

Even Social Engineers Don't Want Their Kids Used as Demographic Pawns

Matt Welch

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Is *schoolenfreude* a word? If so, a *Wall Street Journal* [article](#) from Saturday produced buckets of the stuff.

Seems an area man who helped design the devilishly complicated algorithm that determines the middle school designations for New York City public school kids, and who also supported the [trailblazing](#) (and [controversial](#)) [diversity plan](#) in Brooklyn's [mediagenic](#) District 15, found himself on the losing end this spring when his incoming middle school daughter was assigned to just her 10th-ranked choice of government-run school. So what did Neil Dorosin and family do?

They chose a charter school closer to home. And I do not blame them, not one little bit.

The school his daughter was assigned to, Sunset Park Prep, features comparatively poorer students (a majority of them, unlike Dorosin, are nonwhite) achieving comparatively decent test results, so that was attractive enough to include on her school rankings (as it was for my daughter, who is in the same school district and age group). But: "He worried about the travel distance. He said his daughter cared that none of her friends were going to Sunset Park Prep, some were going to the charter, and she found the charter's building more appealing."

As Matthew Ladner wrote in an unrelated [piece](#) about New York charter schools yesterday, "We should celebrate anytime any family finds a good fit school for their children. They paid their taxes after all; if they are happy, then so am I." Indeed. And there is no ammunition for a charge of hypocrisy here, either, as Dorosin does not to my knowledge share Mayor Bill de Blasio's unreasonable [hostility to charters](#).

But the initial experiences of parents on the vanguard of District 15's experiment with "controlled choice"—as in, families choose their ranked preferences, then the school system chooses their assignment based on a mixture of lottery and demographic leveling—suggest that more people than before are choosing exit rather than compliance.

Dorosin's Brooklyn Urban Garden School (BUGS), one of five privately-run charters in a district that has 11 Department of Education-operated middle schools, "had a surge of interest in the past year," the *Journal* reported:

Its officials said 502 children living in District 15 entered the charter's lottery for sixth-grade for this fall, up from 315 the previous year, before the district's new admissions method. Now 77 of its sixth-graders come from the district, up from 37 before.

That's an eye-popping increase. We don't yet know the full enrollment picture for this fall, but a previous *Journal* [article](#) from the summer reported that the number of incoming sixth graders

appealing their designations jumped from 350 to 450 (or from around 13 percent of the incoming class of middle schoolers to 17 percent), while the number of appeals granted plummeted from 59 to 14. As I noted in this [Twitter thread](#) at the time:

Matt Welch @MattWelch · Jul 10, 2019
Replying to @MattWelch
Last year, around 350 students (13% of the incoming 6th grade District 15 class) appealed their designations, and 59 won their appeals. This year, around 450 (17%) appealed, and just 14 won. Citywide appeals in 2017 were 12%; about 1/3 won.
[wsj.com/articles/rise-...](#)

Rise in Requests for Different School Seats After Brookl...
In the wake of a new admissions lottery to boost diversity, more families in Brooklyn's District 15 asked for a change in
[wsj.com](#)

Matt Welch @MattWelch
That's a meaningful increase. The number of objectively disgruntled families in District 15 has jumped from around 290 to 435, or from about 11% of incoming 6th graders to 16%. Where will those 145 additional unhappys go? We don't know yet.
5:07 PM - Jul 10, 2019

[See Matt Welch's other Tweets](#)

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At just one middle school, the long-maligned Charles O. Dewey (I.S. 136) in the same Sunset Park neighborhood as Dorosin's assigned school, appeals went up from 22 to 50. A disproportionate number of my daughter's classmates at her comparatively affluent and successful elementary school were assigned faraway I.S. 136 despite not even including it in their rankings. (You can select up to 12 publicly run schools; charters are handled separately.) I have yet to hear of a single one of those families accepting their assignment.

Meanwhile, we know of at least three parents of District 15 elementary public schoolers who have either moved or are in the process of moving away from this area altogether as a direct result of their middle school placements. Have I mentioned that my elementary school subdistrict may soon be changing to controlled choice?

As it happens, just today—the same day as a crucial public meeting about the fate of my youngest daughter's elementary school—the Cato Institute has published a new policy paper about controlled choice, by George Mason University education professor emeritus David J. Armor. Keep in mind that this particular policy approach toward integrating schools, which is the successor of the racial-integration busing policies of the 1970s, is preferred not just by my district, but by New York City's whole Department of Education, and pretty much the whole school-diversification establishment.

So what does Armor conclude?

In larger school districts, controlled-choice plans can generate controversy and middle-class flight among parents who prefer neighborhood schools, similar to the "white flight" observed in earlier decades when mandatory busing was used to attain racially balanced schools.

A review of controlled-choice plans in six large districts in North Carolina, Kentucky, and Florida shows considerable and ongoing higher-income and white losses in these districts. While other demographic forces cannot be ruled out (e.g., urban to suburban movement for reasons unrelated to schools), neither can the unpopularity of controlled choice. More important, none of these districts has demonstrated significant closing of achievement gaps between higher- and lower-income students, one of the main justifications for these plans.

For larger school districts...it is clear from the cases reviewed here that controlled choice for economic integration is not working as intended. It is still controversial, and it may be contributing to growing racial and economic isolation among some larger school districts. Most importantly, this policy has not been successful at achieving one of its major goals: closing achievement gaps.

Ouch.

As I have said whenever asked, I don't *know* if my school district's new system will be good or bad, and I'm happy that some populations that previously did not even think to apply to some of the highest-reputation middle schools got admitted this year. Choice is a wonderful thing, and poorer families especially should have more of it.

But the lure of control is ever-present. Two weeks after a Democratic presidential debate spat between Sen. Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) and former Vice President Joe Biden made school busing national news again, *New York Times Magazine* writer Nikole Hannah-Jones wrote a deeply knowledgeable and interpretatively questionable cover story with the provocative headline, "It Was Never About Busing: Court-ordered desegregation worked. But white racism made it hard to accept."

I can testify that Hannah-Jones' conclusion resonates with many of the people driving diversity-conscious admissions changes to schools in New York and elsewhere: "Busing did not fail. We did."

Parents who balk at accepting the results of the new busing *will* be branded as racist, one of the gravest accusations one can level at another human being in modern society. As one woman just emailed me while I was finishing this post:

For schools to become integrated and, more importantly, equalized, it means that some kids will suffer. Those kids are likely to be those who already have an enormous amount of social capital, if not downright wealth. They will survive. If their parents choose to send them to private school instead, let it be on their conscience about how they are supporting a racist and classist system and how they are, indeed, racists.

All parents, Neil Dorosin included, are going to do what they think is best for their kids. If the school they are assigned to is objectionable on grounds of distance, or test scores, or curriculum, or cleanliness, or safety, or leadership, they will look for ways to opt out. And if in the process they are treated like privilege-hoarding accomplices to a system of white supremacy, then that noise you will hear is the slamming of doors behind them.

"The whole process [has] left us so traumatized and frankly angry that I can't see myself going through it again for our younger daughter," one District 15 parent of a sixth grader emailed me last week. "And, we look forward with terror at the high school admissions and the real possibility that the same forces will be at play by the time we're up. It's become [such] a toxic subject of our lives that I really can't live with anymore. So, [the] end result is that we have decided to leave Brooklyn altogether."