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Neil Kraus^a

^a University of Wisconsin, River Falls

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Concentrated Poverty and Urban School Reform: “The Choice is Yours” in Minneapolis

Neil Kraus

University of Wisconsin—River Falls

The subject of urban schools has received extensive scholarly and popular attention in recent years, and a wide variety of policies to address the problem of low educational achievement has been suggested. This article, based on an analysis of documents and reports, in-depth interviews, and a variety of secondary sources, examines the first several years of the implementation of a 2000 legal settlement between the Minneapolis Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the State of Minnesota regarding the Minneapolis schools. Influenced by the *Sheff v. O’Neill* (1996) case in Hartford, Connecticut, the Minneapolis NAACP’s lawsuit challenged the State’s oversight of the Minneapolis schools under the Minnesota Constitution. The settlement created two new programs intended to provide low-income Minneapolis students more options in selecting schools. This article focuses on the more wide-ranging of these two programs, which buses up to 2,000 low-income urban students annually to suburban Minneapolis schools at State expense. The creation of the suburban transfer program represents a legal and political victory for the NAACP and its supporters. Yet the transfer program highlights the many obstacles faced by low-income students and reinforces the necessity for a multi-dimensional approach to high-poverty urban schools.

The major problem associated with urban schools is concentrated poverty, which produces a variety of negative effects, including lower educational achievement (Jargowsky, 1997; Kahlenberg, 2001; Massey & Denton, 1993; Orfield, 1997, 2002; Roscigno, Tomaskovic, & Crowley, 2006; Rusk, 2003; Wilson, 1987, 1996). While economic class is a major predictor of academic success, racial minorities face additional obstacles, which are evident when comparing children of different races but similar economic backgrounds (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Rothstein, 2004). In light of the continued racial and socioeconomic segregation of U.S. metropolitan areas (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2001; Massey & Denton, 1993; Orfield, 2002; Rusk, 2003), academic achievement gaps persist between urban and suburban districts as well as within urban districts in which poverty among schools is unequally distributed.

For a number of reasons, students in high-poverty schools suffer from low achievement. In their recent article on the place-based inequalities of the educational system, Roscigno and his colleagues (2006) have pointed out that students in low-income areas suffer from lower levels

of resources and investments at both the family and school levels, which substantially affect educational outcomes. This research shows that a family's economic well-being can shape a child's cognitive development in the early years, and economically better-off families are more likely to hire tutors, meet with teachers, use "proper" English in the household, and create educationally meaningful leisure time for their children. Further, lower-income students suffer from a wide range of health-related problems when compared to economically better-off students, including poorer vision and oral hygiene, more asthma and lead poisoning, poorer nutrition, less adequate pediatric care, and more exposure to smoke (Rothstein, 2004). The combined influence of all of these obstacles faced by students in poverty is "probably huge" (Rothstein, 2004, p. 3).

In addition to these individual level factors is the relationship between contextual variables, such as peer influences and classroom environment on educational achievement levels (Kahlenberg, 2001; Rothstein, 2004). Students who attend schools with higher proportions of lower-income students will be exposed to more students who are not performing at their grade level and are more likely to drop out of school (Kahlenberg, 2001). Teachers also face more discipline-related problems in high-poverty schools, which present a major obstacle to academic achievement (Kahlenberg, 2001). Consequently, high-poverty schools are an extremely complex, multi-dimensional problem.

One avenue of reforming high-poverty schools is to break up significant concentrations of low-income students. This article explores the background and early results of a legal settlement (reached in 2000) between the Minneapolis Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the State of Minnesota regarding the Minneapolis Schools. Under the provisions of the original four-year settlement (which was recently extended indefinitely), up to 2,000 low-income Minneapolis students are bused to suburban schools each year. The transfer program created by the settlement represents a political and legal victory for advocates seeking to give students in high-poverty urban schools more educational opportunities; however, taking into account the variety of obstacles faced by low-income students in high-poverty schools, the overall success of the transfer program should be viewed with caution. Providing low-income students with the opportunity to attend more economically advantaged schools should be seen as one component of a many-faceted approach to urban educational policy.

CONTEXT

In the contemporary period, the citizens of Minneapolis have consistently shown willingness to support increasing funds for the city's schools. City voters have supported school levies earmarked for additional spending in district schools in each of the three instances since the levy was first created in 1990. In the most recent of these in November 2000, voters overwhelmingly supported a \$42 million school levy increase to keep classes small and pay for early childhood education programs. Seventy-three percent of voters supported the levy increase, which carried every precinct in the city, and received nearly 80% support in some precincts (Shah, 2000). In fact, because of state educational funding policies and the tax structure of Minneapolis, a recent analysis of 70 school districts in Minnesota (including all major cities and most large suburbs) found that the Minneapolis schools spend more per pupil than all other districts examined (Walsh, 2002). In terms of school funding, then, there is evidence that Minneapolis residents are willing

to entertain policies aimed at creating a more equitable school system. But when one considers the events that led up to the NAACP case, the difficult realities of high-poverty urban schools and educational politics begin to become more apparent.

The most direct cause of concentrated poverty is residential segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993), which has been a problem of longstanding in the Minneapolis schools. The issue of racial segregation in the district first became apparent in 1972, when a federal court ruled in favor of the Minneapolis NAACP in its original desegregation suit against the school district (*Booker et al. v. Special School District No. 1*, 1972). Minnesota adopted a desegregation rule (Minnesota Administrative Code, 1973) that was intended to ensure desegregated school districts throughout the State. In 1983, the court released the district from supervision, and ordered the state to monitor the city's schools and maintain a desegregated system.

In subsequent years, however, racial and class-based residential patterns in the Minneapolis school district increased, and the differences between the district and its surrounding suburbs became much more pronounced. Between 1980 and 1990, the percentage of minority residents living in Minneapolis increased substantially, from 13% to 22% (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [U.S. HUD], 2006a). In addition, the city's poverty rate increased from 14% to 19% during the same decade (U.S. HUD, 2006b). During the same period, however, the total numbers of minority and low-income citizens living in the suburbs were still relatively small. Racial minorities made up just 2% of the total suburban population in 1980, and increased to only 4% by 1990 (U.S. HUD, 2006a), while the number of citizens living in poverty in the suburbs remained constant between 1980 and 1990 at just 5% (U.S. HUD, 2006b).

These demographic changes translated directly into significant changes in the makeup of the Minneapolis schools, and by the early 1990s, racial segregation within the district was again a subject of public discussion. By 1995, the schools were over 55% students of poverty and consisted of roughly two-thirds minority students (*Minneapolis Branch of NAACP et al. v. State of Minnesota et al.*, 1995). Nine of the district's 62 elementary schools were in violation of the state desegregation rule, and the district claimed that it was unable to remedy the problem (Hawkins, 2000). Further, the state was making no effort to enforce the desegregation rule in Minneapolis (Hotakainen, 1995b), which substantially contributed to the problem.

To further exacerbate the problems of racial and economic segregation, in 1995 the school board adopted a new policy of community schools, which was roughly the equivalent of neighborhood schools. This policy was implemented with the support of many constituencies and political leaders, including Democratic Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton, the city's first African American mayor, who was elected in 1993. The policy assigned students to elementary schools based primarily on two factors—geographic proximity to students' homes and keeping families together. The board's reasoning was to have no school (either community or magnet) consist of more than 70% of any one racial or ethnic group (Minneapolis Public Schools, 1995). Since the Minnesota desegregation rule stated that no school could have more than approximately 15% students of color than its district as a whole, the State awarded Minneapolis a variance from the desegregation rule in order to implement community schools (State of Minnesota, Department of Children, Families, and Learning, 1998). Ultimately there was no way to enforce the community schools policy's stated goal of a 70% maximum of any one racial or ethnic group at any district school.

The community schools policy was popular; it was supported by a majority of the public. A poll published in August 1995 showed that 67% of Minneapolis residents supported the school board's decision to adopt the policy (Hotakainen, 1995a). While the policy enjoyed the support

of a variety of groups and some in minority communities, there was also measurable opposition. Orfield (1997) points out that the NAACP, Urban League, and the University of Minnesota's Center for Race and Poverty all vigorously opposed the effort, but the plan was adopted in 1995 and phased in over several years. Because of the segregation of the city's neighborhoods, it was evident that the community schools policy would likely increase the segregation within the district as a whole, thereby creating more high-poverty schools, which opponents maintained would only reinforce the low academic achievement characteristic of many students in those schools.

MINNEAPOLIS NAACP V. STATE OF MINNESOTA ET AL.¹

With these events in the background, on September 19, 1995, the Minneapolis Branch of the NAACP et al. filed a law suit against the State of Minnesota et al. on the grounds that the State was not providing an adequate education to the students of the Minneapolis Public Schools. The suit maintained that since the Minneapolis schools were segregated by race and socioeconomic class, students in those schools were not receiving an education equal to the students of neighboring districts that did not have such concentrations of racial minorities and low-income students. Using the state Constitution's requirement that the legislature "establish a general and uniform system of public schools" as a foundation (Minnesota State Constitution, Article XIII), the plaintiffs made their argument against the State explicit: "The educational environment in which they [Minneapolis students] are placed, however, with its concentration of poverty and race and the negative effects incident thereto, depress their educational achievement" (*Minneapolis NAACP et al.*, p. 3). The plaintiffs demonstrated that non-graduation rates among students in Minneapolis were approximately 33%, whereas suburban schools averaged below 12% non-graduation rates (*Minneapolis NAACP et al.*, p. 14). Students in the Minneapolis schools lagged far behind suburban students in standardized test scores, the percentage of students who entered four year colleges, the percentage of students who entered higher education, and the percentage of graduates who were able to obtain full-time employment within eight months after graduation.

A companion case involving numerous additional individual plaintiffs filed by the NAACP's attorneys in 1998 further illustrated the high poverty and segregation rates of the Minneapolis schools (*Xiong et al. v. State of Minnesota et al.*, 1998). By 1998, the district had become approximately 70% students of poverty and 70% students of color. In 1998, the plaintiffs presented data that showed dramatic differences according to race in passing rates for the Minnesota Basic Standards test. For example, while 70% of white 8th grade students passed the basic standards test for math in 1996, only 22% of African Americans, 33% of Latinos, and 39% of Asian students passed the exam. This pattern also was apparent in results for the basic reading test for 8th graders that year, and passing rates according to race were as follows: 64% of Whites, 18% of African Americans, 29% of Latinos, and 31% of Asians (*Xiong*, 1998). In light of the high proportions of lower-income and minority students, achievement levels in the Minneapolis schools were well below suburban schools.

Minnesota's educational funding formula had withstood a challenge to the state Constitution in the 1993 case *Skeen v. State of Minnesota*, and so the options of those seeking substantive changes in education policy became limited. However, because of the state's open enrollment policy, adopted in 1987, moving urban students to suburban schools was one viable option for

the plaintiffs. And the language of the original filing implies that the plaintiffs were seeking a metropolitan-wide remedy:

Members of the plaintiff class are therefore confined to schools that are separate in terms of both racial composition and socioeconomic composition. As a matter of both law and fact, such schools are not equal to neighboring and surrounding suburban schools . . . The State, which has known for some time of these patterns of segregation and resulting educational outcomes, has the capacity to discharge its constitutional obligation to provide these class members with an adequate education, but has failed to do so. (*Minneapolis Branch of NAACP et al. v. State of Minnesota et al.*, 1995, pp. 2, 3)

The plaintiffs had a difficult case to make for a metro-wide remedy. While a few major cities, such as Boston, St. Louis, and Indianapolis (Kahlenberg, 2001), have implemented programs to transport urban students to suburban schools. Hochschild and Skovronick (2003) show that “direct efforts to integrate poor and better-off students, nevertheless, have been few and far between and have proven very difficult to accomplish” (p. 26). A metropolitan remedy could be created in a variety of ways involving any number of individual school districts.

The decision to file a suit against the State was heavily influenced by the Hartford, Connecticut case, *Sheff v. O’Neill* (1996), which challenged Connecticut’s constitutional responsibilities for the Hartford schools (Delaney, 1996; Holmes & Clarke, 2005). The Minneapolis case, like *Sheff*, addressed the State government’s responsibilities regarding a specific school district. But the Minneapolis case was fundamentally different from the many successful educational equity and adequacy law suits, including *Sheff*, that have been filed over the past few decades in that the plaintiffs’ goal was to give low-income Minneapolis students—not only racial minorities—access to more economically advantaged suburban schools.

The original suit specified numerous individual defendants, policies, and actions that the plaintiffs argued contributed to the substandard education of Minneapolis Public School students (*Minneapolis Branch of NAACP et al. v. State of Minnesota et al.*, 1995). Despite being responsible for the creation of the district’s attendance boundaries, the Minneapolis School District was not named as one of the defendants in the suit. Some people involved with the case believed that the district would eventually join with the plaintiffs in the suit against the state. This never happened, however, and the NAACP and numerous individuals remained the primary plaintiffs.

After roughly five years of debate and negotiations, on April 3, 2000, the parties came to an agreement, and a settlement was reached. Although the case was filed as a class action, the plaintiffs were denied class action status, thereby limiting the potential scope of the remedy. The original case was consolidated with the 1998 case, and the settlement made any trials unnecessary. The terms of the settlement were very specific, and implementation was to begin in the fall 2001 school year. The settlement had three major provisions: an intra-district transfer program involving eight suburban districts, a new inter-district placement program involving Minneapolis magnet schools, and an accountability program for all the Minneapolis schools. All Minneapolis students receiving free and reduced-price lunch would be eligible for the new intra- and inter-district programs, which were subsequently collectively designated “The Choice is Yours” by the State. This income requirement for eligibility in the suburban transfer option makes the NAACP settlement fundamentally different from the *Sheff* (1996) case, in which the “court specifically took the issue of economic isolation off the judicial and legislative agenda,”

and, in the process, forced “the state to focus most closely on the racial disparities in Connecticut’s schools” (Reed, 2001, p. 169).

The suburban transfer program mandated that at least 500 new students each school year, from 2001–2002 through 2004–2005, be allowed to enroll in the eight participating suburban districts during the four-year program for a total of up to 2,000 participating students. The participating suburban districts included Richfield, Edina, St. Louis Park, Hopkins, Robbinsdale, Wayzata, Columbia Heights, and St. Anthony. Eden Prairie was subsequently added to the list of receiving schools. In order to avoid sending Minneapolis students to high-poverty suburban schools, suburban districts that had more than 50% of their students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch were excluded from the program. The terms of the settlement spelled out the precise minimum number of Minneapolis students that each district had to accept, leaving nothing to chance during implementation (Settlement Agreement, Exhibit 3, 2000). A significant accomplishment for the plaintiffs was the provision requiring the state to pay for the transportation costs, which also distinguished the Minneapolis settlement from the result in *Sheff* (1996). To minimize the costs of transportation, participating students were given a limited number of suburban school options based on the location of their home in Minneapolis.

EARLY RESULTS OF THE SUBURBAN TRANSFER PROGRAM

A comprehensive assessment of the inter- and intra-district transfer programs was required as part of the settlement agreement. Specifically, the settlement required that variables, such as the school choice process, parental involvement, student attendance, school climate, program costs, and academic achievement, be evaluated in order to determine the overall impact of the settlement on participating Minneapolis students (Settlement Agreement, Exhibit B, 2000). This article places the various components of the formal evaluation of the program into three broad categories—participation, parental satisfaction and school climate, and academic achievement. The discussion here is confined to the results of the suburban transfer option of the settlement.

Student Participation

Table 1 shows the racial and ethnic composition of all students who participated in the suburban transfer program between 2001 and 2006. Sixty-four percent of the program’s participants have been African American, 18% have been white, and the remaining participants have been Hispanic, Asian, or American Indian.

A comparison of the data in Table 1 to the characteristics of eligible non-participating Minneapolis students shows that both African American and white students are participating in the suburban transfer program in disproportionately high numbers. The pool of all eligible students consists of about 53% African Americans and about 9% Whites (Aspen Associates, 2004). The relatively low participation rates of both Asian (17% of eligible students) and Hispanic students (16% of eligible students) suggests additional obstacles that language and culture play in the lives of low-income students with these racial backgrounds. In light of the lower participation rates of these two groups, the 2004 evaluation concluded: “Outreach efforts targeting other ethnic groups and other geographic locations within Minneapolis need to be examined and possibly modified

TABLE 1
Students Ever Enrolled in Suburban Transfer Program, 2001–2006

<i>Race</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
African American	64%
White	18%
Hispanic	9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	7%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2%
Total Participants	<i>N</i> = 3,829

Source: Aspen Associates, 2007, p. A-6.

if the suburban choice program is intended to be a choice for all low income families” (Aspen Associates, p. iv).

Another revealing aspect of the program’s participants is data regarding the previous schools attended prior to enrolling. Less than half (42%) of suburban transfer participants through 2006 attended Minneapolis Public Schools the year prior to enrolling; the remainder attended either other Minnesota public schools, charter schools, private schools, were not yet enrolled in school (pre-kindergarten), or came from out of state or out of the U.S. (Aspen Associates, 2007). Utilizing open enrollment, charter schools and private schools require parents to seek information, make deadlines, and, in the case of private schools, find access to funds for tuition. With more than half of the students coming from these educational backgrounds prior to enrolling in the suburban transfer program, one could speculate whether the suburban transfer program is reaching what Wilson (1987) called the “truly disadvantaged.”

Retention is also a fundamental component of the success of this program. As the data in Table 2 indicate, nearly two-thirds of the students who participated in the suburban choice program at any time through 2006 withdrew, and of these students, 79% did not reenroll in subsequent years (Aspen Associates, 2007). Therefore it appears that retention has been the program’s single largest impediment. The retention rates for the individual districts participating also have varied, with some of the lowest-poverty districts retaining the most students, and the highest-poverty districts retaining the least. For example, two of the three districts with the lowest poverty rates, Edina and Wayzata, have had two of the three highest retention rates at 78% and

TABLE 2
Students Withdrawing from Suburban transfer Program,
2001–2006

<i>Race</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
African American	65%
White	17%
Hispanic	8%
Asian American	7%
Native American	3%
Total Withdrawn	<i>N</i> = 2,262

Source: Aspen Associates, 2007, p. A-6.

74%, respectively. Conversely, two of the three districts with the highest poverty rates, Richfield and Columbia Heights, have had the two lowest retention rates at 57% and 52%, respectively. To date, official evaluation of the program has not explored the reasons for students having withdrawn. Yet, the seemingly low overall retention rate as well as the differences in retention rates among participating districts are suggestive of the need for more detailed examination.

Parental Satisfaction and School Climate

Another indicator of the success of this program is the perceptions of students enrolled. Evaluation of the suburban transfer students has examined a variety of issues related to student and parental satisfaction and involvement, school responsiveness, and student experiences. Recent program evaluation reports have included the results of numerous questions posed to samples of parents and students about their experiences in their new suburban schools and compared these findings with responses from demographically similar eligible non-participants still enrolled in the Minneapolis public schools. Overall, parents have seemed pleased with the results of the suburban transfer program. For example, approximately 87% of parents said that their child's new school was prepared to meet the needs of students of different races and cultures, slightly greater than the 78% of parents of eligible non-participants who agreed with this statement (Aspen Associates, 2006, p. A-45). Further, 88% of parents said they would choose the same suburban school again if given the opportunity, as opposed to 79% of parents of eligible non-participants (Aspen Associates, 2007, p. 21).

Students who have remained in the program have generally expressed favorable views about it. Researchers utilized the same methodology by comparing the perceptions of participating students with eligible non-participating Minneapolis public school students. When samples of participating students were asked whether they agreed with the statement "I feel as though I 'belong' at my school," between 70% and 78% of all students (elementary, middle, and high school) either strongly agreed or agreed (Aspen Associates, 2006). Students also were asked whether they agreed with several statements regarding the racial and cultural climate at their new school. A typical statement was "Students of different races work well together at my school," with which 72%–85% of students either strongly agreed or agreed. The responses of eligible non-participating Minneapolis students to these and other questions regarding school climate were very similar to the perceptions of suburban transfer participants, indicating that the climate in the predominately white, middle-class, suburban schools is conducive to racial and cultural diversity. These findings are comparable to the results reported in the 2003 and 2004 evaluations that also showed that parents and students who have remained in the transfer program have positive attitudes about it (Aspen Associates, 2003, 2004).

Academic Achievement

The limited research on the academic achievement of the suburban transfer students has shown mixed results. Assessment during the 2004–2005 school year found that the participants appeared to be benefiting academically from their new educational environments. In order to assess student achievement, students in third through seventh grade were tested in the fall and spring using the

Northwest Achievement Level Tests for reading and math. Those students for whom both fall and spring data were available were analyzed and again compared with a sample of similar size and demographic characteristics of eligible non-participating students (Aspen Associates, 2006).

The average gains made by participating students in the suburban schools in 2004–2005 were 23 and 25 percentile points higher for reading and math, respectively, in comparison with the gains made by eligible non-participants who remained in the Minneapolis schools (Aspen Associates, 2006). Suburban transfer students in each grade level showed higher gains than their counterparts in the Minneapolis schools. In an attempt to assess the impact of the program on lower-performing students, program evaluations also measured the gains made by participating students who initially scored at or below the 50th percentile. Again, the academic achievement of suburban transfer students outpaced that of eligible non-participants. The gains of suburban transfer students averaged 18 and 19 percentile points higher in reading and math, respectively, which appeared to be very encouraging.

Yet the findings regarding student achievement during the 2005–2006 school year showed very different results. Using the same methodology, researchers found that the gains made by the transfer students averaged 15 percentile points lower in reading and 17 percentile points lower in math than the gains made by a demographically similar group of non-participants who remained in the Minneapolis schools. A comparable pattern was revealed for lower performing students (at or below the 50th percentile) during the 2005–2006 school year: The increases achieved by the suburban transfer students averaged 13 percentile points lower in reading and 18 percentile points lower in math (Aspen Associates, 2007). The most recent evaluation report speculated that the one plausible explanation for the different achievement results is the fact that two different groups of students were tested over the course of these two school years. While this could be the case, future results regarding academic achievement will be looked at very carefully by analysts and policymakers in order to uncover any possible patterns of academic success of the suburban transfer students.

CONCLUSION

When considering the background and early results of the suburban transfer program created by the Minneapolis NAACP's case against the state of Minnesota's oversight of the Minneapolis schools, several observations can be offered. First, the creation of "The Choice is Yours" was a legal and political victory for the Minneapolis NAACP and its allies concerned with chronically underperforming high-poverty schools. In light of the practical limitations of the open enrollment option for a large number of Minneapolis students, the state courts were the primary vehicle for the NAACP and its supporters. Using the courts remains an effective method of educational reform, and addressing the states' constitutional responsibilities vis-à-vis individual school districts is a viable method of achieving policy change.

The circumstances of the Minneapolis case also illustrate the many political complexities involved with reforming high-poverty urban schools. Jennifer Hochschild (2005) suggests that "local democratic governance in the American public school system sustains racial, ethnic, and class hierarchies in the society as whole" (p. 328). The case was precipitated by the actions of the elected Minneapolis school board as well as by the Minnesota Department of Education run by individuals appointed by the Governor. Through its community schools policy, the school board

reinforced the racial and economic segregation within the district, and the state's initial decision not to enforce the desegregation rule in Minneapolis in combination with its subsequent decision to grant a waiver to the district enabling the community schools policy to go forward, set the stage for the Minneapolis NAACP's challenge to the state's oversight of the city's schools. The evidence suggests that the community schools policy had the support of a majority of city residents. Yet, in the period before the community schools policy was adopted, rates of segregation and the concentration of poverty had increased in the Minneapolis schools (Orfield, 1997), and so it was clear that this policy would likely result in greater racial and socioeconomic segregation in the district.

Several aspects of the results of the suburban transfer program on students and their families stand out. Only about 42% of participating students attended Minneapolis Public Schools the year before enrolling. This suggests a group of participants who are not necessarily representative of the larger group of low-income Minneapolis Public School students. Moreover, an examination of the students who have enrolled in this program necessitates consideration of the large number of students who do not or cannot enroll. Because the overall number of spots for students has remained fixed at 2,000, the vast majority of low-income Minneapolis students have to look for other education options, most of which remain neighborhood schools. While the evaluation of the program has only studied students who have actually enrolled and stayed in the program, other research can shed light on this issue. In an in-depth analysis of students who did not enroll in a St. Louis metropolitan desegregation plan, Wells and Crain (1997) conclude:

The evidence presented here paints a portrait of twelve black students who end up in all-black inner-city schools for several reasons that have nothing to do with the quality of education offered. Many are the children of tired, beat down parents who have not actively investigated the educational options. They often come from homes where day-to-day survival taps so much energy that little is left for gathering information on schools of choice. They attend city schools because they are close to home and host many familiar faces. (p. 179)

The same is likely true of low-income Minneapolis students who have not enrolled in the suburban transfer program.

As discussed above, parents of students who have remained in the program are quite positive about it and generally feel that their children's new suburban schools are a better learning environment. Students who have remained in the program also have spoken favorably about it. Both of these patterns are good signs and may help to shape the academic success of many program participants. But the fact that almost two-thirds of the program's participants have dropped out must be confronted directly. Prospects for socioeconomic integration policies hinge on assessing the experiences of the students involved in a program such as "The Choice is Yours." Future research should investigate precisely why students left this program, as one can imagine a whole range of possible explanations—increases in transportation time to and from school, changing family situations, relocating outside of Minneapolis, dissatisfaction with the program, and so forth. In their study of the St. Louis program, Wells and Crain (1997) found several major reasons cited by students who withdrew, indicating that remaining in this type of program depends substantially on the family circumstances of participating students' families. The fact that 21% of the students who dropped out of the Minneapolis program during the first five years have re-enrolled in subsequent years (Aspen Associates, 2007) illustrates the difficulties involved with drawing any firm conclusions based on the rather low overall retention rate. Further, the

fact that retention rates have been higher in lower-poverty districts could be suggestive of the positive effects of the different environment of these schools on participating students. But, no conclusions can be made regarding why retention rates vary by district without in-depth analysis of all students who have participated in the program, including those who have dropped out.

The seemingly contradictory findings regarding the academic achievement of program participants make arriving at any general conclusions difficult regarding the academic impact of the suburban schools on program participants. Scholars have argued that economic integration in schools can successfully improve the academic performance of lower-income students, who are disproportionately minorities (Kahlenberg, 2001; Rothstein, 2004). School districts in Lacrosse, Wisconsin; Wake County, North Carolina; Manchester, Connecticut; Maplewood, New Jersey; San Diego, California; and Coweta County, Georgia have implemented policies aimed at economic integration, while a variety of other districts in all regions of the country are either planning or considering implementing similar policies (Kahlenberg, 2001). Wake County, North Carolina's economic integration attendance policy strives to limit the proportion of low-income students at any school to 40%. Recent research on the effects of this policy has shown significant improvements in math and reading tests among African American and Hispanic students (Finder, 2005). Wake County and these other districts, however, have created system-wide policies aimed at socioeconomic integration. In the Minneapolis case, even with open enrollment and the implementation of the NAACP settlement, approximately 3700 urban students are attending suburban schools (Reinhardt, 2006), and therefore the data are too limited to draw any substantive conclusions about the impact of socioeconomic integration in schools. Over time, researchers will have a much larger set of data on the academic achievement of the students in the Minneapolis transfer program, which should shed some light on policy questions related to the success of low-income urban students in predominately middle-class suburban schools.

The Minneapolis schools are actually more racially segregated today than when "The Choice is Yours" was first implemented in 2001 (Brandt, 2005). And recent data continues to reveal a relationship between high-poverty schools and lower academic achievement. For example, 95% of all Minneapolis schools that have been designated as not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind (2002) law have student poverty rates of greater than 40% (Minnesota Department of Education, 2005). These numbers at least confirm the major line of argument of the plaintiffs in the Minneapolis NAACP case linking concentrated poverty to lower achievement and make discussion of the relationship between poverty and academic achievement even more pressing.

In 2003, Minnesota received a five-year federal grant to assist with the costs of implementing the suburban transfer program. Subsequently, in January 2004, the Minnesota Department of Education announced that it would continue to fund the provisions of "The Choice is Yours" until further notice. In 2006, the program completed its sixth school year, and evaluation is ongoing. Under the leadership of Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty, Minnesota appears very enthusiastic about the program, and the Department of Education has created extensive outreach and promotional materials to publicize it to Minneapolis parents, including several billboards along major thoroughfares in the Twin Cities. While the State continues to characterize the program as one of many "school choice" options, an attorney for the NAACP has described the suburban transfer program as a "desegregation" plan (Shah, 2004), which is another illustration of the complex politics of this issue.

Considering the multitude of obstacles faced by low-income students in disadvantaged urban schools, the early results of “The Choice is Yours” should be interpreted with care. While clearly benefiting a sizeable number of participating students, this program does not appear to be a panacea for the range of problems confronting high-poverty Minneapolis schools. Rather, a suburban choice option should be seen as one component of a multi-dimensional educational policy that seeks to give all students, regardless of their economic, family, or school circumstances, an excellent education.

NOTE

1. The information presented in this section has been informed by 12 in-depth interviews with individuals directly involved with or knowledgeable about the case. Interviews were conducted with people associated with the plaintiffs, the Minnesota Department of Education (formerly the Department of Children, Families, and Learning), the Minneapolis School District, the Minneapolis School Board, the court system, media, and the university community. I guaranteed all interviewees that no quotations, even anonymous ones, would be used in any writing that was based on this project. While this approach certainly limits the type of data generated in interviews that can be included in research papers, I believed it was necessary in order to encourage interviewees to talk as openly as possible about the issues raised.

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Neil Kraus is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls. His research interests include urban politics and education policy.