

Feedback (Verbal) Report
Controlled Choice Advisory Group
Thursday, January 31, 2013 (Day 1)
Saturday, February 2, 2013 (Day 2)

Breakout Session #1 - Entrance Age:

- All felt not convinced by slide of JK not helping, want to see more information
- Not convinced it affects diversity; preschool parents benefit
- Get JK assignments they don't like
- Fairness – older kids get double benefit 2 years of higher quality public education
- Some families have a cultural bias asking for extra year
- Compare kids with high quality PreK to JK
- Dates confusing when kids enter JK, K
- Similar thoughts as square group
- Questions about entry age in terms of Tobin School not centrally located, few slots, not accessible for working families (part day), you don't hear about it
- Plan baby's birthday better
- More kids applying than spaces; if you eliminate JK, you eliminate mandatory assignments
- Siblings could double the effect of 2 years
- Is 4 years old age appropriate to show independence to take bus, walk around the school alone; are they ready developmentally
- Tobin shows a lot of families want free public school, some are interested in different school but take it because it's available
- Stress of lottery causes people to leave
- It didn't have an impact on diversity
- Similar thoughts
- Tobin not centrally located
- People may not care for Montessori; don't have any other options for 3 year old program
- Puzzled by student achievement slides, didn't show improvement
- Guidelines are clear for transparency
- Increase enrollment for people who want extra JK year
- Special start not covered in this
- Doesn't show socially how kids are who have had JK year
- Larger feeder population requires every one knowing about early entry opportunity
- Fair if everyone has access
- Special start issue
- Newcomers late to lottery in July; seats are filled can't get into 1st choice
- Data doesn't support JK evidence
- Is there benefit to disaggregated information by sub-group
- First hit with process don't know what it means, has improved over time
- Wait list is good for transparency
- Paperwork a deterrent; private Montessori, 2 pieces of paper, interview and a check

Breakout Session #2 - Availability of seats/classrooms, choice and non-choice assignments:

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- How many more open seats in west vs. east
 - Appears to be need for more open seats on the west side
 - Lack of open seats diminishes choice for everyone in Cambridge.
 - Families want choice though out the district.
 - Individually, it wasn't fair; kids families asked to travel from east to west, or west to east
 - Some people were happy with mandatory assignments
 - Counseling FRC confusing; sent mixed messages
 - Should east/west designation change to different zones
 - Should proximity be reexamined
 - Question the validity and appropriateness of the lottery
 - Not true lottery
 - Process felt uneven
 - Based on data, it looks like more paid lunch students are in East Cambridge which helps with integration of the City; glad about this
 - Housing costs are lower on east side; more multi-families with kids
 - Census data makes it look like based on the number of applications east/west; west has more private school enrollment
 - Most families want to go close to home
 - Unfair that if JK families keep child out of preschool, they get 2 chances in the lottery: question of would the number of mandatory assignments go down if you only allow JK families only 1 chance in the lottery
 - 1 school is getting a lot of perks, e.g. smart boards, laptops, based on being high % of free/reduced lunch and low test scores
 - Less support for free/ reduced lunch at risk students if they attend a school with lower % of free/reduced lunch
 - It hurts achievement if schools are not integrated
 - Cambridge as a community values diversity; Controlled Choice supports that value of City
 - Integrating schools does benefit students
 - Process has become greatly improved, more dissemination of information, loved video
 - Research on schools is very time consuming; big disadvantage for families who don't have time to visit schools or search internet
 - Issue of potentially disadvantaged kids do have an advantage in more economically rich school
 - Overachieving students possibly put at disadvantage is a question for teachers on how to challenge kids
 - Culture of schools – conscientiousness of learning and addressing every single student regardless of race or SES
 - Video was excellent; still hard to absorb; is there a way to simplify it
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- Does controlled choice help diversify schools; prevents some schools from becoming severely imbalanced (becoming very middle class) but may not impact other schools because their neighborhoods are more economically balanced; leaves some schools still very imbalanced with low income students

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- Still have large achievement gaps in all schools, even ones we consider balanced
- Achievement patterns don't fit the assumption that achievement of low income students is lower if there is a higher concentration of them; some schools have higher achievement of lower income students despite fact they are not balanced

Breakout Session #3 - Algorithm and the effects of '+ or - 10%':

- Reconsider structure of the lottery; maybe fill half the seats in January and the other half in June
- Reputation vs. quality

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- There are parents who want uniforms and a longer day; subset driven by those choices
- Is there a problem being out of balance; whose problem is that?
- Is the amount of choices among the schools affecting the choice policy; or is the policy affecting the choices or supporting the choices?
- If balance is the value/target then there needs to be another factor besides proximity to bump people up
- Need human element in choice process
- Recommend giving parents a deeper knowledge of what school offers
- Schools that have a lot of open seats after enrollment may get transient population which makes balance a challenge; graduate/doctoral students tend to have younger children then they move away after a few years
- Depends on how you define achievement
- Growth in MCAS scores isn't always necessarily in the schools that are most balanced
- What was motivation behind this complex process
- Informal networks, FRC may assume what is appropriate for your family; you may be steered away from other choices
- Make sure you get people in the buildings; sell the kindergarten
- Some schools stay balanced, suggestion to use '+ or - 5%'
- Frustrating for some families when a class had open seats
- Test results data mixed
- Having school not balanced will only get worse over time
- K families who get mandatory assignment don't get their choice and also get an unbalanced school
- A mandatory assignment is good for the health of the school
- Tension between the individual interest of the family and the benefit of the school community is a constant struggle
- Parents perceive that certain schools will serve the child better; it depends on culture of the school and the culture of the family as to whether child will achieve
- Process is not transparent; even if it were, does it really do you any good since it is such a complicated process

Breakout Session #4 - Ideas, concerns and priorities for the continued review of Controlled Choice:

- Even if you don't get one of your top 3 choices, how is it communicated to the parents that all Cambridge public schools are quality schools; this is an essential element to get perception of quality
- Where do we get information regarding quality; is system based on assumption

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- We get information from social networks, family liaisons, tours of schools, FRC, website, knowledge of programs and test results
- The controlled choice policy doesn't pay attention to how parents perceive schools; parents don't believe that whatever school their child gets into will be fine
- Parent investment/involvement is to get the higher choice
- Suggest waitlist change - if you get 1st, 2nd or 3rd choice, you shouldn't be on a waitlist
- Need to improve parents' understanding before engaging in the JK/K process; libraries, realtors
- Need more help for newcomers, personal contact person in FRC and ambassadors to connect people who get mandatory assignment with people in mandatory assignment schools who have chosen to stay
- Give them more of a personal connection also within the school; family liaison could make list of people interested in getting in touch with newcomers
- Clearer path into finding information when you are not from the area
- Put emphasis that all schools are good; it is a lottery and the systems is used to create balance
- Different algorithm for 2nd and 3rd choice placement; would get more kids into 2nd and 3rd choices
- People are already picking elementary schools on reputation of the upper schools
- Conduct parent surveys after K lottery has been run
- Make sure FRC staff are neutral, talk about quality of all the schools in a fair and balance way but not directing them to a particular school
- Families feel they have no choice with sub-separate classrooms
- Get families to consider a wider range of schools citywide; school advisory group
- With '+ or - 10%' will guarantee that some schools will be out of balance
- Families don't know about schools until they are there; cant' visit all 12 schools
- Idea of open houses - to what degree are they are marketplace for competition
- Communicate that the whole district is good.
- Controlled choice implies you have less choice, talk about benefits of school
- Connect preschools to elementary schools to keep parent informed
- Proximity role very helpful; may give you points that are of no value to you.
- Have different steps for people when proximity is most important
- Improve how parents get information
- Convey to parents that this process is good for the community; good for your child
- We have 12 quality schools but each school may have something unique to offer, e.g. music program, etc.; need to get this information out
- Have to maintain quality across schools
- Can we achieve balance though another way, e.g. magnet schools or zones