EQUITABLE ACCESS TO CHOICE SCHOOLS

Mountain View Whisman School District

HANOVER RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

Identified as a *Choice School*, Mountain View Whisman School District's (MVWSD) Stevenson Elementary School allows parents to apply to enroll their child with no restrictions based on attendance boundary, achievement level, or education program (e.g., general education, special education, or English learner). Generally, new students enter Stevenson in Kindergarten through a lottery system with sibling preference until capacity is reached. There are other limited access points as space becomes available. As a result of the lottery system, the demographics of Stevenson's student body differs from the characteristics of the district's total student population.

To inform the district's choice school enrollment policies and practices and address such disparities , MVWSD partnered with Hanover to research:

- Causes of disproportionality in choice schools;

- Strategies for increasing choice school diversity; and

- Related legal and ethical considerations.

In this presentation, Hanover shares findings from the literature (including guidance from education experts, federal and state education agencies, and other districts) and outlines recommended next steps for MVWSD.

FINDINGS

WHICH FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO DISPARITIES IN CHOICE SCHOOL ENROLLMENT?

POLICY ISSUES

Districts' choice school enrollment policies may result in "**opportunity hoarding**," or outcomes that restrict some groups' access in favor of other groups. In the case of choice schools, opportunity hoarding tends to disadvantage students of color, as well as students from families with lower household incomes. Examples of enrollment policies that may contribute to such disparities include:

Selective Policies

Policies that **limit choice school eligibility** to students based on one or more criteria (e.g., performance on admissions test).

Complex Policies

Policies that **specify multi-phase application processes** (e.g., taking an admissions test administered only at a specific site on a single date, scoring at a particular level on the admissions test, filing an application form, ranking choice school options, etc.).

Priority Policies

Policies that **grant admissions preference** to students based on one or more criteria, such as: geography (i.e., neighborhood in which a student lives); sibling enrollment (i.e., one or more of a student's siblings already attends the choice school); and/or demonstrated interest (e.g., parent participation in choice school open houses during the school day).

INFORMATION ISSUES

Finding information about choice schools, **understanding the various options**, and then **navigating the application process** often proves more challenging for families with the following characteristics:

New to the District or School	Less Connected Socially	Low Household Income	Less Access to Technology	Non-English-Speaking

TRANSPORTATION ISSUES

A family cannot opt for choice school enrollment if their child lacks **safe, reliable, affordable, and convenient transportation** to and from the building—a particular concern with choice schools located a significant distance from a family's home. Some districts that cannot directly transport students to choice schools subsidize use of public transportation. Such arrangements, however, may subject students to time-consuming, complicated commutes involving long walks and multiple transfers. Thus, transportation barriers may limit some students' ability to attend choice schools—especially students whose parents work or do not own a car.

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HOW CAN DISTRICTS INCREASE CHOICE SCHOOL DIVERSITY?

ESTABLISH A MISSION AND VISION

Define Diversity

Ask questions to determine what diversity means in the local context:

—*What are the demographics of our community? Our students?*

—*How might these demographics shift over time?*

Set Goals

Create enrollment targets for specific student groups (race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geography).

Choose metrics to measure and monitor progress.

Communicate to Stakeholders

Include diversity in mission and vision statements.

Commit to achieving diversity goals.

Ensure leadership reflects diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

AUDIT CURRENT APPLICATION PROCESSES

Do current application processes disadvantage some student groups?

- When and where are applications available?

- How much time and what resources are required to complete the application process?

- What are supports for non-English-speaking families?

- How does a family's access to technology influence the application process?

- What information are families required to supply for the application? Are there any questions on the application that could deter some families (e.g., undocumented or homeless families)?

Questions taken verbatim from: Potter (2019)

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How do families make school enrollment decisions for their child?

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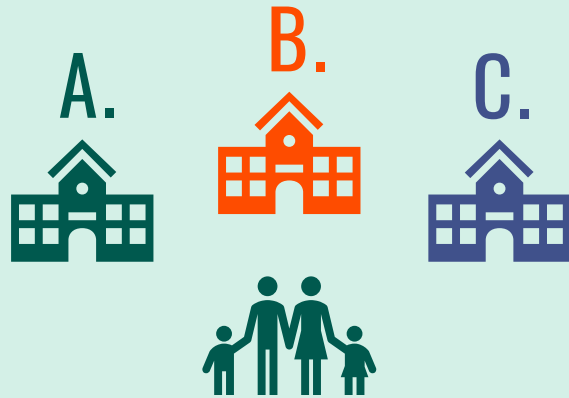
Districts can use surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews to gain insight into:

- What families know about school choice options;

- What families consider when selecting a school for their child;

- How families decide between different schools; and

- How families perceive the application process for choice schools.

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DEVELOP A COMMUNICATION PLAN

How can districts raise diverse families' awareness of school choice options?

- Dedicate a section on district and school websites to the application process (e.g., providing instructions, forms, etc. in multiple languages);

- Host information sessions and have translators present;

- Distribute pamphlets and other materials in multiple languages at community events;

- Leverage community partnerships to disseminate information;

- Invite parents of current choice school students to act as family liaisons;

- Conduct targeted outreach to individual families; and

- Place advertisements in multiple languages across various media.

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USE A COMMON ENROLLMENT SYSTEM

How can districts simplify the application process for families?

A common enrollment system lets families use a single form to apply to <u>all</u> schools in a district. Centralizing the process:

- ✓ Facilitates efforts to make content available to families in multiple languages and formats;

- ✓ Helps provide standardized information on individual schools;

- ✓ Typically means less time needed to liaise with school personnel and complete the application; and

- ✓ Reportedly results in less stress.

MAKE TRANSPORTATION EASIER

How can districts facilitate transportation to and from choice schools?

- Adjust current bus service: provide district or school bus service to all students attending a choice school or at least those students who live more than a specified distance from the building.

- Implement a tiered bus service: use one or more buses to transport students along multiple routes to one or more choice schools at different times.

- Introduce a hub bus system: create a system with bus stops placed strategically throughout a service area that enables students to transfer at a hub to another bus that then travels to the choice school.

- Partner with public transportation: permit students to use public subway and/or bus systems to travel to and from school at no cost to their families.

- Support ridesharing: contract with a rideshare company that allows families to use an app to request door-to-door transportation for their child.

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WHICH LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS SHOULD INFORM DISTRICT POLICIES AND PRACTICES?

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

- **Mandatory admissions**: choice schools must admit all students who want to enroll.

- **Random public drawing**: if the number of interested students exceeds the number of available seats, then choice schools must use a random public drawing to determine admission.

- **Admission <u>preference</u>**: the following groups receive preferred admission:
  - *Students already attending the choice school;*
  - *Other students in the district;*
  - *Siblings of students already admitted to or attending the choice school; and*
  - *Children of the choice school's staff.*

- **Admission <u>protection</u>**: choice schools cannot restrict admission based on:
  - *Academic achievement;*
  - *Delinquency;*
  - *Disability status;*
  - *English language proficiency;*
  - *Economic disadvantage (e.g., FRPL eligibility);*
  - *Neglect;*
  - *Homelessness;*
  - *Nationality*
  - *Race/ethnicity; or*
  - *Sexual orientation.*

- **Other criteria**: choice schools cannot require parent volunteer hours as part of any admissions criteria.

Source: California Legislature, Assembly Bill No. 1505 (2019)

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Can districts legally adjust the public lottery process to increase diversity?

California permits districts to use weighted lotteries to:

- **Comply with applicable federal and state laws** (e.g., Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the equal protection clause of the Constitution);

- **Permit students to change schools as provided by Title I**, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; and

- **Increase the likelihood of selecting students in underrepresented groups** (e.g., economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness).

Source: California Charter Schools Association

What kinds of ethical concerns do districts typically face in the context of choice schools?

Choice schools may...

- Expand education options for families;

- Create new education communities based on shared interests; and

- Give districts opportunities to promote student diversity.

Choice schools also may...

- Increase disproportionalities (depending on how districts implement enrollment policies); and

- Place budgetary pressure on districts (diverting scare resources from neighborhood schools that primarily serve underrepresented students).

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, Hanover recommends that MVWSD:

Conduct an equity audit to understand current conditions at the district and school levels.

➢ Since the situation at Stevenson may reflect broader equity issues in MVWSD, an equity audit would engage stakeholders in a process that:

- *Gathers perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion;*
- *Builds an asset-based mindset to support greater use of community resources;*
- *Analyzes data to identify disparities in academic and behavioral outcomes;*
- *Strengthens district leaders' capacity to develop policies and practices to address these disproportionalities; and*
- *Monitors progress toward goals for greater equity at the district and school levels.*

➢ An equity audit would leverage several research methodologies, including surveys, qualitative research (e.g., in-depth interviews, focus groups), data analyses, and best practice research. The process also would help MVWSD engage stakeholders by providing discussion guides and other resources to facilitate open dialogue and transparent communication.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, Hanover recommends that MVWSD:

Form a mission and vision statement prioritizing systemwide equity and then develop policies and practices to enhance diversity across the district and at Stevenson.

➢ MVWSD should draft the mission and vision statement collaboratively with stakeholders and ensure it aligns with the district's overall strategic plan. Prior to initiating this process, however, MVWSD should gather perception data to determine stakeholders' readiness to engage in an equity-focused dialogue.

Further explore the impact of specific enrollment policies and practices used by choice schools.

➢ MVWSD should conduct additional research on how individual policies and practices—such as transportation requirements and weighted lotteries—impact choice school enrollment overall and among specific student groups. Such research will enable MVWSD to make more informed decisions related to enrollment policies and practices for the district's choice schools moving forward.

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Thank you.

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