

What is controlled choice?

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Controlled choice is a comprehensive, educationally sound, transparent, and equity-driven method of assigning students to public schools. It empowers parents to choose the schools they want for their children in a manner that is fair to all students and is feasible for a school district to implement. Parents choose schools in rank-order preference.

The concept of universal controlled choice originated in Massachusetts in the early 1980's as a way to voluntarily achieve racially integrated schools and avoid forced busing. During the past three decades, controlled choice plans have been adopted by numerous school districts throughout the United States. They have proven to be living and equitable innovations that have adapted to changing circumstances and challenges.

Schools of Choice: Under controlled choice *all* schools are deemed to be a school of choice and no students are assigned to a school based solely on their home-address. Controlled choice, therefore, creates a system of universal public school choice.

Available Seats: The number of students that can be admitted to a particular school of choice will depend upon the number of available or unused seats that a school has at an applicant's grade-level. Therefore, establishing maximum enrollment capacities at each grade in every school is an essential component of an effective controlled choice plan to ensure no school is overcrowded.

Student Achievement: Controlled choice provides school districts with the opportunity to implement an *achievement-focused* student assignment plan. It is highly unlikely a school will attract parents unless it can provide children with an instructionally effective educational experience. It is also highly unlikely that truly informed parents will select a school that they believe will not meet the educational needs of their children.

Diversity: Controlled choice was initiated as a way to promote voluntary racial integration. It was then modified through the years to promote voluntary integration of diverse social and economic backgrounds. Therefore, the ultimate goal of controlled choice is to provide all students with a high-quality education in an integrated setting based solely on parental choice.

Magnet Schools: Magnet schools have played a key role in the development and implementation of controlled choice student assignment plans. A school district that already has successful magnet schools needs to ensure its existing magnet schools will continue to offer students a distinctive and attractive educational experience. The district must also develop a planning process for replicating its successful magnet schools and develop new magnet programs for schools that are having difficulty attracting diverse enrollments under controlled choice.

Stability of Assignment: Under controlled choice no students face mandatory reassignment to another school. Students assigned through controlled choice are allowed to remain in their assigned school until they complete that school's highest grade.

Grandfathered Student Assignments: Students who are already enrolled in the school district are allowed to stay in their school until they complete that school's highest grade. Siblings can follow an older brother or sister to the same school as long as the older sibling has not yet moved on to the next level.

Controlled Choice Assigned Students: Once grandfathered students are accommodated, current students who prefer to be transferred would be assigned using universal controlled choice. Students entering kindergarten, sixth grade and high school also would need to select the schools they prefer. The same approach would be used for students who are new to the district.

Opening New Schools: A distinctive benefit of controlled choice has been its effectiveness in assigning students to a brand new school without disrupting students who are enrolled in other schools in the system. This is accomplished by conducting a new school assignment lottery. Experience shows new schools typically have little difficulty attracting students.

Student Transportation: Providing efficient yellow bus transportation services is an essential component of an effective and equitable universal controlled choice student assignment plan.

School Choice Attendance Zones: Controlled choice plans have been effectively implemented in school districts of varying size and geographic configurations during the past 30 years. Large urban school districts have subdivided their school system into a number of *equivalent* K-12 “school-choice attendance zones” to make the plans feasible and fair.

Equivalent school-choice attendance zones are created by ensuring the demographic composition of the families and the achievement levels of the students in each zone mirrors the system as a whole. The range of educational programs offered to students in each zone must be similar and each zone must have the resources to accommodate the educational needs of all its students. By achieving zone-equivalency, no students will be educationally disenfranchised or structurally disadvantaged because of where they happen to reside in the school system.

Fairness: All aspects of the school choice application and assignment process must be transparent and fair to every parent. Active outreach efforts must be made to inform *all* eligible parents. A strategic plan must be developed that ensures all parents comprehend the details of the application process and are able to make an informed decision.

Enrollment Fairness Guidelines: Before a school district can adopt a universal controlled choice student assignment plan, it must develop the criteria that will be used to determine how students will be assigned to a school that has more applicants than available seats. Priority is given based on sibling relationships and a child’s proximity to first-choice schools. A walk zone of 1.5 miles is typically an objective and cost-effective starting point for establishing a “proximity priority.”

As a matter of fairness, provisions must be put in place to ensure that students who do not live within 1.5 miles of a school have an equitable opportunity to be assigned to any school in their zone.

School Improvement: Controlled choice enables school districts to identify the schools that most need improvement, based on parental choice. Experience has shown that schools that are over-chosen by parents are schools that are meeting the educational needs of students, and schools that are chronically under-chosen are schools that need to be enhanced in order to make them more attractive to parents.