City.

Choice expanded to middle schools in 2009–10, when Baltimore closed or turned around several low-performing middle schools and opened new “transformation” schools for Grades 6–12. Unlike most traditional schools, the transformation schools did not have geographic enrollment zones, so by the spring of 2010 the district had effectively removed geographic zones from one third of the district’s schools with middle grades. Today, all high school students select their school, one third of incoming sixth graders must choose their school from 32 options, and elementary students can opt into 26 charter schools.



As options increase for students, options increase for school systems as well. When designing and implementing school choice policies, districts must make several key decisions regarding the enrollment and transfer process, enrollment preferences, and the lottery and placement process. The path a district takes should ultimately reflect the values and priorities of the district and the families within it. To understand, it's worth a close look at how these issues are being addressed for Baltimore's emerging choice system, in comparison with Boston and New York City, two school districts with well-established choice processes (Boston Public Schools, 2009; Toch & Aldeman, 2009).

THE FIRST CHOICE: ENROLLMENT AND TRANSFERS

Every district has unique school enrollment patterns and embedded values to consider when creating policies to increase school options for students and families. In addition, district officials must regularly evaluate whether the implementation of choice is consistent with the initial intent of the policymakers. Districts need to consider which entity—the central office or the school—will control enrollment activities such as lotteries, timelines, and rules regarding student transfers, as well as the costs of managing the choice enrollment process.

To place students into choice schools, Baltimore, Boston, and New York City all have centralized enrollment lotteries (see Table 1)—Boston and New York for entry at every grade level and Baltimore for sixth and ninth grades. While Boston and New York have formalized school choice at every grade, options in Baltimore are limited in the elementary and middle grades. However, Baltimore, like New York, offers out-of-zone or choice placements in elementary schools based upon the seats available after zoned students enroll.

Table 1. Summary of District School Choice (charter schools are not included in table)

Grades/Schools	Baltimore	Boston	New York City
Elementary	Zoned Informal out-of-zone choice	Full choice	Full choice, limited seats
Middle	1/3 choice 2/3 zoned	Full choice	Full choice
High	Full choice	Full choice	Full choice

Note: Each district has some exceptions to the system listed here. Charter schools are not included.

In Baltimore, schools, rather than the district, still control many enrollment decisions. About 28 percent of Baltimore students enrolled in traditionally zoned elementary and middle schools live outside the zoned area for their schools. Many Baltimore students who are enrolled in out-of-zone schools entered the school in a nontransition year—for example, seventh instead of sixth grade—so did not participate in the central lottery. In such situations, principals determine admissions case by case. In addition, Baltimore’s student placement office handles only about 30 percent of cases in which students transfer after the official choice process. The case-by-case nature of school-level enrollment and transfers raises some concerns about school access and fidelity of the choice processes and creates significant challenges in monitoring and regulating the timing and effect of student transfers between schools.

A formal school choice enrollment and transfer process, coupled with new school options, can arguably increase access for students to all school options. In 2010–11, students formerly zoned to underperforming traditional middle schools now had formal access to 32 options. Students could apply to 28 of those options, including three charter schools, through a centralized choice process, while the other four options, all charter schools, required direct applications to the schools. It is likely many students would not have considered these options were it not for the formal enrollment system.

To ensure that in-district transfers align with the instructional program in schools, Boston has established transfer windows. The windows allow transfers at the end of the first and second marking periods—only a few exceptions are made for transfers after January. In addition, Boston restricts the number of times a student can transfer: once a year during elementary school, once total during the middle grades, and once during high school. In New York City, high school students can transfer only through October of ninth grade, but for a few exceptions. Baltimore, meanwhile, does not restrict when students can transfer.

Districts that are considering increasing and formalizing school choice at the elementary grades and controlling transfers in the middle and high school grades will have to wrestle with increased staffing costs. On a per-student basis, the placement staffs in Boston and New York, cities with highly centralized enrollment controls, are considerably larger than Baltimore’s full-time equivalent (FTE) placement staff (see Table 2).



Table 2. Estimated Size of Student Placement Staff

	Baltimore	Boston	New York City
Enrollment School Year 2008–09	82,866	55,371	985,921
Student Placement Staff (FTEs)	7	25	190
Students per FTE	11,838	2,215	5,189

THE SECOND CHOICE: ENROLLMENT PREFERENCES

Districts must carefully weigh the trade-offs inherent in offering students enrollment preferences based on various criteria, versus giving equal access to all students. In making choice assignments, urban districts might consider sibling enrollment, geography, historic feeder patterns, transportation and walk zones, and performance criteria such as academic achievement, interviews, and auditions. Such preferences appease certain constituents and, in the case of geographic preferences, can cut costs or improve safety. But preferences also complicate the assignment process.

Districts and schools have recognized that families often prefer to have siblings enrolled in the same school, particularly in the elementary and middle grades. Boston, New York City, and Baltimore recognize this preference and give siblings of students, through eighth grade, a greater chance of acceptance into those schools. Boston also has a sibling preference for high school. In some states, charter schools allow an admissions preference for siblings or the children of school founders.

Some districts and schools have recognized that families prefer to attend schools within their communities. In Boston and Baltimore, students can attend a school outside of the geographic zone where they live, but students who live within that school's zone receive preference. During the 2009–10 school year, 72 percent of Baltimore students were attending a middle school within their proposed zone. If this pattern continued as the new choice process began, 28 percent of students entering middle grades would have the opportunity to go to a school outside their geographic zone.

Historic enrollment and school feeder patterns can inform how to craft the geographic preferences in a way that addresses family and community concerns. As communities generally consider local schools part of their identity, and travel

time and transportation are a concern for families of younger students, respecting these historic zones makes good sense. But planners know to make exceptions as well. For example, students at one high-performing K–5 school in Baltimore were permitted to transition to a high-performing K–8 school, instead of the lower-performing middle school to which they naturally would be zoned. The district decided that it was more important, and fair, to move the students to a school of similar quality to the school they had been attending.

Where historic enrollment and school feeder patterns are related to neighborhood and gang rivalries, implementation should include the involvement of community groups and school and city police. After a review of safety and gang issues and major road geography in Baltimore, the geographic preferences were revised.

Boston created a preference for students close enough to walk to a school, regardless of the zone in which they live. The school system sets aside half of each school’s seats for applicants with “walk zone priority,” which means the students live within one mile of an elementary school, 1.5 miles of a middle school, and two miles of a high school.

All three districts have schools that require academic entrance criteria, interviews, or auditions. Particularly in New York City, schools have some flexibility in how they manage the interview process. Most schools with academic entrance criteria are high schools, including some career and technology academies; but districts do have some middle-grades programs with academic prerequisites. For example, Baltimore’s Ingenuity Project provides a program for high-achieving students at a handful of middle-grades schools, with admission based upon grades and test scores.

THE THIRD CHOICE: LOTTERIES AND PLACEMENT

The lottery process is one of the most important levers for determining student placement and is an essential tool to ensure fair access to the district’s schools. A lottery is also one of the most complex systems to design and operate and is the process the public and even school staff understand the least.

The school assignment process in Boston, Baltimore, and New York used to work, for the most part, like this: Students would rank their top preferred schools. For a given school, the district would run a lottery that included all students who made the school their first choice. If the school still had room after accepting those

students, another lottery would select from among students who ranked the school second, and so on. Students who enter this sort of lottery must play a strategy game of sorts, considering not just their true preferences but the school's overall popularity.

This approach, called a sequential lottery, had many critics. For starters, the process was not clear: A large number of students, and even some counselors, did not fully understand the savvy strategies of rank order that would give them a better shot at getting into at least one school of their choice. For example, if just about everybody was applying to a student's top three choices and her fourth-choice school was not as well known, the student might be better off listing her actual fourth choice first, because the chances of her getting into her first three favorite schools were slim.

A student who didn't know to use this strategy would essentially be wasting her top choices—a common problem under this model. For the 2010–11 school year in Baltimore, for example, 4,111 students selected four popular schools as choices two through five. But those schools filled up solely with students who had picked the schools as their first choice, meaning that the remaining students had useless selections in those four slots. Because of wasted choices, 11 percent of students who entered the lottery that year did not receive placements at all.

In response to criticisms that this selection model was not transparent or fair, the New York public schools adopted a new approach in 2003, with the help of Al Roth at Harvard Business School, who had worked on the national system to place medical residents. In 2006, Boston began using a version of Roth's model, called a simultaneous lottery, or deferred acceptance. Baltimore followed, adopting a simultaneous lottery for middle schools for the 2010–11 school year and for high schools a year later (Toch & Aldeman, 2009).

As with a sequential lottery, students in a simultaneous lottery order their choices. But there is no need to apply strategy to the rankings. The lottery for each school includes all students who listed it, regardless of the ranking. Of the schools a student gets into, he is placed into the one he ranked highest.

Compared to a sequential lottery, in a simultaneous lottery fewer students get accepted to their first choice. But many more students get matched to a school they ranked at all. For the district, a simultaneous lottery has the added benefit of minimizing transfers, because students can express true preferences in their

rankings. As well, a simultaneous lottery can match schools that have academic entrance criteria with the highest performing students in the district, independent of how students rank the schools. In Baltimore, students eligible for competitive-entry schools are ranked by score, so a student with the highest score in the city is guaranteed entry into a selective school whether she ranked the school first or fifth. This means that high-scoring students can consider less traditional schools without the risk of losing access to the selective schools.

MORE SCHOOL CHOICE CHALLENGES

CHARTER SCHOOL LOTTERIES

Entrance into charter schools primarily occurs at the school site, with an application and process specific to each school. In New York and Boston, the authorizing of charter schools happens at the state level. Admissions are completely school based, which means that the cities' departments of education have almost no control over enrollment in these schools, and parents must enter multiple lotteries if they hope to have their children attend a charter school.

By contrast, Baltimore charter schools are authorized locally and have been part of the city's high school choice process since the inception of the process. For the 2011–12 school year, three of seven middle-grades charter schools opted into the central choice, application, and lottery process. Enrollment in Baltimore's elementary charter schools is still completely school based.

For many charter schools, the school-based lottery is a central part of their culture and marketing efforts. But in districts with high poverty, large numbers of non-English-speaking or new immigrant families, and transportation challenges, multiple school-based lotteries greatly complicate access to charter school options. To make access more equitable, it is worth considering a streamlined application process, similar to the common application for college admissions.

OPENING AND CLOSING SCHOOLS

The portfolio management strategy used in many urban school systems involves opening new high-performing schools and closing underperforming ones. This presents unique challenges for school choice.



The primary challenge is aligning the timelines for approving new schools, marketing, and enrolling students. For the most part, Baltimore and New York have phased in new schools, taking one or two grade levels of students at traditional entry points, such as kindergarten or ninth grade. Schools that open by the first round of school choice have the best opportunity for full enrollment, while those opening after students have already made their choices will have a hard time meeting initial enrollment targets. Of course, a school's location, theme, athletic offerings, and other factors all influence families' choice decisions. Ensuring that this information is available by the time school choice fairs are held and guides are published is ideal but not always possible.

When schools are closed, districts must transfer current students—a process that comes with its own complications. When the vote to close a school is timed well, student school choice decisions can occur prior to the lotteries so that no placements are influenced by an invalid school choice. New York phases out its schools to be closed one grade at a time, while Baltimore has closed entire schools all at once and also phased out schools to allow on-track students to complete their senior year. In Baltimore, students are given transfer options to complete their education at another school. The process is modeled on the regular middle and high school choice processes but is customized for the schools and students involved.

Sometimes parents fail to make any choices, even after district officials reach out to them. When that happens, administrators assign the children to whatever schools have space left. Boston and New York have multiple lottery rounds. While they reach a majority of students in the first round, there are always students who do not participate in any of the rounds. In Baltimore, Boston, and New York, those students usually are administratively assigned to schools based on geographic location and available seats. In 2009, New York administratively assigned about 1 percent of students to high schools (Toch & Aldeman, 2009). For the 2010–11 school year, Baltimore worked one-on-one after the choice process with about 7 percent of entering sixth graders and 9 percent of entering ninth graders to make administrative assignments. In Boston, about 10 percent of students were administratively assigned after the second round of school choice (C. Chin, personal communication, March 2010).

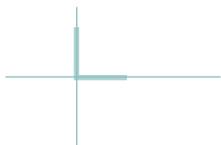
SCHOOL ENGINEERING

School assignment policies and implementation structures can be leveraged to have a significant impact on student achievement and the climate and culture in a building. These policies and structures send a message about what a district values. Along those lines, there are several reasons a district might consider proactively engineering schools. First, school engineering might provide for academic diversity across school options. Second, a school system can create programs that benefit at-risk students, for example, by using choice to target overage and underachieving students for accelerator programs. Third, a district can use choice to ensure that students with special needs are not overrepresented at any given school to a degree that negatively affects achievement levels, culture, and climate. Last, districts can manage choice in a way that provides selective schools to attract middle-class families, without decreasing the academic diversity at other schools. In Baltimore, 33 percent of first-time ninth graders attend a school with academic entrance criteria. If high achievers are overly concentrated in certain schools, this can hurt the demographics, culture, and academic learning climate of other schools.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD IN BALTIMORE

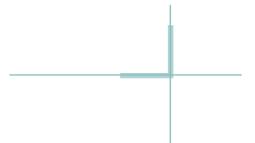
Baltimore City Public Schools are continually evaluating how to improve school choice options and operations and adjusting the assignment system to adapt to the growth of great schools. In the years to come, the district is likely to consider all of the approaches to school engineering mentioned previously. And the district may take more steps to make the process more efficient and effective for both families and the school system itself.

The district might consider a more centralized enrollment process, akin to New York City's and Boston's processes. (While it makes sense for a district to take on more enrollment functions in this way, easing concerns around access to schools, such a move comes with costs. Baltimore's student placement staff now is efficient but small, authorizing no more than two in five middle and high school placements and transfers after school choice lotteries were conducted.) Other changes the district might adopt include school choice at all grades for out-of-zone entry, enrollment windows for student transfers, and a secondary selection process for choice seats remaining after the first lottery.



To make selecting the right school easier for families, the district is likely to consolidate its many school choice fairs into one comprehensive event and adopt a single choice timeline too. All school choice information for the public may be accompanied by student performance data from each school, and the district may create an interest inventory students can fill out to see which schools match their personal priorities.

Through efficient management, robust information, and personalization, the Baltimore City Public Schools can meet their ultimate goal: a choice system that reflects the values of the community and gets all students into schools that are right for them.



References

- Boston Public Schools. (2009). *Introducing the Boston public schools 2009: A guide for parents and students*. Boston: Author. Retrieved October 28, 2011, from <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/files/IntroBPS09%20English.pdf>
- Maryland Public Charter School Act (2003). Retrieved October 28, 2011, from http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/programs/charter_schools/docs/md_charter_school_laws
- Neuman-Sheldon, B. (2005). *Making choices: A look at the Baltimore City public schools high school placement process*. Baltimore: Fund for Educational Excellence.
- Toch, T., & Aldeman, C. (2009). *Matchmaking: Enabling mandatory public school choice in New York and Boston*. Washington, DC: Education Sector. Retrieved October 28, 2011, from http://www.educationsector.org/usr_doc/ChoiceMatching.pdf

