

# INTERDISTRICT CHOICE AS A POLICY SOLUTION:

EXAMINING ROCHESTER'S URBAN-  
SUBURBAN INTERDISTRICT TRANSFER  
PROGRAM (USITP)

Kara S. Finnigan

Tricia Stewart

University of Rochester

# Study Rationale

- Most students attend public schools segregated by race and class (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Lee, 2003)
- Most segregation occurs *between* districts (Lankford & Wyckoff, 2005)
- Interdistrict choice policies have been used in a handful of locales
  - ▣ Reduction in racial isolation (Piliawsky, 1998; Orfield, Frankenberg, & Garces, 2008)
  - ▣ Short and long-term effect on participants (Holme, Wells, & Revilla, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2004; Wells & Crain, 2005; Wells, Holme, Atanda, & Revilla, 2005; Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2009)
- Limited research on processes and practices that facilitate or hinder participation in these programs and affect implementation across sites.

# Study Context

Voluntary  
Interdistrict  
Transfer  
Program

Founded in  
1965 to end  
racial isolation

- 1 Urban District (RCSD):
  - ▣ 88% Students of Color
  - ▣ 88% Receive Free and Reduced Price Lunch
- 18 Suburban Districts in County
  - ▣ 7 participating districts (42 schools)
  - ▣ NY State's 11<sup>th</sup> Wealthiest County
  - ▣ 81 percent White

Current Enrollment in USITP: 450 students

# Research Questions

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- What is the political context of USITP and to what extent has this changed over time?
- Who participates in USITP and what are the driving forces affecting enrollment?
- How is USITP implemented at the school and district level and what obstacles exist with regard to program expansion?

# Mixed Methods Study

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- Enrollment Data (5,821 students, 21,500 records)
- Stakeholder Interviews (N=24)
- Newspaper Articles (1965-present)
- USITP Program Records (1965-present)

# Key Findings

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- **USITP Historical-Political Context**
- **Participation and Enrollment**
- **Implementation and Expansion**

# USITP Historical-Political Context

- Advocacy coalitions played key roles in development and implementation
- Smaller programs (e.g., Summer Enrichment) paved the way for USITP
- Grassroots advocacy of program administrators fostered initial growth of the program
- Initial opposition has faded, as has media attention
- Suburban districts receive a financial benefit

# Participation and Enrollment

- Participation is limited by a myriad of factors, including “fit” of student and space availability
- Special education students are not admitted (but may be identified once admitted)
- Most students enter in primary grades
- Participants include a range of neighborhood household incomes
- Tension between desire to increase diversity and “cost” of student participation (to suburban taxpayers)
- High levels of attrition

# Implementation and Expansion

- Philosophy of immersion
- Participation is a “privilege” - high standards for academics and behavior
- Some racial and socio-economic tensions exist (including between minority participants and minority residents)
- Transportation is a major challenge
- Suburban parents question involvement when USITP students “deny” opportunities to their children
- Expansion appears unlikely

# Implications

- Political coalition building is necessary for program sustainability and expansion
- Changes to application procedures and eligibility requirements would broaden participation (at what cost?)
- Determination of space availability limit “critical mass” in schools/districts
- Benefits of integration are tested by self-interests of tax-payers - finding ways to negotiate this political domain is critical
- Policy incentives may be necessary to reach ultimate goal of decreasing racial isolation

# Next Steps.....

- Continue to study enrollment/implementation, including governance and financial issues
  
- Begin to examine access and opportunity
  - ▣ What are the educational and social opportunities for participants?
  
- Begin to examine program impact
  - ▣ On participants
  - ▣ On minority and white suburban residents
  - ▣ On integration