

Student-Assignment Policies in Other Cities

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DRAFT

D.C. Policy Brief #2: Student-Assignment Policies in Other Cities

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Introduction

In this policy brief, we discuss seven cities' policies related to assigning students to schools. In doing so, we highlight key issues and principles involved in student assignment. To illuminate the local context, we also discuss the student-assignment policies of local jurisdictions including Montgomery and Prince George's counties in Maryland, as well as Alexandria City and Arlington and Fairfax Counties in Virginia.

Student Assignment

Every jurisdiction has a policy or at least a practice regarding student assignment that is driven by certain values and policy goals. Most common among these values are equity of access to quality, walkability/proximity, diversity, cost efficiency, and choice. Although jurisdictions generally share these values, they balance or prioritize these values differently, combining residence-based and choice-based ingredients in formulating a student-assignment policy. Jurisdictions prioritizing walkability/proximity and cost efficiency tend to tie student assignment more to residence, making one neighborhood school—or a small number of nearby schools—available to a student. Jurisdictions prioritizing choice tend to allow students to select from more than one school even at the cost of added travel.

Selected Cities

Of the U.S. cities we examined, the four most comparable to Washington, D.C. in terms of their population size, land area, and school distribution are Baltimore, Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle—all long-standing urban jurisdictions with relatively dense and diverse populations of residents and students.¹ Three of the four cities—Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle—have recently completed major revisions of their student-assignment policies. All three cities—Seattle in particular—chose to reduce the level of choice in favor of a greater connection between schools and their neighborhoods and local residents.

Three other U.S. cities that are less statistically comparable with Washington, D.C. but that have student-assignment policies or practices worth reviewing are Denver, New Orleans, and New York. In Denver, public school enrollment increased by approximately 11,400 students between 2005 and 2012.² Although it is unclear to what degree the gains resulted from economic factors, a baby boom, improved attractiveness of both the traditional and charter schools, or a mix of factors, the result is noteworthy. In New Orleans, the conversion of the majority of New Orleans public schools to charter schools after the damage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 has created the only major city in the United States in which the vast majority of the students attend charter schools. And New York City has the greatest number of students and schools within commute distance of any school system in the nation.

San Francisco's policy allows families to select at all levels from schools across the city with little weight given to where students live. New York City's policy gives families flexibility in selecting schools while providing an assignment of right to some—but not all—students at the elementary level. Boston's policy allows families to apply to at least six school options, each of which has been selected

¹ Other cities with similar population totals were not compared because their populations and schools are spread out over 2–5 times the land area (e.g., Nashville, TN; Columbus, OH; New Orleans, LA; Louisville, KY; Milwaukee, WI; and Portland, OR). Although Cleveland, OH, Honolulu, HI, and Oakland, CA have a similar land area and percentage of residents under 18, their total populations are only half that of D.C.'s, and their population densities and school distributions are correspondingly different from the District's.

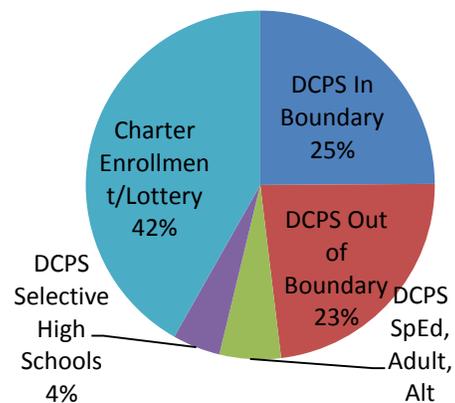
² DPS Strategic Regional Analysis, Spring 2013, at 8.

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administratively in part based on its proximity to the residence. Baltimore assigns all elementary-level students to neighborhood schools based on where they live, but requires all students to choose for grades six and above from a city-wide menu of schools. Seattle’s policy is the most neighborhood-centered of the four, giving students at all levels a residence-based assignment but allowing students to apply to “Option schools” city-wide and making 10% of the seats in every neighborhood school available to students from other attendance zones.

Washington, D.C. is unique among these cities in that it has 60 other local education agencies (LEAs) providing K–12 education services on a city-wide basis in addition to D.C. Public Schools (DCPS).³ Within DCPS, students are currently assigned by default to a residence-based “attendance-zone” school at each level. However, DCPS also provides choice options via lottery, application-based selective admissions, and administrative placement. In SY 2012–13, 25% of D.C. public school students attended their geographical attendance-zone DCPS school, 23% of all public school students attended a DCPS school that is not their attendance-zone school—but could have been their school of right through feeder rights—and 42% selected a charter school.⁴ Four percent of all public school students attend DCPS selective high schools and 6% of all public school students are attending special education, adult education or alternative education DCPS schools.⁵

City-wide Distribution of Type of Student Assignment/Choice 2012-13



³ Only New Orleans (with 44 LEAs) comes close.

⁴ Derived from SY 2012–13 DCPS student-enrollment data and OSSE charter student-enrollment data.

⁵ OSSE Student Level data, Roster File, includes some non-public students in DCPS SpEd, Adult, and Alt.

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Table 1: Comparison Cities

SY 2012–13	DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	SAN FRANCISCO	BOSTON	BALTIMORE	SEATTLE	DENVER	NEW ORLEANS
Student Assignment	Neighborhood school with choice overlay	City-wide choice	Assigned choice sets	MS/HS: City-wide choice; ES: Assigned	Neighborhood school with choice overlay	Neighborhood school with choice overlay	City-wide choice
Land Area (Sq. Mi.)	61.4	46.9	48.4	80.9	83.9	153.3	180.6
Population	632,323	815,358	625,087	621,342	620,778	634,265	369,250
% Population Under 18 (2011 est.)	17%	14%	17%	22%	16%	22%	21%
Total Public School Enrollment	80,231	52,900	63,780	84,748	49,870	84,424	42,637 ⁶⁷
School Dist. Enrollment	45,557	52,900	57,100	84,748	49,870	72,618	6,822
# of District Schools	117	102	127 ⁸	171	95	162	18
Charter School Enrollment	34,674	2,894	6,680	- ⁹	0	11,806	35,815
# of Charter Schools	101	13 ¹⁰	26	33 ¹¹	0	41	72
% of Students eligible for meal subsidy	77%	61% (2011–12)	75%	84%	40%	72%	82%
% of General-education Students Bused	<1% ¹²	4%	52% (2011-12)	Est. 35%	42% (2010-11)	34%	

⁶ SY 2012-2013 enrollment, school, and student data from Tulane University/Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives: The State of Public Education in New Orleans (2013).

⁷ 25% of school-age children in New Orleans attend private schools. Cowen Institute 2013 report.

⁸ Including six in-district charter schools.

⁹ Charter enrollments are included in Baltimore's total enrollment of 84,748.

¹⁰ All in-district charter schools.

¹¹ All in-district charter schools.

¹² DCPS buses a few students from the pre-consolidation Bruce-Monroe ES attendance zone to the consolidated Bruce-Monroe @ Parkview ES and a few former River Terrace ES students to Neval Thomas ES.

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San Francisco, CA

City-wide lottery with preference criteria

As of October 2012, San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) had an enrollment of 52,900 students in 102 public schools, with 2,894 additional students attending 13 in-district charter schools and 570 attending five county school sites. SFUSD's student population is 33% Chinese, 24% Latino, 12% White, 10% African-American, and 21% other race/ethnicity, with 27% of the total being English-language learners (ELLs). In 2010-2011, 61% of SFUSD students were eligible for free/reduced-price meals.

Recent Policy (through SY 2010–11)

Between 2001 and 2010, SFUSD's student-assignment policy was designed to give families choice, ensure equitable access to academic opportunities, and not just support but *promote* diversity. This approach followed a history of court-mandated desegregation (1978–2005) and multiple plans and policies aimed at reducing racial isolation and improving educational opportunities and outcomes for all students. In 2001, SFUSD implemented a choice-based "diversity-index" student-assignment system that was intended to facilitate diversity while remaining race-neutral to meet judicial mandates. Each student submitted an application listing up to seven desired schools in priority order regardless of their location in relation to the student's home. If a seat was available at the first-ranked school, the student was placed into the school. In oversubscribed schools, the diversity-index system used five socio-economic and academic-performance factors to allocate available seats to as diverse a set of students as possible. Although attendance zones were established for elementary schools, a student's residence within an attendance zone did not weigh heavily in the calculation.

In 2008, the SFUSD Board found that the existing diversity-index lottery system had not reduced racial isolation or sufficiently helped to improve educational outcomes for minority and low-income students. More than a quarter of SFUSD schools had populations with single-race/ethnicity group percentages of over 60%, and there was a persistent achievement gap between white and Asian students on the one hand and African-American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students on the other.¹³

In addition, boundaries for attendance areas had not been revised since the early 1980s, and some SFUSD schools were under-enrolled, while others were overenrolled. Finally, many families found the application system to be time-consuming, unpredictable, and difficult to understand. Families' participation in (and outcomes from) the choice process varied considerably by race/ethnicity (and, inferentially, by socio-economic level), leaving some students with more access to their top choices and others with less.¹⁴

Current Student-Assignment Policy (SY 2011–12 and thereafter)

In 2009, the SFUSD Board undertook a public-engagement process to develop a new student-assignment system. SFUSD's stated goals were to:

- facilitate diversity,
- reduce racial isolation,
- provide students with equitable access to opportunities,

¹³ June 2011 presentation on student-assignment system.

¹⁴ In 2008, 90% of white students and 92% of Chinese students applied on time for kindergarten in 2008, as compared with 69% of Latino and 49% of African-American families.

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- create robust enrollments at all schools,
- be transparent and easy to use,
- improve predictability for families, and
- support efficient use of resources.

Through extensive research and data analysis as part of its 2009 policy revision process, San Francisco arrived at some key findings that bear recounting here:

- Neighborhood schools are limited in their ability to reverse the trend of racial isolation and the concentration of underserved students in the same school.
- However, city-wide lotteries are also limited in their ability to reverse the trend of racial isolation and the concentration of underserved students in the same school because
 - the applicant pools for individual schools are racially isolated, and
 - all families do not have the same access to information and time to maximize the opportunities of a city-wide lottery system.
- To reverse the trend of racial isolation and the concentration of underserved students in the same school through student assignment alone, the [SFUSD] Board would need to assign students to schools they have not historically requested and to schools far from where they live.
- SFUSD staff concluded that a new student assignment system is one part of creating educational environments in which all students can flourish. **School quality is the paramount concern, and a student assignment system alone cannot ensure school quality**, although it does have a role to play in creating diverse learning environments and robust enrollments in all SFUSD schools.¹⁵

SFUSD's new policy, which was approved in 2010 and took effect for SY 2011-2012, adjusts the SFUSD city-wide lottery preference criteria to include a low weight for living in the elementary or middle school attendance areas. Preferences were retained for siblings, students entitled to NCLB choice options, students living in a census tract with low academic test scores¹⁶, and residing within the attendance zone of the school.

All new or transitioning students must submit an application listing up to seven desired schools in priority order. Students may request any public schools in the city that offer the appropriate grade level. Applications are due in late January, although there are additional rounds in March and May, as well as an August "Waiting-Pool" round. Students already attending a school may automatically continue in that school until they complete its final grade level. Students applying to enter a school (generally at the transitional grades of K, 6, and 9) are assigned to their highest-ranked request so long as there is space available at that school. If demand exceeds available seats at a school, tie breakers are applied to the requests in the following preference orders:

¹⁵ 2011-2012 SFUSD Annual Report (3/5/2012).

¹⁶ SFUSD calculates a Census Tract Integration Preference ("CTIP") based on average K-12 California Standards Test scores.

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Table 2: San Francisco Unified School District Student-Assignment Preference Criteria

	Entering Kindergarten	Entering Grades 1-5	Entering Grade 6 ¹⁷	Entering Grades 7-8	Entering Grade 9*	Entering Grades 10-12*
1.	Sibling of student already attending the school	Sibling of student already attending the school				
2.	Attending SFUSD Pre-K within attendance area	Attending a school whose students are eligible for NCLB school choice	Attending feeder elementary school	Attending a school whose students are eligible for NCLB school choice	Attending a school whose students are eligible for NCLB school choice	Resides in census tract with average test scores in bottom 20% of city
3.	Resides in a census tract with average test scores in bottom 20% of city	Resides in a census tract with average test scores in bottom 20% of city	Resides in a census tract with average test scores in bottom 20% of city	Resides in a census tract with average test scores in bottom 20% of city	Resides in a census tract with average test scores in bottom 20% of city	Random-number lottery
4.	Resides in attendance area ¹⁸	Resides in attendance area	Random-number lottery	Random-number lottery	Random-number lottery	
5.	Random-number lottery	Random-number lottery				

* Not applicable to the two high schools with special academic/audition-based admissions criteria.

SFUSD’s algorithm looks first at all first-ranked requests, applies tiebreakers as needed, and then moves to the remaining students and processes second-ranked requests (and so on). If the application of the tiebreakers does not result in a placement for a student, the student is placed at the school nearest to his home that serves his or her grade level and has an available seat.

SFUSD’s current transportation policy provides for very limited general-education transportation services for the purposes of supporting diverse learning environments, equitable access to opportunities, and reasonable access for attendance-area residents to their attendance-area school. Busing is provided only upon request, and is approved on a per-student basis. As SFUSD moves towards implementing ES-to-MS feeder patterns, the district expects to reduce the busing it provides. In SY 2011–12, SFUSD operated 38 buses serving 2,280 students (4.3% of total enrollment) attending 52 elementary and middle schools. For SY 2012–13, SFUSD planned to operate only 30 buses serving approximately 2,000 students attending 46 schools. As a result, the costs of transportation that accompany the city-wide lottery in San Francisco fall primarily on families.

¹⁷ The listed tie breakers for students entering grades 6-8 apply for the 2012-2016 school years. Beginning in 2017, entering 6th-graders will be initially assigned to the middle school to which their elementary school feeds. Students will be able to apply to other middle schools if they so choose.

¹⁸ For the eight SFUSD elementary schools that are city-wide (magnet) schools, the attendance-area tie breaker does not apply.

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Boston, MA

Moving from three zone-based lotteries to customized choice sets based on preference criteria

Boston Public Schools (BPS) operates 121 public schools and six in-district charter schools, with a total enrollment in SY 2012–13 of 57,100. Of BPS's student population, 40% are Hispanic, 36% are Black, 13% are White, 9% are Asian, and 2% are categorized as "other/multiracial." Seventy-five percent are eligible to receive free/reduced-price meals. BPS captures approximately 74% of the estimated 77,200 school-age children living in Boston; state-authorized charter schools enroll about 9% and private and parochial schools enroll about 13%.

Current Student-Assignment Policy and Process (through SY 2013–14)

Boston's current policy is characterized by a high degree of travel out of neighborhoods. This developed out of a long history of court-mandated desegregation (1974–1997) as well as a desire to maximize equity of access to high-quality schools. Instead of setting attendance zones for individual schools, BPS divided the city into three large geographic zones for elementary, K-8, and middle schools. Each zone provided about two dozen elementary or K-8 schools from which families may choose. Boston's high schools are not zoned, but instead are open to all students city-wide through the application process.

All new and transitioning students had to apply for admission to at least one of these three options:

- 1) any school in the zone where he or she lives;
- 2) schools in other geographic zones that are within the student's "walk zone" (which may extend across school attendance-zone boundaries); and
- 3) any city-wide K-8 and middle schools, as well as all high schools.

The walk zone was defined as a radius from the student's home of approximately one mile for elementary students, 1.5 miles for middle-school students, and two miles for high-school students. Boston's policy set aside fifty percent of each school's seats for applicants with walk-zone priority. Families were encouraged to request at least five and up to a maximum of eight schools on each application.

Registration and school assignment was handled at four regional administrative offices. At the elementary and K-8 levels, students submitted applications in a series of four "rounds" between January and July. Students entering kindergarten, sixth grade, and ninth grade were assigned in the first round; all other students applied in the subsequent three application rounds. School assignment was determined by an algorithm. When requests for a school exceeded available seats, the central office allocated seats to students according to their characteristics in the following order:

- 1) students with a sibling in the school and living in the walk zone;
- 2) students with a sibling in the school;
- 3) students living in the walk zone; and
- 4) all other students.

When the number of students in a given category exceeded the number of available seats, random selection was used to allocate the seats. Students who did not receive any of their preferred choices were assigned by central administration to the closest school that had space. Families received assignments in the mail and had to respond to their assigned offer by a specified date. Students could remain on waiting lists for up to four schools through the following January.

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Once a student was assigned to a school, he or she was automatically reassigned to that school each subsequent year unless the family requested a new assignment. Elementary school students could request a new assignment once per year from kindergarten through 5th grade; secondary students could ask to change schools once during their middle school and once during their high school careers. Students who moved within Boston but wanted to remain at their original school could do so but had to accept personal responsibility for transportation.

Corner-to-corner bus service is provided to elementary-school students attending a school outside a one-mile radius from their residence, middle-school students outside a 1.5-mile radius, and high-school students outside a 2-mile radius. Bus service is provided using a mix of school buses and MBTA (public-transit authority) bus routes. BPS carries the cost of making public transit free to Boston students. Because so many students attend schools far from their homes, in SY 2011–12, BPS transported 33,194 students to and from 228 schools on 732 buses at a cost of more than \$43 million for general-education students and more than \$36 million for special-education students.

BPS has acknowledged that its current policy and process are hard for parents to navigate and provide little predictability for families. In addition, many including Boston's mayor cited the dispersion and travel of students to distant schools as a costly burden on neighborhoods and the city. On one day in 2012, a sample set of 1,100 BPS students living within a few blocks of each other commuted to 64 different schools across the city and logged a total of more than 1,773 miles traveled.

New Policy (SY 2014-15 and thereafter)

In 2012, Boston Public Schools began a year-long public process to overhaul the three zone lottery student-assignment system it had utilized since 1988. BPS's stated goals were to:

- provide families with more equitable access to high-quality schools closer to home,
- reduce transportation costs,
- increase predictability,
- more directly connect elementary schools to nearby K-8s and middle schools, and
- maintain diversity.

The Boston school board established a 27-member External Advisory Committee (EAC) that held approximately 100 open meetings during the course of a year and received input from more than 5,000 people through more than 50 community meetings and online surveys.

The EAC considered multiple models and approaches, including 6-, 9-, 11-, and 23-zone plans as well as two different versions of a home-based policy based on a proposal by the members of the MIT economics department, which had provided some analytical support to the EAC and BPS. In February 2013, the EAC recommended a *home-based policy* to the Boston school board, which approved the plan in March 2013 for implementation starting with SY 2014–2015. Boston's new policy limited school options, but provides every student with some higher quality school options and options closer to their residence.

Under the new home-based policy, BPS will provide each home address with a customized list of six or more school options based on proximity to the home and on school academic performance based two-thirds on English-language Arts and math MCAS scores and one-third on MCAS score growth. The list will always include the schools within one mile of the home as well as at least two of the closest schools

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from each of four tiers of school performance. All high schools will remain available city-wide, but the plan establishes ES-to-MS/K-8 feeder patterns. Students will rank their options and BPS will assign the students to their highest-ranked choice at which space is available, using the existing sibling and walk-zone priorities and tiebreakers.

School assignments and bus transportation rights for current students are grandfathered for at least five years. However, BPS has conservatively estimated that, holding other factors constant, the new policy should reduce the median student distance traveled to school by 39 percent (to 1.15 miles). The MIT team has estimated that the new policy should decrease the average bus coverage area to 6.5 square miles from 24.5 square miles.

Baltimore, MD

Residence-based student assignment at the ES level with city-wide lottery with preference criteria at the MS and HS levels.

Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) operates 171 public schools and 33 in-district charter schools, with a total enrollment in SY 2012–13 of 84,748. BCPS's student population is 85% Black, 8% White, 5.4% Hispanic, 1% is Asian, and 0.6% American Indian or Alaska Native. Eighty-four percent are eligible to receive free/reduced-price meals.

Current Student-Assignment Policy

BCPS's student assignment policy is a hybrid in that it assigns elementary-school students by residence within attendance zones, but uses a city-wide lottery to assign a majority of middle-school students and all high-school students. Fifth graders not living within the zone of a K–8 must enter the city-wide lottery and are given first priority in the MS placement process. Fifth graders living within the zone of a K–8 school may either exercise city-wide choice (in a second-priority group) or exercise the right to attend their zoned K–8 school. In processing requests for a middle school, BCPS gives priority for:

- siblings,
- feeder pattern continuity (some ES have designated MS, and others do not), and
- to students living in the same quadrant of the city.

Eighth graders have full city-wide choice of high schools and charter schools, and eighth graders attending a 6–12 school have automatic eligibility to attend grades 9–12 in that school. Although BCPS bills itself as a “district of choice,” BCPS also states that its operating philosophy includes “keep[ing] school communities at the center.”

BCPS presents a school-choice fair each year in mid-December, as well as school “open houses” during November, December, and early January. Fifth and eighth graders select and rank up to five desired schools on a choice application that they submit to the central office in mid-January. Decision letters are mailed to students by March 31.

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Seattle, WA

Since 2010-11 a residence-based assignment with limited out of boundary access

Seattle Public Schools operates 95 schools and serves approximately 50,000 students, of which 12% are English language learners, 14% receive special-education services, and 40% are eligible for free/reduced-price meals. In SY 2012–13, there were no public charter schools in Seattle.

Context/History

Between the mid-1990s and 2009, Seattle Public Schools (SPS) utilized a city-wide lottery with preference criteria in an effort to voluntarily integrate its schools, promote parental involvement, and encourage innovation.¹⁹ Although the system provided for choice and facilitated diversity, by 2005, the Seattle School Board acknowledged that the system was complex and difficult to navigate for parents and families, was not equitable, and did not provide the desired level of predictability for families or for the district in its planning processes. In addition, the system resulted in relatively high administrative costs as well as general-education transportation costs of more than \$32 million in SY 2010-2011, or \$1,650 for each of the approximately 20,700 ES/MS students transported out of a total district enrollment of 47,008. Another 8,300 high-school students used Orca (public transit) cards provided by the school district.²⁰ In 2006, the Seattle School Board engaged the community in the development of a new student-assignment plan and policies, which it finalized in 2009. Seattle began implementing the new plan in SY 2010-2011.

Current Student-Assignment Policy

Seattle's Student-Assignment Plan divides SPS's schools into two main categories: 1) Attendance-area Schools and 2) Option Schools.²¹ Each student is assigned to an attendance-area elementary, middle, and high school of right based on his or her residence, but may also apply for admittance to another attendance-area school or a city-wide (magnet) Option School.

Attendance areas are created and updated based on demographic data and projections, proximity to a school, safe walk zones, physical barriers, efficient bus routing, municipal bus routes, and opportunities for diversity. Seattle's elementary-school attendance areas combine to match its middle-school attendance areas, thus creating geographic elementary-to-middle feeder patterns for predictability.²² However, these feeder patterns do not extend to the high schools. Each high school has its own stand-

¹⁹ Although promoting integration was one of the primary reasons for implementing the open choice plan, the "integration positive" tiebreaker criteria has been eliminated following the Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*.

²⁰ Recommendations of the Superintendent's Student Transportation Taskforce, Aug. 30, 2012. These figures were higher than the \$1,067 per-student average cost among three other Washington state districts, and were up substantially from the SY 2004-2005 figures of \$26 million (\$1,040 per student for about 25,000 transported students) that helped provoke the change in policy in 2009. Seattle Public Schools, Student Assignment and Transportation Plans 2006-07 (PPT), March 2, 2005.

²¹ In addition, a third category of "Service Schools" includes home-schooling, bilingual-education, special-education, Head Start, and other special program locations, to which students are assigned by SPS administrative units.

²² The middle-school attendance areas also constitute "service areas" for the purpose of providing some English-language-learner, special-education, transportation, and other special services, although this is rapidly being changed by drop-in service models.

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alone attendance area and reserves 90% of its seats for in-area students and 10% of its seats for out-of-area (choice) students.

Option Schools are city-wide (magnet) schools that offer specific programs or instructional approaches or methods.²³ During an open-enrollment period beginning in the spring and running through September 30, a student may apply to attend an Option School or an attendance-area school other than his or her designated school. Preferences are given to siblings and, in the case of Option Schools, to residents within a geographic zone of proximity to the Option School. Remaining seats are allocated by lottery.

Although substantially modified for many students through grandfathering policies, Seattle Public Schools as of September 2012 provides the following transportation services to its general student population:²⁴

- Attendance-area Elementary/K-8 Schools: 1) Busing for students living outside the walk zone but within their service area and within a 1.25-mile straight-line radius of their assigned school; and 2) municipal bus passes for students grades 6-8 living outside of a 1.25-mile straight-line radius.
- Middle Schools: 1) Municipal bus passes for students living more than 1.5 miles but less than 2.0 miles from their assigned school; and 2) busing for students living more than 2.0 miles from their assigned school and within their service area.
- High Schools: 1) Busing for students living more than 2.5 miles from their assigned school and within the boundaries of SPS.
- Option-School Elementary/K-8 Schools: 1) Busing for students living outside the walk zone but within their service area; and 2) municipal bus passes for students in grades 6-8 attending a school outside their service area.

While Seattle's new student assignment policy provides families with schools of right, increased predictability, and some choice, transitioning to it from the previous policy has resulted in substantial complexity. In order to make the transition from the pre-2009 open-choice system to the post-2009 hybrid system while preserving stability for families currently in the district, Seattle has had to extensively employ grandfathering policies, exceptions to rules, and temporary modifications lasting some years. This phasing-in of the new rules has required Seattle to annually publish 30-plus-page Transition Plans to explain the complicated policies and policy adjustments. At least in the short term, this complexity makes it more difficult for families to navigate the system and creates additional costs in terms of staff time required to communicate the policy changes on an annual basis and assist families in understanding them.

²³ As of 2009, seven of Seattle's ten K-8 schools are Option Schools.

²⁴ This summary omits special provisions for students living in specific locales as well as transportation services for special-education, English-language learners, and other special populations.

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Denver, CO

Residence-based elementary and secondary assignment with unified DPS and charter school lottery providing increased options

The Denver Board of Education and Denver Public Schools (DPS) operate 162 schools serving a total of 73,000 students. The Denver Board of Education is also the chartering authority for Denver city/county, and has granted charters to an additional 41 schools serving approximately 12,000 more students. DPS statistics accordingly aggregate the data for traditional DPS schools and charter schools.

Between 2005 and 2012, Denver traditional and charter public schools gained more than 11,000 students.²⁵ Of the 11,000 student gain, charter schools picked up 5,000 and traditional DPS schools picked up 6,000. While the economic recession beginning in 2007 is likely to have factored heavily into this recapture, DPS has attributed its gains to successful turnaround/improvement efforts in its middle and high schools. This assertion is supported by the 16% increase in DPS's middle-school enrollment since 2007 despite a total increase of only 2% in the city's population of 5-17 year-olds between 2000 and 2010.²⁶

Strategic Planning

Denver Public Schools and the Denver boasts an Office of Planning & Analysis (OPA) with a staff of six who conduct demographic and market analyses, create enrollment projections, and develop long-term forecasts for facilities planning. At least once a year since 2010, OPA has produced a Strategic Regional Analysis that has informed the community engagement around and management of Denver's portfolio of traditional and charter schools and its student-assignment policies.²⁷

Current Student-Assignment Policy

In Denver, each student is assigned to an attendance-area DPS elementary, middle, and high school of right based on his or her residence. Attendance areas are created and updated based on "demographic data and projections, proximity to a school, major streets and hazards, geographic features, equalization of capacity among sites, current boundaries, and student diversity, consistent with available capacity."²⁸

A student may either attend his or her attendance-area school or may submit by late January a SchoolChoice application listing up to five ranked schools. Students may choose city-wide from all neighborhood schools, magnet programs/schools, and charter schools. Charter schools have the ability to set school-specific application requirements, deadlines, and student-admission procedures that may vary from the standard DPS policies. Students are assigned to their highest-ranked choice at which space is available. In 2012, 70% of applicants were assigned to their first-ranked choice, and 86% were assigned to one of their five listed choices. If the number of requests for a school exceeds the seats available, DPS uses tiebreakers that give priority to applicants as follows, with random selection employed within each category:

²⁵ Between 2000 and 2010, DPS K–12 enrollment increased 1.2% per year compared with a 0.4% annual growth rate for Denver's ages 5–17 population. DPS states that its loss rate between 5th and 6th grades declined from 15% in 2000 to 12% in 2012 and its loss rate between 8th and 9th grades declined from 23% in 2000 to 17% in 2012. DPS Strategic Regional Analysis (Spring 2013).

²⁶ DPS Strategic Regional Analysis (Spring 2013); U.S. Census 2000 and 2010 Census data.

²⁷ See <http://planning.dpsk12.org/analysis/strategic-regional-analysis>.

²⁸ DPS Policy JC (June 30, 2010).

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Table 3: Denver Public Schools Student-Assignment Preference Criteria

	Entering PK-3/PK-4	Entering Kindergarten	Entering Grades 1-12
1.	Students who reside in the neighborhood boundary of the school	Denver residents who have a currently-attending sibling who will also be continuing at the school	Denver residents who are currently attending the school
2.	Denver residents who have a currently-attending sibling who will also be continuing at the school	Denver residents who are currently attending the school's 4-year-old ECE program	Denver residents who have a currently-attending sibling who will also be continuing at the school
3.	Denver residents who are currently attending the school's 3-year-old ECE program	Children of full-time employees at the school	Students seeking to return to their boundary school
4.	Children of full-time employees at the school	All other Denver resident students	Non-Denver residents who are currently attending the school's 4-year-old ECE program OR have a currently-attending sibling who will also be continuing at the school
5.	All other Denver resident students	Non-Denver residents who are currently attending the school's 3-year-old ECE program OR have a currently-attending sibling who will also be continuing at the school	Children of full-time employees at the school
6.	Non-Denver residents who are currently attending the school's 3-year-old ECE program OR have a currently-attending sibling who will also be continuing at the school	All other students who are not Denver residents	All other Denver resident students
7.	All other students who are not Denver residents		All other students who are not Denver residents

Once a student has been accepted into a school based on a choice application, the student obtains the right to continue at that school through its final grade and loses the right to attend his/her attendance-zone school. To return to the attendance-zone school, the student must submit a SchoolChoice application in a subsequent cycle and win an available seat pursuant to the priorities in the table above.

DPS provides transportation to approximately 26,000 general-education students as follows:

- Elementary-school students living more than 1.0 mile *walking distance* from their attendance-zone school;
- Middle-school students living more than 2.5 miles *walking distance* from their attendance-zone school; and
- High-school students living more than 3.5 miles *walking distance* from their attendance-zone school.

DPS also provides transportation to/from selected magnet schools and charter schools.

In summary, Denver's student-assignment policy is a residence-lottery hybrid that provides a neighborhood school of right but is increasingly facilitating and even promoting choice as a strategy to attract more Denver families and provide families with schools that they desire.

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New Orleans, LA

Optional unified city-wide lottery 72 of 88 public schools with preference criteria

Prior to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, New Orleans had more than 66,000 enrolled students. When the storm damaged or destroyed more than 100 of the 128 Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) schools, OPSB shuttered the New Orleans Public Schools. The state of Louisiana subsequently stepped into the vacuum and transferred 114 schools to the state-run Recovery School District (RSD). Since that time, RSD converted many of the RSD-controlled schools into charter schools, retaining direct control of only 12 schools, and OPSB converted all but six of its remaining schools into charter schools in order to take advantage of available federal funding. Today, chartering authority is held by OPSB and by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), which has continued to grant new charters. In SY 2012-2013, 84% of the 42,637 New Orleans public school students attended one of the city's 72 charter schools, and the percentage continues to trend upward.

By 2013, 44 local education agencies (LEAs), including RSD and OPSB, are operating in New Orleans. This division of governance presents a number of challenges,²⁹ particularly in the areas of taxing, funding, strategic planning, facilities-portfolio management, and student assignment. In 2008, New Orleans established a ten-year School Facilities Master Plan covering all New Orleans LEAs and school facilities. The plan is updated biennially to adjust to actual and projected changes in the city's population, and addresses the need for strategic planning of public-education infrastructure. The plan lays out the number of school facilities to be built or renovated and the locations.

Student Assignment

Student assignment in New Orleans is characterized by city-wide choice. A student residing in New Orleans may attend any traditional public or public charter school in the city that has an available seat, subject to any non-residence-based admissions requirements that the school might establish. In 2013, RSD and OPSB jointly launched a citywide "One App" enrollment application and assignment system covering 72 of the city's 88 schools.³⁰ RSD and OPSB advertise the One App process as being "easier for families to navigate [and ensuring] that every child in [the] city has equal access to an excellent education." On the One App, parents may list up to eight schools in order of preference. All applications are processed at the same time. At schools for which demand exceeds available seats, applicants are randomly selected within the following groups in the following order:

- Students with siblings currently enrolled in the school;
- Students residing within the school's catchment area (grades PK-8 only; applies to up to 50% of the available seats);³¹
- Students meeting school-specific criteria; and
- All other applicants.

Initial data from the 2012 RSD-only implementation of the One App suggest that choice is working for many New Orleans families. In 2012, 84% of Kindergarten and 9th-grade applicants received one of their top three choices and 73% of other-grade applicants received one of their top three choices. Reports from Tulane's Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives describe strong support for school choice among New Orleans parents. An October 2011 poll of New Orleans public school parents found that

²⁹ Cowen Institute: The State of Public Education in New Orleans (2012), p.8.

³⁰ The system uses an assignment algorithm developed by the Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice.

³¹ The city is divided into six catchment areas, with each including approximately eight elementary schools.

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90% strongly agreed that it is important to be able to choose their child's school; 95% said that their children attend their first- or second-choice school. In 2013, Cowen polls found that a clear majority of both African-American (59%) and White (76%) parents agreed that bringing in a charter organization to take over a failing school creates the best chance to improve student learning. However, many parents reported the choice process resulted in increased stress, frustration, and worry due to the "high stakes" involved. Many parents also expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of high-quality school options.

Choice has not been without its costs, however. As the choice system in New Orleans has decoupled student enrollment from residence, student travel and transportation costs have increased by an estimated 50%. In SY 2010-2011, just 13% of New Orleans public school students attended a school in their neighborhood, and only 10% lived within a half mile of their school.³² Prior to 2005, transportation comprised 4% of New Orleans's education expenditures. By 2010, the percentage had increased approximately to 6% overall, with levels as high as 12% for some LEAs.

New York, NY

Lottery-based student assignment with strong attendance-zone rights subject to space availability for elementary and middle schools

In SY 2012–13, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) operated 1,619 schools and programs and served 1,036,053 students in non-charter schools.³³ In addition, 183 publicly funded charter schools—69 of which are authorized by NYCDOE and 114 of which are authorized by either the NY State Department of Education or the SUNY Charter School Institute³⁴—enrolled approximately 14,600 students.³⁵

For K–12 students, access to NYCDOE schools in grades K–8 is based primarily on the student's residence, but additional options are available at all levels.³⁶ Of the 32 geographic "districts" into which NYCDOE K–12 schools are grouped, 29 have attendance zones drawn around most or all of their ES, MS, and K–8 schools, while three districts are non-zoned "choice" districts. In addition, NYCDOE operates non-zoned borough-wide and city-wide schools.

Each ES and MS student must submit an application to the NYCDOE Office of Student Enrollment (OSE) that includes a ranking of desired schools. Students living in a school's zone have a right to attend that school (subject to space availability), so long as they rank that school on their application. OSE applies in-zone, sibling, pre-K attender, and in-district preferences to the pool of applicants for each school and assigns students to available seats. Students with a zoned MS have a priority—but not a right—to attend that MS, but not all students have a zoned MS.

Some NYCDOE high schools are zoned, while others are not. Many NYCDOE high schools have special themes or areas of focus. All students must submit an application in which they rank up to 12 desired high schools out of more than 400 NYCDOE high school options (including NYCDOE charter high schools). Zoned high schools give an admissions priority to in-zone students. "Screened" programs evaluate

³² Cowen Institute 2012 report, p.23.

³³ <http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/data/stats/default.htm>

³⁴ <http://schools.nyc.gov/community/planning/charters/default.htm>.

³⁵ <http://www.nyccharterschools.org/about>

³⁶ In NYC, pre-K is optional and, in SY 2012–13, 54,990 pre-K students enrolled. Zones provide resident pre-K students a priority but not a right to a seat in the local school. See NYCDOE Regulation A-101, p. 4.

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students selectively based on criteria such as academic grades, standardized test scores, attendance, and punctuality. Some programs require that applicants demonstrate proficiency in a specific program area through a portfolio or an audition.

Access to charter schools at the ES, MS, and HS levels is through separate lotteries operated by each school. Each school sets its own application process and deadlines. If applications for a grade level exceed the number of seats available, seats must be allocated randomly. NYC law requires charter schools to give preference to returning students, siblings of students already enrolled in the school, and students who live in the “local Community School District” in which the charter school is located. NYC charter schools are also allowed to give an admissions preference to students who are at risk of academic failure.³⁷

Student Assignment in the Washington Metropolitan Region

Residence-based student assignment

The District of Columbia is unique among its surrounding jurisdictions not just because of its history and status as a federal district but also because it is the sole midsize school system in the midst of small and large systems. As the chart below illustrates, all of the surrounding jurisdictions are either much larger and bus more of their students or have less than half the land area and fewer than half the students and schools that D.C. has. For this reason, this brief focuses on the peer districts listed above for comparisons and insights. Nevertheless, in order to provide context for the District’s effort, we briefly describe the student-assignment systems of the neighboring jurisdictions.

SY 2012–13	Alexandria City, VA	Arlington County, VA	Washington, DC	Prince George's County, MD	Montgomery County, MD	Fairfax County, VA
Area Sq. Mi.	15	26	61	481	497	391
Total Public School Students	13,114	22,624	80,854	123,833	148,840	181,536
District Students	13,114	22,624	45,835	123,833	148,779	181,536
Charter Students	0	0	35,019	included in total	61	0
District Schools	19	37	117	194	202	196
Charter Schools	0	0	101	8	1	0
Bus Transportation	K–9: 1 mi.; 10–12: 1.5 mi. (except for admin. Transfers)	ES >1 mi.; MS & HS >1.5 mi.	Some DCPS ES consolidations; charters at LEA discretion	ES >1 mi.; MS & HS >1.5 mi.	ES >1 mi.; MS >1.5 mi.; MS >2 mi.;	ES >1 mi.; MS & HS >1.5 mi.

³⁷ This category includes English-Language Learners, students who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, and students who did not score at the proficient level on state standardized tests. See <http://nyccharterschools.org>.

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SY 2012–13	Alexandria City, VA	Arlington County, VA	Washington, DC	Prince George's County, MD	Montgomery County, MD	Fairfax County, VA
% of General-education Students Bused	Est. 46%	66%	Est. <1%	65%	67%	61%

The public school boundary and assignment policies in the small cities and large suburban jurisdictions surrounding Washington D.C. are based almost completely on where they reside. With limited exception, students in Arlington, Alexandria, Prince Georges' County, Montgomery County, and Fairfax County expect simply to attend their attendance-zone schools. For the post part, choice is limited.

In Alexandria, Arlington, and Prince George's County, there are efforts to provide alternatives to the strictly neighborhood-based systems. In Arlington in particular, elementary school choice is provided through specialized elementary and middle school programs that are available regionally or district-wide in addition to International Baccalaureate and access to a magnet high school in Fairfax. Both Prince George's County and Alexandria provide for region-wide, specialized, and magnet programs. However, not infrequently, families are required to provide their own transportation to these special programs and schools.

Montgomery County and Fairfax County in particular operate some magnet and specialized programs, and Montgomery County allows for some choice across a selection of high schools within regional "consortia" of high schools. Within these consortia, students have the right to attend their zone school but may also request any of two to four other nearby high schools. The district takes into account students' sibling status, free/reduced-price meal eligibility, and gender as it evaluates requests in order to maintain "comparable demographics" and manage utilization at the schools within the consortium.

Except for Washington, D.C., each of the jurisdictions listed above provides bus transportation for students living more than a specified distance from their school. Some districts provide bus service to stops within ¼ mile of a student's home, while in other regions a child may be required to walk a mile to the nearest school bus stop. In Washington, D.C., DCPS provides busing only for high-needs and out-placed special-education students and for a small number of students whose schools have recently been consolidated with another school.

Although easy to navigate, student-assignment policies in the Washington suburbs do not necessarily provide predictability or stability because school districts frequently re-draw attendance-zone boundaries in order to equalize enrollment pressures in areas of rapidly increasing school populations. This forces some students to change schools every few years.³⁸

³⁸ "Rapid growth drives frequent boundary changes in Northern Virginia schools"; Susan Svrluga, The Washington Post, January 26, 2013, p. 1.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/rapid-growth-drives-frequent-boundary-changes-in-northern-virginia-schools/2013/01/26/29383524-60d8-11e2-9940-6fc488f3fecd_print.html