

SCHOOL COMMITTEE

(Official Report)

Special Informal Meeting

Tuesday, November 24, 2009

Called, by Order of Her Honor Mayor E. Denise Simmons, for 6:00-8:00 p.m., 159 Thorndike Street, for the purpose of a roundtable discussion on Controlled Choice.

Members Present: Mr. Fantini, Mr. Grassi, Mr. McGovern, Ms. Nolan, Mr. Schuster, Ms. Tauber, Mayor Simmons

Mr. McGovern, in the Chair.

Also Present: Jeff Young, Superintendent; James Maloney, Chief Operating Officer; Bridget Rodriguez, Education Liaison; School Committee Member-Elect Alice Turkel; Councillor-Elect Henrietta Davis, Graham & Parks Principal Sarah Fiarman; Parag Pathak, MIT Assistant Professor of Economics

The Chair called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. Mr. Schuster gave a brief review of the Community Relations Subcommittee's work on the Controlled Choice formula and introduced Parag Pathak. Dr. Pathak walked Members through a slide presentation, "Controlled Choice in Cambridge" (copy on file in the School Committee office), including:

- Goals of Choice in Cambridge
- Cambridge mechanism (simplified)
- Cambridge mechanism: central issue
- Cambridge mechanism: Advice for participants
- Cambridge mechanism
- Gaming
- Seat Swap algorithm
- Cambridge mechanism: Example

Dr. Pathak explained that if Cambridge is going to change something, it is important that there are straight forward incentives to eliminate gaming i.e., seat swap algorithm, and responded to some of the following questions, comments, and concerns:

- How far down does the algorithm go
- Is it good that there are no seats at Graham & Parks
- There is no chance of getting into Graham & Parks if you don't live in the neighborhood
- Stop using Graham & Parks as an example – that issue needs to be addressed
- Who gets to play this game and manipulate the system
- Stop using the word "gaming"
- Can a lever be added to the knobs like changing the number of schools a family can choose
- There should not be a cap on the number of schools that can be chosen
- If someone wants to rank more than three schools, let them
- Does the lottery serve as a tie breaker
- This algorithm is a way to get closer to our policy
- How can levers be changed to decrease mandatory assignments
- What percentage of families get their first three choices
- We do not know how wide the gap is between popular schools
- How does this discussion support our academic goals

- What are the goals of the Controlled Choice policy
- It would be good to get a true sense of preferences – have a near walk zone and a far walk zone
- Is this algorithm a discrete change or is it more complicated
- The dangerous thing about our policy is that people don't understand the system
- One benefit could be that schools get who they want
- Purpose of controlled choice is to balance schools – why is there neighborhood preference
- There is a huge weighting on neighborhood preference
- We value having balanced schools – is this still our goal
- This isn't about getting first choice – it's about leveling the playing field
- A system that is fair and doesn't favor families who do not want to strategize is better
- Graham & Parks is serving mostly neighborhood students and it wants to serve all the children of Cambridge
- One of the most important things is to have families trust that this is a fair system
- Look at eliminating the word "mandatory"
- Do we have the lever calibrated right
- Think about changing the algorithm for next January
- Should we tackle the whole elephant or just little pieces
- School Committee should make a decision to make this a priority
- Need to revisit how the whole Committee handles this and how subcommittees work
- If this clears up a messy area and it doesn't make huge changes we should do it
- Should proximity preference be eliminated
- Part of the issue is why some schools are chosen over others

Members thanked Dr. Pathak for the presentation.

On a motion by Mr. Fantini, seconded by Mr. Schuster, the meeting was adjourned (8:05 p.m.).

Adjourned
Marilyn Y. Bradshaw
Executive Secretary to the School Committee