



SCHOOL FINANCE SERIES

# Sharing the Wealth

How Regional Finance and Desegregation Plans  
Can Enhance Educational Equity

John Brittain, Larkin Willis, and Peter W. Cookson Jr.

# **Sharing the Wealth: How Regional Finance and Desegregation Plans Can Enhance Educational Equity**

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## Executive Summary

Most racial and ethnic segregation in American public schools occurs between, not within, school districts, which are typically inequitably funded. This finding leads us to consider the potential of organizing for racial integration and fiscal equity on a regional basis. What if student attendance policies and school finance policies were not confined to individual school districts but were thought of as crossing and uniting districts in a region? What if districts were to share resources and collaborate to create a system of public schools that are integrated and designed to meet the needs of diverse students and families?

This report uses three examples (Boston, MA; Hartford, CT; and Omaha, NE) to explore how interdistrict desegregation plans have been designed, financed, and implemented. It describes academic and social outcomes and identifies several promising strategies for policymakers.

### Features of Interdistrict Desegregation Plans

Interdistrict desegregation plans have three common features. First, each plan is founded on voluntary cooperation. Second, because segregation is strongly associated with concentrated poverty and a lack of adequate resources within schools, successful interdistrict plans require regions to coordinate the movement of resources, as well as of students, across school boundaries. Third, local context matters. Patterns of racial segregation and funding vary across the country. Furthermore, American education is highly decentralized, and decision-making power is dispersed across multiple governing structures. Thus, no two plans can be exactly alike. The goals and context determine what kind of approach can succeed.

Researchers must consider key questions when assessing the effectiveness of interdistrict desegregation plans:

- How was the plan created—was the initiative court-ordered or was it voluntary?
- Who initiated the planning—was the driving force from the grass roots or from the top down, or some combination of both?
- Who is responsible for the plan’s financial stability—the state, the county, the city, or an extra-governmental organization?
- What are the processes for monitoring the success of the program—systematic evaluations and assessments, or little use of data for decision making?
- And finally, how solid is the political support of the plan—is there widespread agreement among the stakeholders or are there unresolved tensions and divisions?

### Cases of Interdistrict Desegregation Plans

The district plans described in this report focus on three key areas: district action, financing, and outcomes.

#### **Boston, MA**

The greater Boston metropolitan area has sustained the longest continuously running voluntary desegregation program in the United States, the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO). This long-standing interdistrict transfer plan, currently serving about 3,300 students

in 42 school districts, is a one-way voluntary racial balancing program that transfers students of color from Boston and Springfield into the surrounding suburban districts, paying costs for transportation. The program pays for transportation and offers an additional \$5,000 for each student to the receiving district beyond the usual per-pupil allocation. It also coordinates registration, referral, and student support services—including social workers, guidance counselors, support for college and career planning, and after-school academic support.

The program’s goals are twofold: to expand educational opportunity for parents and families in the city and to create more diverse suburban classrooms. METCO is supported by three sources of funding: transportation reimbursement, direct program funding, and the statewide education funding formula (Chapter 70) that factors in transfers.

Between 2006 and 2010, reported performance on state standardized tests in the 3rd, 6th, and 10th grades showed that METCO students, who are largely Black and Hispanic, tended to outperform their Black and Hispanic peers in both Boston and Springfield and met or exceeded the commonwealth average in 6th grade reading, proving that METCO students can match the average proficiency of the nation’s highest academically performing state. In 2014, the 4-year graduation rate of METCO participants was 98%, beating the average scores for receiving districts (95%), the state (86%), Boston (67%), and Springfield (62%).

### **Hartford, CT**

The 2003 *Sheff v. O’Neill* case established that de facto segregation between Hartford and suburban students violated the education and equal protection clauses of the state constitution and set a 4-year timeline to place 30% of Hartford students of color in “reduced isolation” settings, defined as schools in which “minorities” constitute less than three fourths of the student body. The *Sheff* reforms encouraged two-way transfers between Hartford schools and those of surrounding districts and invested \$1.4 billion in school construction over the first 10 years. Magnet schools within and outside the city are joined by other “open choice” schools. The state provides per-pupil grants to receiving districts to make interdistrict transfers attractive and affordable (with larger grants allocated to districts who accept more students), and Hartford Public Schools invests an additional \$350,000 in marketing campaigns through its Regional School Choice Office, which conducts and monitors the computer-based lottery for school assignments. Instead of setting quotas to meet the integration standard, the office relies on “affirmative marketing” to target communities with desired demographics.

Data from the 2012–13 school year show that enrollments in magnet schools in the Greater Hartford region are more equally distributed across racial subgroups than statewide enrollments, with Black, White, and Hispanic students each comprising roughly one third of the overall magnet enrollment. Using pretreatment scores and random lottery assignment to eliminate selection bias, a 2009 study found that attending an interdistrict magnet high school had positive effects on both the mathematics and reading achievement of central city Hartford students. Furthermore, 2013 achievement data from the Capitol Region Education Council demonstrated improved scores for all student subgroups on state mastery and performance tests as well as smaller achievement gaps between subgroups as compared to state averages.



## Omaha, NE

In January 2006, Nebraska State Senator Ronald Raikes introduced legislation to promote more equitable public education in the region. The “Raikes Plan” included three major components: regional governance, tax-base sharing and resource redistribution, and a diversity plan. The regional governance system, the Learning Community Coordinating Council (LCCC), was tasked with creating Elementary Learning Centers to support high-poverty districts and establishing a choice-based mobility program to deconcentrate high-poverty schools. The Raikes Plan also granted the LCCC authority to distribute a common levy to equitably move dollars across district boundaries. Under the common levy, the combined value of all property taxes was collected and immediately redistributed back to local districts for operating costs, based on a state funding formula that gave greater weight to students from low-income families and English language learners. This weighting system intended to create incentives for more affluent communities to welcome less affluent students, who brought more funds with them.

In 2016, this Nebraska legislature eliminated the common regional tax levy in exchange for increased state support to the Learning Community. Local property tax revenue is now backfilled with state equalization aid available for low-income districts.

A small LCCC tax levy of 1.5 cents continues to fund a set of programs for promoting equity, financing community centers (44%); an early childhood learning plan (34%); district pilot programs for instructional coaching, school readiness, and extended learning (18%); and administration costs for such programs (4%).

The initial Open Enrollment plan funded districts to establish “focus” or magnet schools along with transportation to increase diversity, enrolling thousands of students each year, and demonstrating wide appeal for many parents. Three years of LCCC evaluations compared the performance of Open Enrollment students on 3rd- to 8th-grade reading and mathematics assessments to their resident counterparts. In low-poverty schools, free and reduced-price lunch-eligible Open Enrolled students scored dramatically higher than peers in high-poverty schools in both reading and mathematics in all tested grades. However, in 2016, Nebraska lawmakers rewrote the transfer law and reinstated the older Option Enrollment program, which encourages diversity but provides transportation to fewer students (only those who are eligible for free lunch) and has stimulated far fewer transfers.

## Lessons for Policymakers

The collective action for greater fiscal and racial equity in Boston, Hartford, and Omaha is joined by that of other regions and cities that have begun their own experiments with interdistrict funding and desegregation programs. These case studies offer some lessons that may be informative to others.

### Secure a metropolitan-wide agreement

Most racial and ethnic segregation in American public schools occurs between, not within, school districts. It is not surprising, then, that successful desegregation plans require the collaboration of urban and suburban districts in a comprehensive regional plan. To encourage such collaboration, policy can

- create opportunities for genuine cross-school and cross-district collaboration; and
- offer financial incentives to help receiving schools cover the cost of student transfers.

### **Establish a clear vision for educational equity**

To begin collaborative work toward advancing racial and socioeconomic equity, policymakers, educators, and communities need a collective understanding of what equity means in their region. A clear vision for equity includes

- a set of goals for achieving both greater diversity and greater educational quality and equity for targeted student subgroups that are specific to the region;
- a measurable definition of and a means to reduce “racial isolation” at the school and classroom levels; and
- goals and benchmarks for greater diversity and greater equity that respond to realistic timelines and local factors.

### **Sustain efforts with equitable resources**

Policies can sustain equity-enhancing efforts by promoting

- regionally based finance reform that allocates additional funds to the schools and students who need it most;
- investment in regional magnet programs, capital improvements, and teacher professional development that raise the quality of schooling options available in all districts;
- affirmative marketing campaigns that build strong and accessible systems of public information around schooling options;
- services for transfer students and families that include transportation, school counseling, and family liaisons; and
- continued supports for schools and for students that attend schools in their neighborhoods.

### **Create a strong evaluation and data plan**

Data monitoring allows practitioners and policymakers to test, evaluate, and adapt interdistrict plans to best serve all students. A strong data plan

- is aligned to a clear vision for equity, with specific criteria for determining racial isolation or segregation and targets for reducing these conditions;
- monitors these goals by tracking and understanding multiple measures of student success;
- disaggregates all data across student subgroups; and
- ensures that data collected are visible in the community, with opportunities to incorporate stakeholder feedback seriously and in a timely manner.

Above all else, experience shows that policymakers interested in advancing equity through interdistrict desegregation plans must be persistent and must engage in ongoing problem solving. Progress requires an authentic commitment to equitable outcomes that responds to inevitable roadblocks with continued effort.



## Introduction

Despite a growing awareness of the problems facing urban communities, there is a lack of a broader framework or clear policy approach to address the underlying regional dynamics that drive segregation, concentrated poverty, and racial isolation. Broader approaches must include multiple school districts across a region, and integrate or align educational policy with housing, transit, economic development, and health.<sup>1</sup>

— Jennifer Jellison Holme and Kara S. Finnigan  
*Striving in Common: A Regional Equity Framework for Urban Schools*

Since the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that it is unconstitutional to establish and maintain “separate but equal schools,” cities, states, and regions have experimented with a suite of racial integration policies and attendance strategies designed to integrate public schools. These efforts have been met with an uneven record of success. Yet much has been learned, and policymakers in many regions can benefit from that knowledge. As the quote above indicates, there is a growing awareness among researchers and policymakers that the goals of *Brown* will not be achieved unless other inequities are also addressed. Many advocates have argued that undoing the causes and consequences of historical cumulative disadvantage requires comprehensive regional planning, interdistrict cooperation, equitable and adequate funding, and sustained political will.<sup>2</sup>

Most racial and ethnic segregation in American public schools occurs between, not within, school districts.<sup>3</sup> This finding leads us to consider the potential of planning on a regional basis. What if student attendance policies and school finance policies were not confined to individual school districts but were thought of as crossing and uniting districts in a region? What if districts were to share resources and collaborate to create a system of public schools that are integrated and designed to meet the needs of diverse students and families?

Most racial and ethnic segregation in American public schools occurs between, not within, school districts.

This report examines how three interdistrict desegregation plans have been designed, financed, and implemented, and it assesses the evidence of their success as measured by student achievement data and other meaningful academic and social outcomes. Drawing on evidence from three interdistrict desegregation plans (Boston, MA; Hartford, CT; and Omaha, NE), we identify several potential strategies for legislators and policymakers who are committed to the principles of justice that are at the heart of the *Brown* decision.

These case studies represent a variety of strategies reformers have used to reduce racial and socioeconomic isolation in distinctive contexts. In Boston, a grassroots movement organized a small but long-standing and oversubscribed transfer program to the surrounding suburbs. In Hartford, a landmark decision by the state supreme court provided the imperative and budget to support a regionwide desegregation plan. In Omaha, legislative action created possibly the most extensive effort at regional financing and governance to date.

The Omaha case is particularly instructive about the potential of regional governance, but it confronts us with a sobering fact: without consistent political support, even a well-crafted plan can be undermined. The successes and limitations of the Omaha program serve as a beacon of hope and a cautionary tale that has significance for other regional desegregation programs across the country, and, consequently, this paper devotes somewhat more attention to it than to the Boston or Hartford programs.

Currently 13 metropolitan areas in 10 states have undertaken interdistrict desegregation programs, although two programs have been phased out.<sup>4</sup> Interdistrict desegregation programs have been put in place across the nation, from Palo Alto, CA, to Milwaukee, WI, to Rochester, NY.<sup>5</sup> Some of these plans, such as the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation program in St. Louis, MO, have their roots in civil rights-era desegregation orders.<sup>6</sup> Others, such as the Choice Is Yours program in Minneapolis, MN, have been developed more recently with a focus on family income and class.<sup>7</sup>

Despite their differences, interdistrict desegregation plans have three key features in common. First, each plan is founded on voluntary choices. At a time when White families were increasingly moving into suburban districts, the U.S. Supreme Court reviewed *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), a school segregation case from Detroit, MI. The court ruled that desegregation plans requiring the enrollment of urban students in suburban districts must provide hard-to-document evidence: They had to show that the suburban districts created segregation.<sup>8</sup> This decision established that, absent such a showing, the only constitutional way to promote interdistrict integration is through choice. Districts must voluntarily agree to cooperate about student transfer options, and parents must choose to enroll their children in such an initiative.

Second, because segregation is strongly associated with concentrated poverty and a lack of adequate resources within schools,<sup>9</sup> money matters in desegregation efforts. Equitable and adequate funding may not be enough to end de facto segregation and remedy unequal educational opportunities, but it is a necessary condition. Successful interdistrict plans require regions to coordinate the movement of resources, as well as of students, across school boundaries. Some programs are one-way in that students from a central city attend schools in suburbs but students from the suburbs do not attend schools in the central city, as is the case with the Boston Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) program. Other programs are two-way, such as Hartford's, which provides mechanisms to move students into and out of Hartford schools. Research indicates that financing regional plans, whether they are one-way or two-way, requires sustained and discerning investment.<sup>10</sup>

Third, local context matters. American education is highly decentralized, and decision-making power is dispersed across multiple governing structures. Additionally, loyalty to place by families and communities continues to shape how many Americans think of public education. Thus, it is important to consider several questions when assessing the effectiveness of interdistrict desegregation plans:

- How was the plan created—was the initiative court-ordered or was it voluntary?
- Who initiated the planning—was the driving force from the grass roots or from the top down, or some combination of both?
- Who is responsible for the plan’s financial stability—the state, the county, the city, or an extra-governmental organization?
- What are the processes for monitoring the success of the program—systematic evaluations and assessments, or little use of data for decision making?
- And finally, how solid is the political support of the plan—is there widespread agreement among the stakeholders or are there unresolved tensions and divisions?

Within this context, it is worth noting that no two plans are alike. Some plans explicitly define their purpose as overcoming racial isolation and the unequal treatment of historical minorities, while others focus on reducing economic segregation. Assessing success in terms of integration is complex because of the variety of plans and their differing educational and social objectives. What constitutes racial and/or socioeconomic “balance”? How is balance measured? What are the remedies available to ensure balance? Our research and that of others wrestles with these questions.

Recently, we have seen questions about what constitutes balance in Hartford, where a lawsuit, *Robinson v. Wentzell*, has been brought by African American parents alleging that the magnet schools in Hartford are relying on an unconstitutional racial quota in structuring access to seats in these schools. The current law mandates that magnet school enrollment must be at least 25% White or Asian. This means Black and Hispanic students are turned away if their admission would push minority enrollment above 75%—even if seats remain empty. The lawsuit has been brought by the Pacific Legal Foundation on behalf of seven Hartford families; the ruling in this case will have implications for interdistrict desegregation plans beyond Connecticut.<sup>11</sup>

There are topics that this report does not include. Foremost among these are issues related to transportation, the preparation of teachers to educate students from diverse backgrounds, and an assessment of parents’ willingness to send their children out of their community to attend schools in communities that are socially and economically different and perhaps not well equipped to meet the needs of diverse learners. Additionally, the cases described in this report focus on interdistrict desegregation plans; we do not directly address the quality and inclusiveness of the schools into which students transfer. This is an area of research and policy ripe for exploration.

# Cases of Interdistrict Desegregation Plans

## Boston, MA

### Context

The greater metropolitan area surrounding Boston, MA, has sustained the longest continuously running voluntary desegregation program in the United States. Compared to the statewide general population, which is roughly 65% White, Boston is home to higher concentrations of students of color.<sup>12</sup> In the 2017–18 school year, Boston Public School enrollments were roughly 32% Black, 41% Hispanic, and 14% White.<sup>13</sup> The Boston metropolitan area is marked by a confluence of poverty and racial segregation in schools across the commonwealth: Percentages of students from low-income families attending a school with 90–100% students of color rose from 71% in 1999–2000 to 84% in 2010–11. That same year, over 80% of students attending schools with 99–100% students of color were from low-income families.<sup>14</sup>

Boston’s long-standing interdistrict transfer plan, currently serving about 3,300 students in 42 school districts, is characterized by grassroots community organization and interracial coalition building. Although Massachusetts passed the nation’s first law prohibiting segregation in public schools in 1855, separate schools for racial groups were common in Massachusetts more than a century later.<sup>15</sup> In the early 1960s, there was a growing awareness of limited schooling options in the Boston metropolitan area. Black parents organized, boycotting Boston Public Schools for failure to desegregate.<sup>16</sup>

In 1965, the commonwealth passed the Racial Imbalance Act to address segregation by reducing racial isolation. Racial isolation is defined as any school with more than 50% students of color.<sup>17</sup> Also in 1965, the community founded “Operation Exodus,” an intradistrict transfer program that paid the transportation costs to place Black students in under-enrolled White public schools.<sup>18</sup> Under the leadership of mothers and organizers Ruth Batson and Ellen Jackson, the Boston-area Black community formed coalitions with suburban schools, garnered political support, and secured funding from the Carnegie Foundation for its first year.<sup>19</sup>

The goals of the METCO program are twofold: to expand educational opportunity for students and families in the city and to create more diverse suburban classrooms.

### District Action

Over time, Operation Exodus gained more political and philanthropic allies. In 1966, the grassroots campaign became formalized as METCO. METCO is a one-way voluntary racial balancing program that transfers students of color from Boston and Springfield into the surrounding suburban districts. The goals of the program are twofold: to expand educational opportunity for students and families in the city and to create more diverse suburban classrooms.<sup>20</sup>

To run the program, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education contracts with the nonprofit METCO Inc. METCO supports students through the program by coordinating registration, referral, and student support services from its central office in the predominately Black neighborhood of Roxbury.<sup>21</sup> Once a METCO transfer has been successfully registered, referred, and placed in a suburban school, METCO coordinates a range of services—including ongoing and direct support from full-time METCO directors, social workers, and guidance counselors—in addition to programming for college and career planning, tours of historically black colleges and universities, information sessions on student financial aid, and after-school academic support.<sup>22</sup>

The mechanisms for funding the METCO program are highlighted below.

### Finance Spotlight: Boston's METCO Funding

Massachusetts General Law includes a plan for eliminating racial imbalance in public schools by encouraging cross-district enrollment that enhances diversity and by requiring financial assistance for the costs of educating and transporting each child who transfers, as well as providing special education as needed.<sup>23</sup> METCO programming is supported by three sources of funding: transportation reimbursement, direct program funding, and the statewide education funding formula (Chapter 70) that allows for transfers.<sup>24</sup>

Beyond the direct services METCO offers students to support their academic success and college-going, the program covers transportation costs and provides \$5,000 of direct funding for each METCO transfer to the receiving school in addition to the usual per-pupil expenditures for that student.<sup>25</sup>

As a third source of program funding, Chapter 70 includes transfer students in the district enrollment count for the state foundation budget. Including METCO transfers in this count makes it difficult to track the exact amount of additional state aid for these students. Estimates indicate that the formula provides highly variable state aid for METCO transfers by school and over time, from zero (which may be the formula allocation to a wealthy district) to more than \$11,000 per student (which the formula would provide to a district with greater needs).<sup>26</sup> This lack of transparency in the funding structure has fed misperceptions about the financial impact of METCO participation on receiving schools and districts. Despite stable enrollment and increasing demand, state funding for the METCO program decreased by 20% between 2005 and 2015.<sup>27</sup>

### Outcomes

The METCO program's success is demonstrated in both its longevity and popularity. The program has run continuously for more than half a century. In the 2014–15 school year, roughly 3,300 students attended schools in 30 different districts, with an additional 10,450 students on the waitlist.<sup>28</sup> Families spend an average of 5 years on the waitlist.<sup>29</sup> The 2014–15 active waitlist shows a high concentration of students in the early grades (45% of all registrants are for pre-k and kindergarten alone),<sup>30</sup> and a parent survey conducted by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard found that one fourth of parents registered their children before their first birthday.<sup>31</sup> These enrollment trends demonstrate established and enduring support from local communities; however, oversubscription poses a challenge for the small program. Expanding to serve the entire waitlist would require the program to quadruple in size, yet expansion is not feasible in the face of waning financial support from the state.

In terms of desegregation, available research has demonstrated positive experiences for participating students in the METCO program. An interview study of 65 former METCO students captured lifelong benefits for program participation, such as reported ease when navigating racial and cultural difference, broader knowledge of college and career information, and additional opportunities provided in suburban settings.<sup>32</sup> The same study found that the vast majority of Black graduates of the METCO program said they would “do it again.”<sup>35</sup> However, the small size of the program restricts its desegregative impact: In receiving districts, METCO students represent less than 2.5% of total enrollment.<sup>34</sup>

Student outcome data on METCO participants are limited but encouraging.<sup>35</sup> Between 2006 and 2010, reported performance on state standardized tests in the 3rd, 6th, and 10th grades shows that METCO students, who are largely Black and Hispanic, tended to outperform their Black and Hispanic peers in both Boston and Springfield.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, in 6th-grade reading, METCO students met or exceeded the commonwealth average, proving that METCO students can match the average proficiency of the nation’s highest academically performing state.<sup>37</sup> An analysis of “peer effects” on student achievement found no real effects on White students’ achievement of attending schools with METCO students and modest peer effects on non-White students.<sup>38</sup>

High school graduation rate data are extremely promising. In 2014, the 4-year graduation rate of METCO participants was 98%, beating out the average scores for receiving districts (95%), the state (86%), Boston (67%), and Springfield (62%).<sup>39</sup> It is worth taking into consideration that not all these outcome measures can be attributable to participation in the METCO program alone because, as the waitlist data above illustrate, the issue of student and family self-selection makes simple causal relationships difficult to establish.

But, of course, interdistrict desegregation plans are bigger and more socially significant than test scores alone; they also speak to a public commitment to educational justice. The story of Boston’s METCO program is one of community action driving long-term systemic change in one metropolitan public education system. The region’s locally driven and sustained demand for access, evidenced by the program’s robust waitlist, is a powerful testimony to METCO’s ongoing success. Although small in terms of scope, the longevity and popularity of Boston’s interdistrict program offers a sound model of how an engaged community can create enduring interdistrict desegregation plans.

## Hartford, CT

### Context

As a high-poverty city populated mostly by people of color in a largely White, suburban, New England state, Hartford, CT, also created an interdistrict plan to combat segregation in the region. The population of Hartford is 36% Hispanic, 31% Black, and 13% White, whereas the surrounding counties are 59% White.<sup>40</sup> Compared to the combined rates of its surrounding counties, Hartford has twice the unemployment rate (at 10.6%, compared to 5.9%), roughly 3 times the poverty rate (at 33.4%, compared to 11.9%), and less than half the median household income.<sup>41</sup> The racial and socioeconomic divide along the town-county line is evident in Hartford’s education system. Of the 21,463 students enrolled in the Hartford School District, about 78% are eligible for free and



reduced-price lunch (FRL) and about 18% receive services as English language learners.<sup>42</sup> District enrollments mirror the racial makeup of the city: Hartford public schools are 52% Hispanic, 31% Black, and 11% White.<sup>43</sup>

The funding system in Connecticut was overhauled in the late 1980s and made more equal, but a tax cap that caused backsliding since then has allowed inequalities to re-emerge. Given these demographic and financial differences between the city and its surrounding counties, Hartford residents have long sought options to cross district lines in pursuit of quality education. In the 1960s, the state launched a voluntary minority-to-majority transfer plan, Project Concern, which bused a small number of Hartford students to half a dozen schools in the suburbs.<sup>44</sup> Although limited in size and scope, this program demonstrated gains in academic achievement and social attitudes early on.<sup>45</sup> The modest program set a precedent of working regionally to advance educational equity in the greater Hartford area.<sup>46</sup>

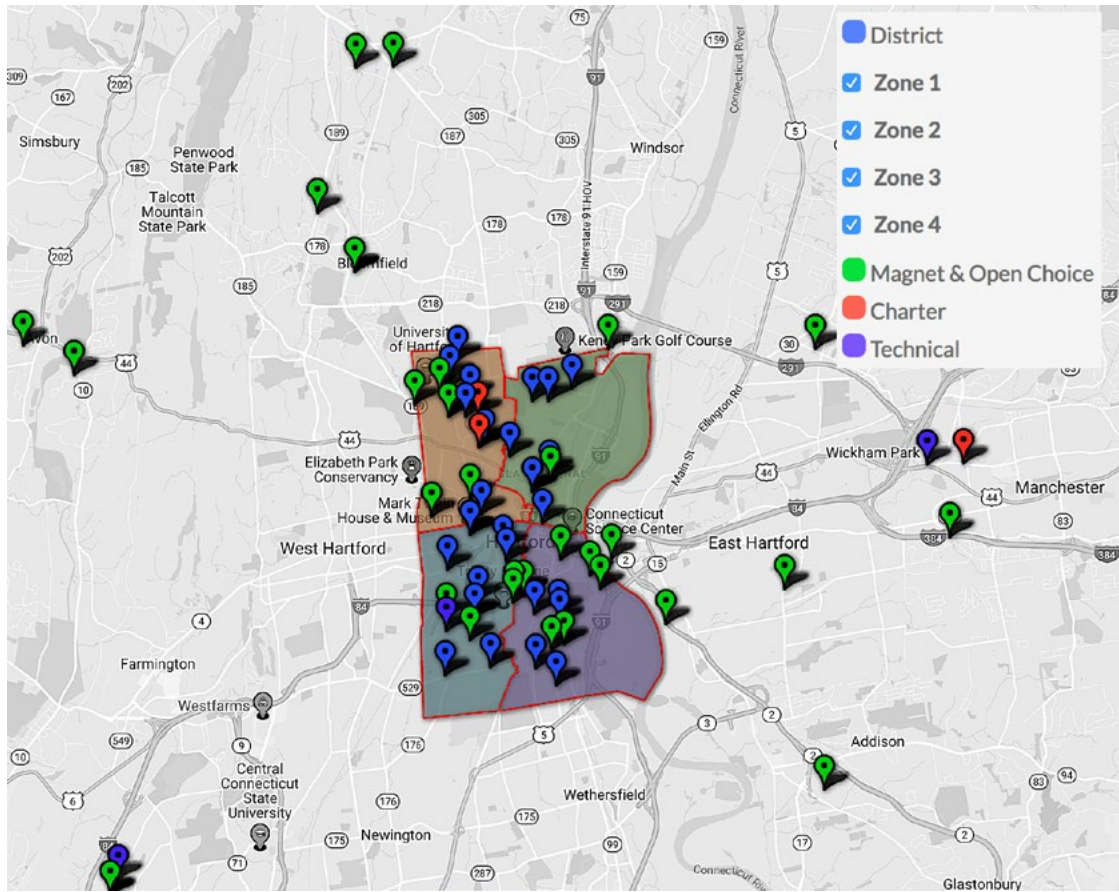
### District Action

A major civil rights case, *Sheff v. O'Neill*, was the watershed for comprehensive reform. In 1996, this Connecticut Supreme Court ruling established that de facto segregation between Hartford and suburban students violated the education and equal protection clauses of the state constitution.<sup>47</sup> The voluntary settlement, reached 7 years later in 2003, set a timeline of 4 years to meet the goal of placing 30% of Hartford students of color in “reduced isolation” settings, defined as schools in which “minorities” constitute less than three fourths of the student body.<sup>48</sup> In service of this goal, the state established and expanded voluntary interdistrict transfer options for Connecticut families.

*Sheff v. O'Neill* was the watershed for comprehensive reform. The ruling established that de facto segregation between Hartford and suburban students violated the education and equal protection clauses of the state constitution.

The state responded to the *Sheff* decision with two desegregation measures: first, a reorganization of the decades-old voluntary transfer program to the suburbs, now called Open Choice, and second, a set of regional magnet schools with specialized programs to entice urban and suburban families to cross district lines.<sup>49</sup> Unlike the Boston METCO program, the *Sheff* reforms aimed to integrate through two-way transfers, providing mechanisms to move students into and out of Hartford schools. In less than 10 years, the number of magnet schools in the state increased by over 50% and the number of students enrolled in magnet schools increased by over 70%.<sup>50</sup> Today, Hartford families can select from options including 28 non-magnet districts participating in Open Choice and 44 magnet schools in the Greater Hartford region (see Figure 1).<sup>51</sup>

**Figure 1**  
**Greater Hartford School Zones and Open Choice Options, 2018**



Source: SMARTERHartford school finder. <http://smarterhartford.org/your-choice/school-finder> (accessed 01/02/19).

The mechanisms for funding the *Sheff* settlement are highlighted below.

### Finance Spotlight: Hartford's *Sheff* Settlement

An interdistrict transfer program at this scale was made possible through strategic state investments. Over the first 10 years of the *Sheff* reforms, the state invested over \$1.4 billion in school construction projects in the greater Hartford area.<sup>52</sup> In addition to supporting infrastructure, the state provides grants to make interdistrict transfers attractive and affordable. Magnet school students are counted for funding purposes as attending school in their home districts, and the state provides receiving magnets an additional per-pupil operating grant.

These state operating grants vary by program type. Hartford host magnet schools receive \$13,054 for each student from outside Hartford, *Sheff* magnet schools in the region covered by the court settlement receive \$10,443 per pupil, and non-*Sheff* magnet schools outside the settlement region receive between \$3,000 and \$8,000 per pupil. For Open Choice participants, the sending and receiving districts evenly split the regular per-pupil grant, and their proportion of enrollments outside their dominant town.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the state provides grants to non-magnet receiving school districts participating in the Open Choice program. The state pays a per-pupil amount to each district accepting Open Choice enrollments, with the amount increasing based on the proportion of the district's total enrollments composed of students transferring in.<sup>54</sup> A separate state grant covers transportation costs for out-of-district pupils, up to a maximum of \$2,000 per student.<sup>55</sup>

Drawing upon a mixture of funds from the *Sheff* agreement and district budget, Hartford Public Schools invests an additional \$350,000 in marketing campaigns through its Regional School Choice Office, responsible for conducting and monitoring the computer-based lottery for school assignments.<sup>56</sup> Instead of setting quotas to meet the integration standard, the office relies on "affirmative marketing" to target communities with desired demographics through evidence-based recruitment strategies.<sup>57</sup> Hartford's interdistrict transfer program stands out in its investment in robust community engagement strategies to support the work of equitable student placement.

### Outcomes

Hartford Public Schools has made progress toward achieving reduced-isolation settings for students of color as a result of the interdistrict transfer program, which uses a lottery system to randomly select Hartford and suburban applicants for placement.<sup>58</sup> Data from the 2012–13 school year show that enrollments in magnet schools in the Greater Hartford region are more equally distributed across racial subgroups than statewide enrollments, with Black, White, and Hispanic students each comprising roughly one third of the overall magnet enrollment.<sup>59</sup> A report by the Civil Rights Project demonstrated that, for that same year, rates of exposure to students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds were higher in magnet schools than in non-magnet schools in the city and suburbs.<sup>60</sup>

In 2015, the Connecticut Department of Education reported that more than 9,000 students were enrolled in reduced-isolation settings (where students of color constitute less than three fourths of the student body), with interdistrict magnet schools serving 6,564 students and Open Choice programs serving roughly 2,000 students.<sup>61</sup> Updated enrollment data from October 2015 shows that nearly half (45.5%) of Hartford-resident pre-k–12 students of color are enrolled in reduced-isolation settings within or beyond the district borders.<sup>62</sup> Doubtless there is still much work left to be done in Hartford.

Several studies of Hartford area public schools have shown evidence of positive outcomes for students in reduced-isolation settings. An early program evaluation conducted in 2009 by the University of Connecticut’s Center for Education Policy examined the social-emotional outcomes of the interdistrict transfer program by administering a questionnaire to high school students to draw comparisons between regional magnet schools and non-magnet schools in the city and suburbs. The evaluation found that students in magnet schools reported stronger peer support for academic achievement, higher college expectations, and lower likelihood for absences or “skipping” classes.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, city magnet students perceived more positive intergroup relations with less racial tension, students of color felt significantly closer to White students (and vice versa), and magnet school students expressed stronger future multicultural interests.<sup>64</sup>

A 2009 study explored the relationship between attending the less racially and economically isolated interdistrict magnet schools and academic achievement of students from Connecticut’s central city.<sup>65</sup> Using pretreatment scores and random lottery assignment to eliminate selection bias, the study found that attending an interdistrict magnet high school had positive effects on both the mathematics and reading achievement of central city Hartford students.<sup>66</sup> These early findings are corroborated by the 2013 achievement data from the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), which operates 23 Hartford area magnet schools, demonstrating improved scores for all student subgroups on state mastery and performance tests, as well as smaller achievement gaps between subgroups as compared to state averages.<sup>67</sup>

An important asset in Hartford’s progress has been its clear definition for reduced-isolation educational settings, which provided measurable goals for tracking progress and sustaining momentum for its desegregation efforts.

The results from the Hartford data are aligned with results from other research about the effectiveness of magnet schools in positively influencing student achievement, graduation rates, student motivation, parent and community satisfaction with the school, teacher motivation and morale, intergroup relationships, and integration.<sup>68</sup> These findings cut across large-scale studies,<sup>69</sup> studies of statewide programs,<sup>70</sup> and rigorous local analyses.<sup>71</sup>

The Hartford case lends additional insights into what it takes to develop successful interdistrict transfer plans. Like the other cases in this report, Hartford’s success relies on cooperation between the urban and suburban districts to coordinate transfers of students and continue investments in magnet programs worth choosing throughout the Greater Hartford region. An important asset in Hartford’s progress has been its clear definition for reduced-isolation educational settings, which provided measurable goals for tracking progress and sustaining momentum for its desegregation efforts. Through these efforts, families in Greater Hartford ultimately enjoy expanded educational opportunity and experiences for all students.

## Omaha, NE

### Context

Omaha's experiment with interdistrict student assignment plans represents another community's concerted effort to provide all students in a metropolitan region with a quality education. The metropolitan area's roughly 110,000 students are served by a jigsaw of 11 school districts across two counties.<sup>72</sup> The largest of these districts, with an enrollment of 52,000, is Omaha Public Schools (OPS).<sup>73</sup> Enrollments reported for 2016–17 were 35% Hispanic, 25% Black, and 28% White.<sup>74</sup> Nearly three fourths (74%) of OPS students qualify for FRL, and 36% receive services as English language learners.<sup>75</sup>

Before 2007 legislative action creating a “learning community” between OPS and 10 of its surrounding school districts, there was a resource discrepancy between the city of Omaha and its largest school district due to a unique legislative environment. An 1891 state statute granted the city the ability to annex suburbs by law, thereby accessing retail and residential taxes. The statute also granted OPS the ability to expand along with the city.<sup>76</sup> Between 1900 and 1940, the city and district both doubled as they annexed land to capture new population growth.<sup>77</sup>

This pattern was interrupted in the suburban housing boom of the late 1940s, as White enclaves were formed by systematically preventing Black families from purchasing homes in suburban neighborhoods. This trend toward increasing segregation impacted public schooling in 1947, when several predominately White suburban neighborhoods joined together to form an independent school district, called District 66.<sup>78</sup> In the same year, the state legislature passed a law that exempted District 66 from annexation by OPS. This amounted to a *de jure* segregation policy. More suburban school districts followed suit in resisting annexation by OPS. Eventually, the annexation power faded into legislative obscurity.

OPS became increasingly racially isolated, and concern culminated in a court-ordered intradistrict desegregation plan spanning 1976 to 1999.<sup>79</sup> This prompted even more White middle-class families to move out of Omaha. In 1998, Nebraska enacted an interdistrict school choice policy, called Option Enrollment, that allowed students to freely transfer between school districts. Option Enrollment was expected to foster competitive improvements across districts without explicit attention to student race or socioeconomic status, though the law included provisions that granted districts under desegregation plans the right to deny transfers that would harm the district's racial balance.<sup>80</sup> From the data, however, it appeared that Option Enrollment accelerated the exit of White students who lived within the boundaries of the OPS district. A survey conducted by the *Omaha World-Herald* in 2005 found that the 2,700 students who chose to leave OPS in 2005–06 were “overwhelmingly white and higher income.”<sup>81</sup>

At the same time, the OPS tax base was eroding. Despite a major urban revitalization project in Omaha's downtown region, a “tax increment financing” policy precluded the district from accessing associated funds. Nebraska's school finance system could not compensate for these problems; taxing and spending lids froze the district budget, and bureaucratic processes delayed additional funding for high-need students until the year after identification.<sup>82</sup> By the early 2000s, OPS was facing a crisis caused by its inability to expand boundaries, open enrollment laws that siphoned off White middle-class students, a discriminatory finance system, and economic development deals that hurt the district's ability to raise revenues. These challenges steadily increased the concentration of poverty in OPS.



## District Action

In 2005, city annexation proceedings and a legislative effort to remove the 1891 statute brought to light the obscure right to expand school district boundaries. Leveraging the statute in a bid for more resources, the superintendent and school board attempted to annex the nearby city of Elkhorn.<sup>83</sup> This campaign, called One City, One School District, resolved “to take all necessary steps to assure that all schools organized or existing within the city of Omaha are under the direction of OPS.”<sup>84</sup> The resolution proposed to unite 25 schools across the two adjoining counties, and it caused a huge political upheaval. Ron Raikes, the chair of the state legislature’s education committee, recalled the lack of workable solutions to the controversy:

So here we are, you know, you’ve got Omaha Public Schools, which ... I have some sympathy for the arguments they present. I also have sympathy for at least some of the arguments ... of the suburban school districts.... Here we are in little dinky Nebraska and Omaha, and so on, I mean, all these places in the country you have this issue, and surely there’s been a lot of smart people and surely they’ve come up with several ways to deal with it, and so all we need to do is go out and find out those ways and just pick the best one and we’re home free. That didn’t work.<sup>85</sup>

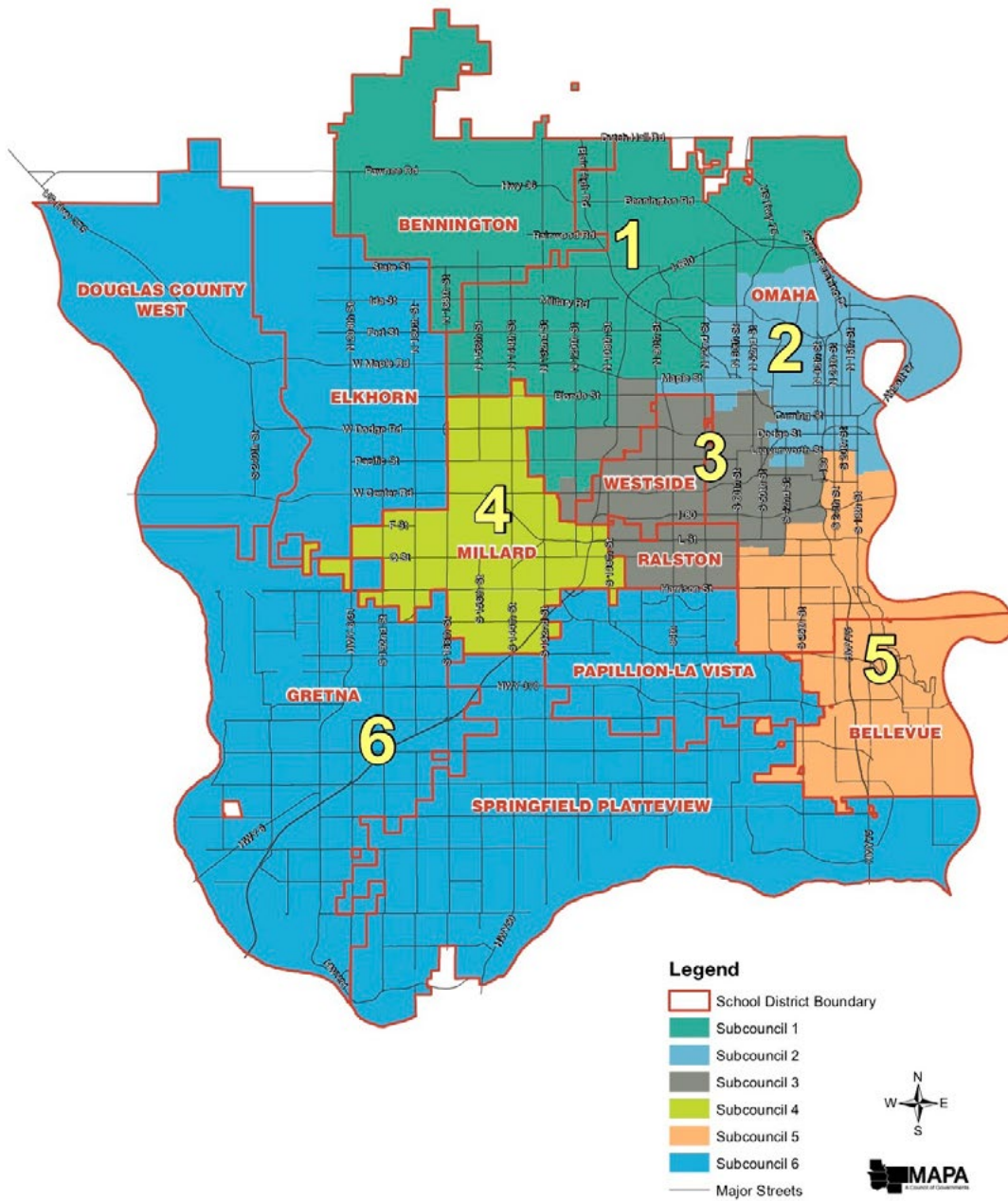
By late summer 2005, several of the superintendents of the suburban districts had formed a coalition to oppose the One City, One School District effort. At the same time, however, they began to work with Raikes and the education committee to develop an alternative solution. Cooperation was grounded in the idea that, in the words of Raikes, “educational opportunity is enhanced by having the opportunity to go to class with a diverse group of students.”<sup>86</sup> Out of these negotiations, the idea of an interdistrict desegregation program was born, called the Learning Community.

Raikes introduced the Learning Community to the legislature in January 2006. The “Raikes Plan” proposed three major changes to promote more equitable public education in the region: regional governance, tax-base sharing and resource redistribution, and a diversity plan. First, it established a regional governance system, the Learning Community Coordinating Council (LCCC), that united all 11 districts in the two-county metropolitan area into six subdistricts (see Figure 2).<sup>87</sup> Second, the legislation coordinated resource-sharing by granting the LCCC authority to distribute a common levy.<sup>88</sup> Third, the legislation included an economic “diversity plan” for the Learning Community, with two major features: The LCCC was tasked with creating Elementary Learning Centers (ELCs) as regionally funded in-place investments and with establishing a choice-based mobility program to deconcentrate high-poverty districts and schools.<sup>89</sup> The operation and outcomes of the diversity plans are discussed in more detail below.

The “Raikes Plan” proposed three major changes to promote more equitable public education in the region: regional governance, tax-base sharing and resource redistribution, and a diversity plan.



**Figure 2**  
**District Cooperation in Omaha Learning Community Subcouncils, 2018**



Source: Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties. [https://learningcommunityds.org/files/9213/6422/8729/District\\_mapV4.pdf](https://learningcommunityds.org/files/9213/6422/8729/District_mapV4.pdf) (accessed 01/02/19).

The mechanisms for funding Omaha’s Learning Community are highlighted below.

### Finance Spotlight: Omaha’s Learning Community

The Raikes Plan proposed a regional strategy for dollars to cross district boundaries by granting the LCCC authority to distribute a common levy.<sup>90</sup> The intent behind this tax-base sharing plan was to promote resource equity by moving revenue from high-wealth districts to low-wealth districts, and also to create a shared sense of financial responsibility among the 11 participating districts.<sup>91</sup> Under the common levy, the combined value of all property taxes was collected and immediately redistributed back to local districts for operating costs, based on a state funding formula that gave greater weight to students from low-income families and English language learners.<sup>92</sup> This weighting system was intended to create incentives for more affluent communities to welcome students from less-affluent families, who brought more funds with them.

In April 2016, the Nebraska Legislature voted 40–7 to eliminate the Learning Community’s common property tax levy starting with the 2017–18 school year.<sup>93</sup> There had been tensions between OPS and the surrounding districts about the tax for some time, and legislators sought to put an end to fighting over tax dollars. In exchange for ending the common levy, the state pledged to increase state support for the districts by \$13.4 million, and local property tax revenue is now backfilled with state equalization aid available for low-income districts.<sup>94</sup> Even though the common levy has been eliminated, the Learning Community has continued its commitment to redistributing resources among the 11 Omaha metro-area districts.

LCCC receives slightly more than \$7.5 million annual program budget support from the Learning Community Elementary Levy, based on a small property tax rate of 1.5 cents.<sup>95</sup> This levy supports Learning Center employees, contracts for learning center programs and services, and pilot projects.<sup>96</sup> A breakdown of Learning Community tax dollars by program shows how these resources are allocated to support efforts for promoting equity: financing community centers (50%); an early childhood learning plan (32%); district pilot programs for instructional coaching, school readiness, and extended learning (13%); and program administration (5%).<sup>97</sup>

### Outcomes

A commitment to equitable outcomes in the Learning Community is at the center of its guiding vision:

Together with school districts and community organizations as partners, we demonstrate, share and implement more effective practices to measurably improve educational outcomes for children and families in poverty.<sup>98</sup>

Regional commitment to this vision has remained central, as Omaha’s Learning Community has undergone implementation and revision. The LCCC continues to promote regional thinking in allocating resources throughout the Omaha metropolitan area, although the LCCC’s commitment to racial integration has waned over the years. As described in the finance spotlight, above, most of the Learning Community’s annual program budget is allocated to support Raikes Plan initiatives for promoting equity and mitigating the effects of poverty in Omaha-area schools.<sup>99</sup> These initiatives include the establishment and regional funding of ELCs in two qualifying subdistricts (North and South Omaha);<sup>100</sup> three district pilot programs focused on pre-k; extended learning; instructional coaching;<sup>101</sup> and the Superintendents’ Early Childhood Plan, which operates across all 11 Learning Community districts to reduce income- and race-based achievement gaps from birth through 3rd grade.<sup>102</sup>

The Raikes Plan also established a mobility plan for the Learning Community, with the goal of achieving an equal distribution of students from low-income families in all schools across the Learning Community. The LCCC implemented an Open Enrollment program in which students could apply for voluntary transfer to schools across the 11 Learning Community school districts with available space in grades k–12. Placements gave priority to students who contribute to the socioeconomic diversity of the school. In schools with a percentage of students qualifying for FRL that is greater than the Learning Community average, the priority went to students who do not qualify. In schools with a percentage that is lower than the Learning Community average, the priority went to students who qualify.<sup>105</sup>

Transportation costs were covered for students who contribute to the diversity of their school. The state supplied funding for districts to establish “focus programs, focus schools, or magnet schools pursuant to the diversity plan.”<sup>104</sup> By the 2012–13 school year, there were 19 magnet schools in OPS offering priority enrollment to students receiving FRL. Of the 15,231 students enrolled in magnet schools that year, the majority (72%) received FRL.<sup>105</sup> In addition, overall participation in the Open Enrollment program expanded from 4,334 students in 2011–12 to 7,826 students in 2016–17, 40% of whom qualified for FRL.<sup>106</sup> Approximately 35% of the Open Enrollment students were enrolled in schools that followed the intention of the diversity plan.<sup>107</sup>

There is convincing evidence that the Learning Community concept has wide appeal for many parents, but its future remains in doubt as local politics continue to divide the community.<sup>108</sup>

In terms of student achievement, 3 years of LCCC evaluations compared the performance of Open Enrollment students on 3rd- to 8th-grade reading and mathematics assessments to their resident counterparts. In schools with less than 44% of students eligible for FRL, Open Enrolled students scored dramatically higher than residents in FRL schools in both reading and mathematics in all tested grades.<sup>109</sup> Although the 2012–13 evaluation could not attribute causality, it stated that “it is important to make comparison among the groups and, as the number of Open Enrollment students increases, it may be possible to apply better methods of analysis.”<sup>110</sup>

In 2014, LCCC evaluations discontinued comparisons of Open Enrollment student performance on the Nebraska state assessments, concluding that the many possible intervening variables meant “valid conclusions are not possible.”<sup>111</sup> The LCCC evaluations continued to report the impact of Open Enrollment on district diversity. After 5 years, the LCCC evaluation found that the percentage of applicants from low-income families in the Open Enrollment program was similar to the percentages of students from low-income families in Learning Community districts overall.<sup>112</sup> Though Open Enrollment was intended to relieve concentrated poverty, the 2016–17 evaluation determined that participation in Open Enrollment (8,054 total, with 39.8% FRL) was not high enough to cause any significant movement of students between high-poverty and low-poverty schools.<sup>113</sup> The report did not specify the enrollment patterns of participating students.

In 2016, Nebraska lawmakers rewrote the transfer law and reinstated the older Option Enrollment program, which is a program more likely to enroll White students than other programs.<sup>114</sup> In principle, the Option Enrollment encourages diversity, but not to the same extent as Open Enrollment. Transfers that will improve a school’s diversity are still prioritized in admission; however, transportation costs to schools outside of partnering districts are covered only for students who qualify for free lunch (not those who qualify for reduced-price lunch). In 2017, the *Omaha World-Herald* reported that fewer applications for transfer were submitted for the 2016–17 school year.<sup>115</sup>

Omaha serves as a groundbreaking example of regional governance used to establish cooperation between suburban and urban districts seeking to meet the needs of diverse students in a large, metropolitan area. The Learning Community moved the region to think and act collaboratively to reallocate resources with the intention of best meeting the needs of all students. Some aspects of the Raikes Plan have been adapted over time as the Learning Community has piloted and evaluated its programs. The Omaha case illustrates the importance of establishing a formal, coherent vision for metropolitan-wide equity in order to sustain momentum, evaluate progress, and deliver on more equitable outcomes on a regional level.

In their analysis of the Omaha regional desegregation plan, Holme and Finnigan identify the core elements of what they refer to as a successful “federated regionalism” plan that constitutes a viable strategy for fulfilling the spirit of *Brown*.<sup>116</sup>

1. **Tax-Base Sharing and Resource Redistribution.** As the Omaha case shows, the pooling and then redistributing of taxes across an entire metro area is a critical first step in ensuring that the risk of creating divisions between “rich” schools and “poor” schools is avoided. Although the common levy was phased out in 2016, it was successful in providing an equitable distribution of resources.
2. **In-Place Investment Policies Funded by Regional Resources.** This strategy calls for directing investment and resources into high-poverty and traditionally marginalized communities. This is exemplified by the establishment of the Elementary Learning Centers, which are community centers that provide social and academic support services to children and parents outside of school hours.
3. **Mobility Policies.** This strategy calls for moving people across boundary lines and toward opportunity. Mobility strategies aim to break down patterns of racial and economic segregation in both housing and schools by using school choice policies to promote diversity across school buildings and change the geographic distribution of affordable housing.
4. **Regional Governance.** The oversight of the implementation of regional plans is best conducted through a regional governing body consisting of elected representatives from across the entire region. In the Omaha case, the LCCC has 21 elected members from six equal-proportion voting districts across the entire metropolitan area. All school districts are represented.
5. **Cross-Sector Approaches.** The effectiveness of educational policies is magnified and maximized when they are pursued not in isolation from other strategies but rather in tandem with housing, transit, health, and economic development. Cross-sector coordination can work to keep the focus on regional equity building on government structures that already exist.

Accomplishing this type of comprehensive equity-based interdistrict plan requires an astute political strategy that is sensitive to local conditions. In Omaha there were several policy entrepreneurs who played key roles in the creation of regional policy. These included State Senator Ron Raikes; Omaha Public Schools Superintendent John Mackiel; and John Gottschalk, the publisher of the *Omaha World-Herald*. When this coalition of policy innovators was no longer active due to Raikes’ death, Mackiel’s retirement, and a change of publisher at the newspaper, a leadership vacuum was created that led to the weakening of the Omaha regional plan.

## Lessons for Policymakers

The “federated regionalism” approach suggested by Holme and Finnigan provides a framework from which to build successful interdistrict desegregation plans.<sup>117</sup> They argue that the educational policy world could best help legislators and other public servants by asking them to “consider how problems of school failure are linked to larger inequities across regions—not only in terms of segregation and inequities in school funding, but in the underlying conditions and structures that limit economic growth and maintain patterns of segregation.”<sup>118</sup>

The case studies in this report underscore this call for a comprehensive vision for creating school systems in which all children might thrive. The collective action for greater racial equity in Boston, Hartford, and Omaha is inspiring and informative. The story doesn’t end here, however; it is ongoing. Other regions and cities, such as Minneapolis, have begun their own experiments with interdistrict desegregation programs. In this section, we draw lessons from our case studies to suggest effective strategies and paths forward for legislators and policymakers. These include securing a metropolitan-wide agreement, establishing a clear vision for educational equity, sustaining efforts with equitable resources, and creating a strong evaluation and data plan.

### **Secure a metropolitan-wide agreement:**

Most racial and ethnic segregation in American public schools occurs between, not within, school districts.<sup>119</sup> It is not surprising, then, that successful desegregation plans require the collaboration of urban and suburban districts in a comprehensive regional plan. Districts in a region rarely come together of their own accord. A solution often involves the state legislature, which can allocate funds and is often needed to legislate actions across traditional boundaries. To inspire and sustain such regional cooperation, it is also important to create incentives for students to cross district lines and for schools to want to admit them. To provide such incentives, policy can

- create opportunities for genuine cross-school and cross-district collaboration, including engaging learning opportunities that can attract diverse students, such as the range of magnet schools launched by Hartford, and school improvement networks that bridge geographic and cultural divides, such as the Local Community Council tackling shared projects in Omaha; and<sup>120</sup>
- offer financial incentives to help receiving schools cover the cost of student transfers,<sup>121</sup> such as METCO and Hartford’s per-pupil program funding and transportation reimbursements.

### **Establish a clear vision for educational equity:**

To begin collaborative work toward advancing racial and socioeconomic equity, policymakers, educators, and communities need a collective understanding of what equity means in their region. This vision should be grounded in equity’s educational value and articulated in writing through a participatory process. Once codified, an explicit vision of equity serves as both an imperative to establish interdistrict desegregation plans and as an important safeguard to prevent efforts from losing momentum as the difficult work progresses. A clear vision for equity includes

- a set of goals for achieving both greater diversity and greater educational quality and equity for targeted student subgroups that are specific to the region and are robust enough to support students’ learning and social-emotional needs. For instance, the METCO program



provides a range of services, including ongoing support from full-time METCO directors, social workers, and guidance counselors in addition to programming for college and career planning and tours of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Omaha has constructed a diversity plan for the Learning Community that includes Elementary Learning Centers and choice-based mobility programs to deconcentrate high-poverty districts and schools;

- a measurable definition of “racial isolation” at the school and classroom levels and means to reduce isolation, such as Hartford’s clear targets and creation of magnet schools that are regularly evaluated to accomplish them; and
- goals and benchmarks for greater diversity and greater equity that respond to realistic timelines and local factors, including neighborhood size and demographics, the size of student subgroups, capacity of participating schools, and transportation routes.

#### **Sustain efforts with equitable resources:**

Segregation is strongly associated with concentrated poverty and inequity of resources.<sup>122</sup> Effective desegregation plans, then, require the reallocation of resources. The interdistrict desegregation plans reviewed in this report invest broadly in the movement of students, information, and resources across school boundaries. Policies can sustain equity-enhancing efforts by promoting

- regionally based finance reform, such as Omaha’s Common Levy, that allocate additional funds to the schools and students who need it most;
- investment in regional magnet programs, capital improvements, and teacher professional development that raise the quality of schooling options available in all districts;
- affirmative marketing campaigns that build strong and accessible systems of public information around schooling options, such as Hartford’s engagement strategies;
- services for transfer students and families that include transportation, school counseling, and family liaisons, such as METCO’s liaisons; and
- continued supports for schools and for students who attend schools in their neighborhoods and are not part of the transfer program, such as the community schools and early learning centers in Omaha.

#### **Create a strong evaluation and data plan:**

Interdistrict plans must not overlook the ability for data, rigorously collected and widely reported, to inform and improve regional work promoting racial equity. Desegregation is complex and challenging work. Data monitoring allows practitioners and policymakers to test, evaluate, and adapt interdistrict plans to best serve all students. In each of the cases described in the report, the state has undertaken the task of collecting outcome data that illuminate the success and challenges of their desegregation plan. In these cases, we saw evidence of the value that ongoing data collection and analysis has afforded for sustaining and continuing to improve these efforts. A strong data plan

- is aligned to a clear vision for equity, with specific criteria for determining racial isolation or segregation and targets for reducing these conditions;



- monitors these goals by tracking and understanding multiple measures of student success (such as enrollment, graduation rates, academic achievement, academic growth, and social-emotional outcomes);
- disaggregates all data across student subgroups; and
- ensures that data collected are visible in the community, with opportunities to incorporate stakeholder feedback seriously and in a timely manner.<sup>123</sup>

Above all else, experience shows that policymakers interested in advancing equity through interdistrict desegregation plans must be persistent and must engage in ongoing problem solving. Progress requires an authentic commitment to equitable outcomes that responds to inevitable roadblocks with continued effort.

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