

**EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE:  
A PLAN FOR  
EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT  
OF THE CHARLESTON  
COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**BY**

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Executive Summary

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Giving direction and coherence to our work in response to the charge we received from the Charleston Planning Project for Public Education to identify problems in the school system and propose ways of overcoming them, we adopted four planning principles: 1) our planning should seek to achieve both excellence and equity; 2) the plan should be comprehensive and designed to achieve systemic change; 3) school enrollment for students should simultaneously accommodate choice, result in student body diversity, and lead to school improvement; and 4) each school should be held accountable as the basic educational unit of the District's school system. These planning guidelines gave direction to the recommendations we share with you in this report. The guidelines may require the simultaneous implementation of several action strategies such as equity and excellence or choice, school improvement, and student body diversity. We caution the community to beware of the temptation of oversimplification, of trying to remedy complex social situations with single-item solutions. Indeed, our study indicates that we must pay attention both to the characteristics of students and to the characteristics of schools in which students matriculate to overcome educational deficits.

While most of the people with whom we talked were interested in achievement as an educational outcome, we determined that it is also important to examine failure. Achievement data readily available in the County District's records include the proportion of students in each school who took the Metropolitan Achievement Test and who scored above or below the national norm which is set at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile. Our indicator of failure is the suspension rate. It represents joint action by the individual and by the school system. Presumably, the suspended individual violated a rule or rules of the school community. The school community, moreover, was found wanting in creative ways of dealing with students who break rules other than to suspend them.

In this study, we analyze achievement as a positive outcome and suspension as a negative outcome. We repeat, both positive and negative behaviors are usually consequences of individual action and systemic effects.

#### Schools as Contextual Communities

In Charleston County, we discovered that negative and positive outcomes tend to be associated with contextual characteristics of schools that students attend. For example, 84 percent of White students in Charleston County and 47 percent of Black students attend elementary and middle schools that may be described contextually as racially mixed. Slightly more than half--32--of the 60 elementary and middle schools are so classified. Four of

the racially mixed schools are poverty concentrated, eight are affluent concentrated. The remainder--20 schools--are socioeconomically mixed. The socioeconomically isolated schools (poverty concentrated or affluent concentrated) are those in which 80 percent or more of the students are eligible or ineligible for free or reduced-cost lunch. Socioeconomic status adds a vertical or graduated dimension to the horizontal or nominal dimension of race. Together, race and social class create an interesting contextual effect for schools.

Although race is more or less held constant in the 32 elementary and middle schools under discussion, socioeconomic status is a variable which when mixed with race produces interesting effects on achievement scores and suspension rates. These scores and rates vary depending on whether the school context is racially mixed and poverty concentrated, racially mixed and socioeconomically mixed, or racially mixed and affluent concentrated. In racially mixed, poverty concentrated schools only 34 percent of all students scored above the national average on the Metropolitan Achievement Test. In the racially mixed, socioeconomically mixed schools, 44 percent of the students scored above the national average on this achievement test. And 78 percent scored above the national average on the Metropolitan Achievement Test in racially mixed, affluent concentrated schools. One might rightfully attribute these achievement scores to the varying influence of these three

different kinds of school communities. A similar pattern but moving in the opposite direction was revealed when suspension rates were examined. The suspension rate is based on episodes of suspension per 100 students. It, too, varied by school community context from 49 percent in racially mixed, poverty concentrated schools, to 31 percent in racially mixed, socioeconomically mixed schools, to 7 percent in racially mixed, affluent concentrated schools. Based on these findings, we conclude that it is very important to examine the school context to which students are exposed. For too long, we have pointed to the individual and said, "He did it; deal with him." To follow this course of action is to forget Yale psychiatrist James Comer's simile that likens schooling to opening a bank box: "When you need two keys to open a bank box and you only have one, you don't get in." With reference to education, Comer said in his book, Waiting for a Miracle, that "the individual is one key, the opportunity structure that the society provides is the second [key]." The school community context is the opportunity structure, the second key, which society provides to open educational opportunities to each student. If the school key is defective, learning will be hindered.

Recognizing this fact, we have recommended that more opportunities for choosing one's school of enrollment should be available to all students in Charleston County. We recommend this because we know that varying school contexts

contribute to positive and negative educational outcomes for students. Thus, a student should have the privilege of choosing a school context that is compatible with his or her educational needs.

The school contextual characteristics that have had the greatest negative effect on achievement scores and suspension rates in Charleston County are Black racially isolated, poverty concentrated schools. Most of these schools are located in Constituent District 20. In these kinds of schools in District 20, only 25 percent of the students have achievement scores above the national norm and the episodes-of-suspension rate is 49 percent. There are poor students and Black students enrolled in schools which have different contextual characteristics elsewhere in the County. These students in schools with different contextual characteristics tend to have higher achievement scores and lower suspension rates. These facts mean that little improvement can be expected of the students in District 20 or students in any other racially isolated, poverty concentrated schools if they remain contained in these kinds of schools.

#### Controlled Choice

After discovering the association between organizational context and personal behavior, we recommend a new way of assigning students to schools that permits students to choose their school community. It is called "Controlled Choice." The Controlled Choice Plan builds upon

the existing eight Constituent Districts by consolidating Districts 1 and 2 into a larger zone for elementary and middle school students called the Santee Attendance Zone. Students in the new zone would have seven elementary and three middle schools from which to choose.

Constituent District 4 would continue with its same boundaries but be renamed the Cooper River Attendance Zone. Students in this attendance zone would have fifteen elementary and three middle schools from which to choose.

Constituent Districts 3, 10 and 20 are consolidated into a new zone for elementary and middle schools called the Charleston Attendance Zone. Students in this new zone would have fourteen elementary and six middle schools from which to choose.

Constituent District 9 and 23 are consolidated into a new zone for elementary and middle schools called the Edisto Attendance Zone. In this new zone, students would have access to seven elementary and two middle schools.

High school zones will build upon the existing Constituent Districts and, also, embrace the new attendance zones for elementary and middle schools. There will be two high school zones. High School Attendance Zone 1 will link the Santee and Cooper River Attendance Zones. Students in this new zone will have access to at least four high schools and countywide magnet schools. High School Attendance Zone 2 will link the Edisto and Charleston Attendance Zones.



Students in this new zone will have access to six high schools and countywide magnet schools.

The four new elementary and middle school attendance zones and the two new high school attendance zones will have student population proportions that are closer to the countywide population proportions for Black and White students and for low income and non-low income students than was true of the Constituent Districts. Further, our plan recommends that an Assistant Superintendent give administrative oversight to each of the four zones, that a Parent Information Center be located in each attendance zone to help students and their families make informed decisions about schools of choice.

An important new feature of Controlled Choice is that it is "user-friendly." Students may choose schools but schools may not reject students. Also, since students no longer are assigned to schools, schools will have to compete for students by making themselves attractive.

Under the rules of Controlled Choice, students may choose three or more schools, rank-order their choices and a computer will assign them to a school of choice for the next school year as early as February or March. Once assigned to a school, one can remain in it until the top grade is completed.

Controlled Choice assignments are given for entering grades, kindergarten or first grade for elementary students, sixth grade for middle school students, and ninth grade for

high school students. During the start-up year for Controlled Choice, no one is dismissed from a school in which one is currently enrolled. All students already attending a school may remain as part of the school's student body. Sibling preference and proximity (or walk-zone) preference may be offered in a Controlled Choice plan as long as this preference does not violate enrollment fairness guidelines.

For Charleston, we recommend that socioeconomic status be used in constructing enrollment fairness guidelines. Data are readily available regarding the proportion of students eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch. The reason for having enrollment fairness guidelines is to ensure that low-income and non low-income students have equal access to all educational opportunities. Enrollment fairness guidelines are zone-specific. The proportions of students eligible for free and reduced-cost lunch in each zone are the ideal proportions for students assigned to entering grades at each school. If students in one income group are not interested in attending a school, the group which prefers the school may take a stipulated percentage of seats beyond the ideal proportion.

In summary, Controlled Choice will change the power relationship between schools and families so that families can choose schools but schools cannot reject students, and, thereby, all schools will be diversified.

## Governance

Another major recommendation in our report concerns governance. For more than 30 years, since the consolidation of the eight Constituent Districts, this community has experienced governance gridlock with bickering between the County Board and Constituent District Boards. The existing model does not work and should be changed.

Along with our recommendation of the Controlled Choice student assignment method and its four zones, we recommend that Constituent District Boards be reconstituted as Zone School Improvement Boards to advise Assistant Superintendents who are appointed to give oversight to educational affairs in each zone. The County Board would be the ultimate policymaking group in the County School District. However, we also recommend that Act 340 which sets forth the responsibilities of the County Board should be amended or replaced with new laws that clearly delineate policymaking authority and fiduciary responsibilities reserved for the Board; administrative and management authority are assigned to the Superintendent. Presently, the County Board makes decisions about personnel matters which should be the responsibility of the CEO (the chief executive officer who is also the chief educational officer). If these administrative and personnel matters were lifted from the shoulders of the County Board, it would have more time to deal with policy matters both long-range and short-term. Throughout the nation, superintendents are

assuming more responsibility for management and personnel matters. This shift in responsibility prevents the Board from attempting to micromanage the school system.

To enhance the capacity of the Superintendent to perform crucial administrative and managerial functions, we recommend that the Office of the Superintendent include a Deputy Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and a Deputy Superintendent for Operations. These two positions and the four Assistant Superintendents who give oversight to education in the four proposed Attendance Zones would constitute the Superintendent's Cabinet.

#### Transportation

We are mindful of transportation costs and have recommended that a bell-time study be conducted to determine if the number of buses used could be reduced by staggering school starting times. We also have recommended that the School District explore whether a pass system for high school students can be worked out so that some high school students may go to and from school on public common carriers at public expense. Finally, with reference to transportation, the proposed Controlled Choice Student Assignment Plan is unlikely to increase transportation costs very much. The more orderly way of assigning students to school by zones may reduce some of the out-of-district transportation.

Presently, Charleston County transports 57 percent of its students to and from school. This proportion is only 3

percentage points less than the national figure of 60 percent. So Charleston is probably transporting more students to and from school than most people realized. The Controlled Choice plan will bring more order to the student assignment process so that all may have access to transportation equitably.

#### Magnet Schools

Two important recommendations are offered regarding magnet schools. Whenever possible, future magnet schools should be zone magnet schools as a way of making magnet school students eligible for transportation at State expense. Further, magnet schools which require a standardized test as part of the admissions process should use a minimum acceptable score which is not greater than the 65<sup>th</sup> percentile. Accommodating the top third of students in the school system as eligible for magnet school enrollment would not harm the admissions process. Moreover, this recommended standard will prevent magnet schools from drifting toward socioeconomic isolation, as some magnet schools are now characterized.

#### Early Childhood Education

Because of the demonstrated benefits of early childhood education, a comprehensive, coherent strategy should be developed to facilitate the orderly development of early childhood education. Educational benefits may then be extended to all children in the County, regardless of race or social class. The College of Charleston has had

extensive experience with early childhood education and should be used as a resource.

#### A Principal's Center or Leadership Training

Because of the critical role which principals play in creating and sustaining schools as effective learning environments, we recommend that a one-year planning project on the implementation of a leadership training program for public schools be conducted by a local institution of higher education which has experience in leadership development. Such a project could result in a Principal's Center or a similar continuous training program for school leadership.

#### Special Education

The good news about Special Education (SPED) is that students so designated are assigned to schools throughout the system. They are in schools in which most students have low achievement scores and in schools in which most students have high achievement scores. They are not lumped together and contained within a few schools. What we could not determine from data available to us is whether the special education students assigned throughout the school system are in self-contained classrooms and cut off from frequent interaction with other students. Thus, we recommend that the School District conduct or commission a study of special education services to determine the specific kinds of students in each disability category in each school. Such a study, also, should investigate the number of students in self-contained classrooms by school and why the proportion

of special education students is low in countywide magnet schools. The study should explore the feasibility of locating in each of the four proposed attendance zones one Inclusion School which may serve as a model of how to integrate special education and regular education students.

Finally, our study has revealed some outstanding learning environments currently existing within the Charleston County school system. These regular education schools could and should be replicated. The regular education schools that serve all sorts and conditions of students very well are Stono Park, St. James-Santee, Orange Grove, Oakland, Drayton Hall Middle School and James Island Middle School. There are other regular education schools with records of excellent instruction. However, these particular are identified schools because they educate diversified student bodies, such as students from all income levels and students in all racial groups very well. We should celebrate the presence of these schools and encourage others to "go and do likewise."

Respectfully submitted  
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