The Reasons Why: Student Assignment Policies and Social Mobility in Wake County, North Carolina

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE REASONS WHY:
STUDENT ASSIGNMENT POLICIES
AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN
WAKE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY
ALICIA N. GARCIA
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ABSTRACT

The Wake County Public School System (Wake County) in Wake County, North Carolina has approached the student assignment process in different ways over the years. In 2000, Wake County instituted a policy designed to integrate schools based on socioeconomic status. In 2010, Wake County returned to assigning students to neighborhood schools. After a negative reaction to the 2010 policy, Wake County implemented a controlled choice student assignment policy for the 2012-2013 school year.

This thesis examines the three student assignment policies used by the Wake County Public School System over the last twelve years to answer the questions: Are any of the Wake County student assignment policies designed to contribute to social mobility—the reinforcement or potential improvement of a student’s social position? Specifically, what rationales are provided for each of the three student assignment policies? Are the provided rationales focused on improving a student’s social status or reinforcing it?
CHAPTER ONE
STUDENT ASSIGNMENT AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

The public education system in America has served many functions throughout history. According to David Labaree, education has evolved to serve three social goals: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility (Labaree, 2008). The democratic equality goal “sees education as a mechanism for producing capable citizens”; the social efficiency goal “sees education as a mechanism for developing productive workers”; and the social mobility goal “sees education as a way for individuals to reinforce or improve their social position” (Labaree, 2010, 16). This thesis will focus on the social mobility goal.

The social mobility goal conceives education as a private good and is aimed at benefiting the individual receiving the education. Labaree includes both reinforcing and improving social position in his definition of social mobility, but these two concepts appear to be in conflict with one another. Although increased educational opportunities may provide individuals an opportunity to improve their social status relative to their parents, it does not necessarily provide them an opportunity to improve their social status relative to their peers. For example, in the twentieth century, many individuals with blue collar parents were able to obtain white collar jobs due to their increased education credentials, but their peers also possessed increased education credentials (Labaree, 2010). All students are affected by increases in access to education, “[s]o merely raising
the floor of achievement in education does not help the less advantaged in the pursuit of earnings in the labour market unless we simultaneously diminish the achievement gap” (Brighouse, 2007, 578). Therefore, students’ social status inevitably remains the same because educational gain for all students does not reduce the advantage that is already in place for certain groups. It is impossible to address both aspects of the social mobility goal of schooling simultaneously because providing opportunities for the improvement of students’ social positions inevitably reinforces those same positions. It is a zero-sum struggle as “any effort to increase opportunity for one group is experienced as a loss for another” (Labaree, 2010, 181).

At the foundation of the social mobility goal of schooling, however, is a belief that enhancing educational opportunities will reduce social inequality. This belief has been present in education throughout history and is attributed to Horace Mann, the founder of the common school movement. Mann viewed education as the “great equalizer of the conditions of men” (Mann, 1848). Mann’s characterization of education as “the great equalizer” remains at the forefront of education reform conversations today; however, the current definition of education as an equalizer focuses on educational opportunity rather than Mann’s initial vision of education as a right that must be provided to all. Arne Duncan, the current United States Secretary of Education recently stated, “The American dream was never about guaranteeing equality of results, but it has always been about ensuring equality of opportunity” (Closing the opportunity gap, 2012). This philosophy serves as the guidepost for many policymakers (Labaree, 2011). This philosophy has two implications:

First, children with similar levels of ability and willingness to exert effort should face similar educational prospects regardless of their social
background, race, ethnicity, or sex. Second, that children with lower levels of ability should receive at least as many educational resources as those who are more able (Brighouse, 2007).

In order to have an equal opportunity to obtain the appropriate education credential, students need to have an equal opportunity to improve their achievement so that they can meet the requirements for those credentials. If each student is given an equal opportunity to obtain the education credentials (e.g., high school diploma, bachelor’s degree) necessary to succeed in society, then all students are offered an opportunity to reinforce or improve their social position and none are hindered by their race or socioeconomic status. “This means that education should give individuals the skills they need to enhance their social prospects, which reinforces their commitment as citizens and workers while simultaneously heading off social problems (such as class and race conflict, social alienation, and apathy) that might threaten this commitment” (Labaree, 2008, 449; Brint, 2006).

The conflict between improving and reinforcing students’ social status through educational policy manifests itself in the conflict between education reformers and education consumers. Reformers are intentionally trying to “improve society through their reform efforts” and consumers (parents) are “simply pursuing their own interests through the medium of education” (Labaree 2011, 391). This conflict between the two competing social mobility concepts is likely to manifest itself in student assignment policies—policies that define which students will attend which schools within a district.

Policymakers who view education as the great equalizer expect student assignment policies to be structured in a way that permits equal access to educational opportunities for all students. However, different education stakeholders such as parents
and district leaders may have additional interests that policymakers must address when crafting a student assignment policy. These additional interests may be in direct conflict with the notion of education as the great equalizer, making it difficult for a student assignment policy to serve the interests of all stakeholders. Conflicting interests among stakeholders regarding student assignment policies often result in actual conflicts ranging from contentious school board meetings to Supreme Court cases.

The United States Supreme Court has been involved in numerous cases regarding student assignment policies. The most well-known student assignment case is the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Court held in this case that separate educational institutions for blacks and whites are inherently unequal (347 U.S. 483 (1954)). This decision led to attempts at school desegregation across the country, and education cases over the next twenty years were largely concerned with the implementation of *Brown* (Rosenberg 2001, 44-46). In *Pasadena City Board of Education v. Spangler*, the Supreme Court held that a school district was not required to continue the enforcement of a court-ordered remedy to desegregate when the segregation was a result of demographic changes (427 U.S. 424 (1976)). This case marked a significant change in the Supreme Court’s perspective on desegregation, eliminating the requirement to desegregate schools when segregative intent is not the cause of segregation.

As a result of these rulings, school districts have often engaged in voluntary integration by race. However, *Parents Involved in Community Schools vs. Seattle District No. 1* resulted in the Court striking down a student assignment policy that used racial categories (551 U.S. 701 (2007)). Across the country, this decision forced school districts
engaged in such practices to contemplate other methods of achieving diversity within their schools. It also raised awareness among school boards and administrators that student assignment policies must address the needs of numerous stakeholders to avoid potential political and legal battles.

This Supreme Court ruling coincided with other national issues such as the 2001 enactment of the *No Child Left Behind Act* and the 2008 economic recession. Each of these factors may have contributed to shifts in stakeholder demands regarding student assignment policies. As a means of addressing a variety of stakeholder needs, student assignment policies come in three common forms: neighborhood-based student assignment plans, mandatory student assignment plans based on non-racial factors (e.g., student socioeconomic status), and student assignment plans based on parental choice.

This thesis will examine the motivating factors behind the implementation of each of these three types of policies in Wake County, North Carolina. It will first provide an explanation as to why Wake County was selected for this study. The thesis will then provide an overview of the literature on these three forms of student assignment policies. The literature review reveals a gap in the literature regarding rationales for the implementation of various types of student assignment policies. This gap motivates the current thesis, which will detail the results of a qualitative study of the policy documents associated with three versions of the student assignment policy in Wake County. The results of this study reveal a shift in rationale over time from a focus on increasing diversity within the schools to a focus on parent satisfaction.
CHAPTER TWO

WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

This thesis will focus on the actions of one school district tackling the challenge of finding a student assignment policy that satisfies all stakeholders. This school district is the Wake County Public School System (hereinafter referred to as Wake County) in Wake County, North Carolina. Over the past twelve years, Wake County has implemented three different student assignment policies embracing each of the three common forms: mandatory student assignment (based on student socioeconomic status), neighborhood-based student assignment, and a controlled choice student assignment plan. The changes in Wake County’s student assignment policies have been the subject of national attention fostering much debate about these policies over the years. This thesis has the potential to provide insight into a high-profile case and the use of all three policy forms in a single school district creates an opportunity for a valuable first look at the motivations involved in the implementation of each version of the student assignment policy.

In 2000, Wake County instituted a policy designed to integrate schools based on socioeconomic status and eliminate schools with a majority lower socioeconomic student population. The policy mandated that “individual schools reflect a free and reduced lunch ratio no greater than 40% of its student population and an achievement level of less than
25% of students below grade level” (Wake County, 2000). Wake County was quick to emphasize that “[w]hile the school district [believed] strongly that racial diversity within its schools [enhanced] the education of all students, race [was] not a factor in assignment of students” (Wake County, 2000 (emphasis in original)). Despite this explicit statement, opponents often argued that policies focused on integration by socioeconomic status were merely using socioeconomic status as a pretense for integrating schools based on race. Wake County did not view its integration policy as a means of racial integration by proxy, however, but “[r]ather, race had been a proxy for income” (Kahlenberg, 2001).

To maintain its goal percentages, Wake County reassessed schools’ student body compositions every year, and shifted students as necessary (Wake County, 2000). Parents were permitted to appeal a new school assignment, but few parents did so because the majority were satisfied with the education their children received (Finder, 2005). Over the years, parent satisfaction with the policy waned as the district reassigned increasing numbers of students each year in order to comply with the policy (Abdulkadiroglu, 2010). In 2009, Wake County held a new round of school board elections and the community elected a more conservative board. The new board voted to dismantle the integration policy (Winerip, 2011).

Starting with the 2010-2011 school year, Wake County returned to assigning students to neighborhood schools—schools based on student residence (National School Boards Association, 2010). As it does in many other parts of the country, a result of this policy was that students living in poor black neighborhoods attended schools full of poor black children, while students living in white upper-middle-class suburbs attended schools full of upper-middle-class white children (Winerip, 2011). The new assignment
process met strong negative reactions at the local and national level. The superintendent resigned in protest, and the district faced criticism from the United States Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, who wrote a letter to the editor of the Washington Post stating that he found the elimination of the previous integration policy “troubling” (Winerip, 2011; Duncan, 2011). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also filed complaints at the state and national level, sparking investigations into Wake County’s policies and practices (National School Boards Association, 2011). This pushback resulted in the creation of a task force to develop a new student assignment policy.

Based on the task force’s reassessment of the student assignment policy, Wake County plans to roll out a new policy for the 2012-2013 school year (Wake County Public School System Student Assignment Task Force, 2011). The new policy is a controlled choice model. The plan “gives all families access to schools proximate to their homes, schools with various calendar types, and magnet school programs” (Wake County Public School System Student Assignment Task Force, 2011). The plan “also includes the option of ‘high-performing’ schools on each family’s choice list” (Wake County Public School System Student Assignment Task Force, 2011). The new plan does not consider a student’s socioeconomic status in assigning students to schools.
CHAPTER THREE

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Student assignment policies have been the subject of much research literature. This literature review outlines literature explicitly related to the three forms of student assignment enacted by Wake County: mandatory student assignment, neighborhood-based student assignment, and controlled-choice student assignment. By examining the results of the student assignment policies on school composition and student achievement, the literature reveals pros and cons to each form of student assignment and the role student assignment plays in the social mobility options for students attending these schools.

**Mandatory Student Assignment**

Mandatory student assignment policies were prevalent in the era following *Brown v. Board of Education* as a means of providing opportunities for social mobility to minority students. Court-ordered desegregation required that students be assigned to schools within their district in a manner that ensured a racially diverse student population in each district school (Erickson, 2011). Therefore, school districts mandatorily assigned students to particular schools based on their race. Desegregation orders began to be lifted in the early 1990s when the Supreme Court held that segregation occurring as a result of private choice rather than state action (e.g., requiring separate schools for Black and
White students) does not have constitutional implications and thus does not require a legal mandate for integration (Erickson, 2011). Despite this ruling, many school districts continued voluntary efforts to integrate their schools on racial lines and eventually incorporated integration based on socioeconomic status in an effort to create diverse district schools. Wake County’s 2000 student assignment policy was one such effort.

The creation of diverse schools is an often well-supported goal, but the creation of diverse schools through the mandatory district assignment of students to schools raises other issues for consideration: “Given the existence of residential segregation, school integration can be achieved only by assigning some children to relatively distant schools” (Vigdor, 2011). This distance can create numerous problems for students. The extended transportation time may hinder students from being involved in extracurricular activities and may impinge on time to complete homework or study. A large distance between a child’s home and school may also hinder opportunities for parental involvement in the school. Such distance may also contribute to social problems for the student as “[c]hildren from different neighborhood who attend the same school may face difficulties in socially interacting” (Vigdor, 2011, 447). These problems contribute to parent dissatisfaction with mandatory assignment policies based on demographic characteristics such as race and socioeconomic status.

**Neighborhood-Based Student Assignment**

As districts attempt to find a student assignment policy that satisfies all stakeholders, they often rely on the traditional practice of assigning students to neighborhood schools. Neighborhood-based school assignment is the practice of
assigning students to schools near their residence. The assignment is based on attendance zones characterized by geographic proximity to the school. Parents are generally enthusiastic about the use of neighborhood schools because it decreases transportation time for their children and permits them to control where their child goes to school by controlling their place of residence (Goldring, et al., 2006). Neighborhood schools are also expected to “enlarge the base of human and community resources that directly support school improvement” (Bryk et al., 2010, 150). Keeping students in their residential area encourages resource sharing, parent involvement and increases social capital (Goldring, et al., 2006). Each of these likely benefits suggests that neighborhood schools will contribute to the social mobility options for students, which makes neighborhood schools an enticing choice as a student assignment policy.

Choosing neighborhood schools may seem like the best option for school districts, but this student assignment policy is not without its downside. Despite the benefit of decreased transportation time and the hope of increased parent and community involvement, neighborhood schools often face significant problems. First, neighborhood schools do not always increase community involvement. If a community is already lacking in resources due to the socioeconomic status of its residents, it is not likely to contribute to improving a neighborhood school (Bryk et al., 2010; Goldring, et al., 2006). For example, if a community is a “no zone,” meaning that it does not have access to common community resources such as banks, grocery stores, and hospitals, it is not likely to have the resources to contribute to the school (Bryk et al., 2010; Goldring, et al., 2006). Therefore, neighborhood-based student assignment may contribute to disparities between schools in low-income neighborhoods and high-income neighborhoods. Schools
in high-income neighborhoods will likely experience increased community involvement while those in low-income neighborhoods will not.

Second, schools in high-income neighborhoods are likely to benefit from higher parental involvement than schools in low-income neighborhoods. Over the last fifty years, higher-income parents have “become increasingly focused on children’s cognitive development” (Reardon, 2011, 104; Brooks, 2012). Higher-income parents are more likely to invest in developmental supports for their children and are more concerned about the quality of education their children are receiving than ever before (Brooks, 2012). This investment contributes to the growing school-quality differential in neighborhood schools because “high-income parents are better able to garner resources for their schools” (Reardon, 2011, 110; Brooks, 2012). Differing levels of parental involvement foster a system that limits the possibility for low-income students to improve their social status and encourage the reinforcing aspect of the social mobility goal of schooling because with less parental involvement, low-income students are less likely to improve their social status than high-income students are to improve their social status.

The income achievement gap has grown steadily over the last fifty years and is now more than twice as large as the black-white achievement gap (Reardon, 2011).

Third, because neighborhoods are often segregated along racial and economic lines, schools based on residential boundaries are also segregated along such lines, sometimes to a higher degree than the neighborhoods themselves. Neighborhood schools often have a much higher percentage of poor students than expected based on the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood because those of a higher socioeconomic status are likely to remove their children from local schools with significant levels of
poverty (Edelberg and Kurland, 2009; Johnson, 2006; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007). This difference is larger in majority-minority attendance areas, indicating that the “racial composition of a school influences the choices of more affluent families” (Saporito & Sohoni, 2007, 1237). In other words, both socioeconomic concerns and racism play significant roles in the school choices of affluent families. These differences increase the chance that minority students in a district using a student assignment policy based on neighborhood schools will attend schools with significantly higher poverty rates than the poverty rates in their neighborhood.

Such disparities in the income level of individual schools play a significant role in the academic achievement of students because high-poverty schools are known to have a “more powerful impact on academic achievement than more distant aspects of the social environment (e.g., teachers) and nonsocial aspects of the environment (e.g., school facilities)” (Taylor & Harris, 2003, 302). Poverty rates in individual schools and standard teacher-assignment policies also result in a teaching corps that is less prepared and less experienced at high-poverty schools than the teaching corps at low-poverty schools (Houck, 2010; Ingersoll, 2007). In most school districts, a district-wide salary schedule is used and the most attractive teaching positions are often taken by the most experienced teachers due to tenure and seniority policies (Houck, 2010). “Studies find that in high-poverty schools … teachers are less likely to be licensed, less likely to be experienced, more likely to teach ‘out of field’ (not in their subject area), less likely to have master’s degrees, and less likely to score well on teacher exams” (Kahlenberg, 2001; Houck, 2010). Additional information finds that “[t]eacher mobility during the school year is four times higher in high-poverty than in low-poverty schools” (Kahlenberg, 2001). The
combination of these detrimental factors affecting neighborhood schools with high-poverty rates indicates that the social mobility of students attending such schools may be reinforced rather than improved.

One approach used by districts to address these issues facing neighborhood schools with high-poverty rates includes focusing on various marketing strategies to entice affluent parents to remain in the public school system (Cucchiara, 2008; Edelberg & Kurland, 2009). These strategies treat the parents as consumers of education, embracing the characterization of education as a private good designed to benefit the individual student. These strategies also work within the confines of a neighborhood student assignment system with districts focused on re-branding neighborhood schools to make them more appealing to local parents (Cucchiara, 2008; Edelberg & Kurland, 2009). Another approach to remedy these issues is to design student assignment policies in a way that prevents high concentrations of poor and minority students in schools (Houck, 2010).

Choice-Based Student Assignment

To counteract parental dissatisfaction with mandatory student assignment policies, which may lead parents to file lawsuits against the school district, school districts have started to implement student assignment policies that permit parents to choose their child’s school. These policies are offered in a variety of forms ranging from policies limiting the option to transfer schools to students who desire to transfer because of poor school performance to policies that provide tuition vouchers for students to attend private schools. Two of the most common student assignment policies offering choice are a pure choice policy, which permits parents to select any district school for their student,
and a controlled choice policy, which provides parents with a list of schools from which to choose their student’s school. Wake County’s most recent student assignment policy is based on the controlled choice model.

The choice movement characterizes school choice as an issue of social mobility by focusing on the individual liberty aspect of choice and the parents’ right to choose the school for their children (Labaree, 2010; Lauen, 2007). The movement gained significant traction in 1990 as a result of the publication of the book, *Politics, Markets and America’s Schools*, by John Chubb and Terry Moe, which posited that a market-based governance of schools would empower educational consumers (parents) and make schools more educationally effective (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Labaree, 2011). This theory rests on the notion that providing parents with their choice of school will improve all schools by inspiring them to compete for students, and posits that school choice promotes social mobility because it will result in increased educational opportunities for all students (Lauen, 2007; Rabovsky, 2011).

In the late 1990s, the choice movement incorporated the language of equal opportunity and was presented as a way to expand social opportunity to the disadvantaged (Labaree, 2011). This argument contends that school choice can “be used as a vehicle for parents to overcome residential segregation” and thereby “[provide] a mechanism for students who otherwise would be trapped in chronically underperforming schools to gain access to better educational opportunities” (Rabovsky, 2011, 88). An opposing viewpoint, however, emphasizes that school choice “will compound racial and class inequality by failing to compensate for the inability of disadvantaged families to negotiate the school choice process” (Lauen, 2007, 495). In other words, school choice
may offer an equal opportunity to all families, but parents are not always aware of the best way to access the opportunity.

Despite the potential issues with accessibility in school choice programs, the school choice rhetoric may have appeal because it underscores the notion that parents are the driving factor behind school choice programs. Parents desiring better educational opportunities for their children are permitted to choose a school based on the school’s student achievement history. Parents desiring a school close to home can choose a school based on residence. Control over which school a student attends is solely within the hands of the parents and is not based on income or residential status.

**Gaps in the Literature**

The literature addressing the three common forms of student assignment mentions *potential* motivations for the implementation of such policies, but the majority of the literature examining student assignment policies focuses on evaluating the results of the policy. This literature describes the resulting school compositions of a new assignment policy or examines student achievement after the implementation of a given student assignment policy. The literature does not specifically address a school board’s goals in implementing a particular student assignment policy. Understanding the motivation behind the implementation of a particular student assignment policy is necessary to engage in discussions with school districts about policy changes and best practices regarding student assignment. If policymakers and reformers can determine the type of student assignment policy likely to be selected based on the current political climate of a school district, they can intercede in policy discussions in a more constructive manner to assist with such decisions. This study will address that gap in the literature by focusing on
the rationale the Wake County school board used in adopting each of its three student assignment policies.
CHAPTER FOUR
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Wake County’s struggle to find a student assignment policy that satisfies all of the stakeholders involved in the discussion exemplifies the difficulty in negotiating some of the competing goals of schooling that have developed throughout the years in American education. This thesis will examine the three student assignment policies used by the Wake County Public School System over the last twelve years to answer the questions: Are any of the Wake County student assignment policies designed to contribute to social mobility—the reinforcement or potential improvement of a student’s social position? Specifically, what rationales are provided for each of the three student assignment policies? Are the provided rationales focused on improving a student’s social status or reinforcing it?
CHAPTER FIVE
DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Document Collection

A systematic scan of policy-related sources focusing on the Wake County student assignment policy was conducted through searches of the Wake County website. Searches were focused on policy documents published in 1998 or later that discussed a Wake County student assignment policy and were published or authored by an individual or organization that may have influenced the creation or implementation of the policy. The documents collected included: the student assignment policies, previous drafts of the student assignment policies, research reports published by Wake County, Wake County School Board meeting minutes, parent survey results, press releases, policy handbooks, PowerPoint presentations created by Wake County, and additional policy documents published by the Wake County Board of Education.

Document Screening

The documents located during the search were subjected to a two-phase screening process to eliminate documents without specific references to Wake County student assignment policies. Phase I screening was a cursory review of documents returned during the search process to eliminate those documents that were unrelated to the student assignment policy. For example, a search of the Wake County website using the terms
“student assignment and socioeconomic” returned more than 100 documents. The researcher conducted a Phase I screening of these documents to determine which documents to include in an Excel database for future study. The search and Phase I screening process produced 103 policy documents for examination. The documents were then screened for relevance to the student assignment policy. This Phase II screening process eliminated 34 documents because they did not make explicit reference to the Wake County student assignment policies. After completing the Phase II screening process, 69 documents remained for the coding stage of the analysis. A graphical display of this process is available in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Policy Scan and Screening Process
Document Coding

The remaining documents were coded using an Excel coding template. The documents went through two rounds of coding. The first round of coding focused on the policy term and the document’s inclusion of a rationale for the Wake County student assignment policy. The documents were first coded by policy term, using the following sections: 2000 policy, 2010 policy, 2012 policy. If the document did not refer to a specific policy term, the document was eliminated from subsequent coding. Of the 69 documents, four were excluded because they did not refer to a specific policy term. The remaining 65 documents were distributed across the three categories as follows: 10 documents for the 2000 policy term, 19 documents for the 2010 policy term, and 36 documents for the 2012 policy term.

The next step of the first round of the coding process involved a review for whether the author(s) defined the rationale for the student assignment policy. If the document did not provide a rationale for the student assignment policy, the document was eliminated from subsequent coding. Five documents were eliminated for the 2000 policy term, nine were eliminated for the 2010 policy, and 19 were eliminated for the 2012 policy term. A graphical display of the initial round of the coding process is available in Figure 2 below.
Figure 2. First Round of Coding Process

The second round of coding focused on only those documents that referenced a specific policy term and provided a rationale for the student assignment policy. This round of coding examined whether the rationale given for the student assignment policy included a focus on the social mobility goal of schooling and whether the rationale was aimed either improving or reinforcing a student’s social position (or both). The
documents were coded to respond to the following three questions: (1) Does the rationale given relate to the issue of social mobility?; (2) What is the type of rationale given for the student assignment policy?; (3) If the rationale given does relate to social mobility, is the rationale aimed at reinforcing or improving students’ social status?

The researcher first reviewed all of the documents to determine if the rationale provided related to the issue of social mobility. Surprisingly, one hundred percent of the documents provided a rationale aimed at social mobility—reinforcing or improving a student’s social position. The researcher then moved on to analyzing the specific rationales provided in each document.

After several readings of each set of documents, the researcher identified three types of rationales for the student assignment policy: diversity, universal educational success, and parent satisfaction. The documents were coded according to these three rationale types. If the rationale(s) provided in a document addressed more than one rationale type, the document was coded according to both types.

After identification of the three rationale types, the rationale types were coded as aimed at reinforcing or improving students’ social status. The rationale types were coded in the following manner: diversity as improving, universal educational success as improving and parent satisfaction as reinforcing. Diversity and universal educational success were coded as improving students’ social position because the language used to promote these policies emphasizes the need to provide opportunities to those students of lower socioeconomic status. Parent satisfaction was coded as reinforcing students’ social position because the parent concerns the Wake County Board was attempting to satisfy with the student assignment policy focused on the parents’ desires for their children to go
to high-performing schools with other children who live in their communities. If the rationale(s) provided in a document were aimed at both reinforcing and improving students’ social status, the document was coded according to both types.

All documents coded as “diversity” included explicit references to diversity or references to the detriments of schools with a majority of students of lower socioeconomic status. An example of policy language coded into the “diversity” rationale type is “achieve student diversity in all schools” (Wake County Board of Education, 2006). Such language was coded as “diversity” because it includes a specific reference to diversity.

All documents coded as “universal educational success” included explicit references to all students and success or academic achievement. An example of language coded into the “universal educational success” rationale type is “achieving academic success for all students” (Wake County Public School System, 2008). Such language was coded as “universal educational success” because it explicitly references the goal of academic success for all students.

All documents coded as “parent satisfaction” included references to issues identified as parent concerns in Wake County. Through review of the documents, parent concerns about student assignment policies fell into three common themes: proximity, stability and choice. Student assignment policy rationales that address these factors are aimed at satisfying parents and were coded accordingly. An example of the “parent satisfaction” rationale type is “distance, choice, stability of assignment, facility utilization, grade structure, alignment with magnet schools program and students with higher needs” (Wake County Public School System, 2010). Such language was coded as
“parent satisfaction” because each of these factors is designed to ensure that parents are pleased with the student assignment process.

A more in depth explanation of the document search and coding protocol is available in Appendix A.

**Limitations**

The analysis was limited by the availability of documents for the 2000 and 2010 policies. The 2000 policy predates the expansive use of the internet to preserve policy documents and the majority of the relevant documents for the 2000 and 2010 policy were replaced by the relevant documents for the 2012 policy. Therefore, the sample size for the 2000 policy documents is smaller than those for the 2010 and 2012 policies. Additionally, the sample size for the 2010 policy is smaller than that for the 2012 policy. The smaller sample sizes for the earlier policies may skew the results of the analysis if the available documents are not representative of those documents in existence at the time of each policy’s implementation. Despite these limitations, the results of this study warrant discussion and reveal a need for further study.
CHAPTER SIX
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this analysis reveal a marked shift in priorities in Wake County over the years. The 2000 policy documents reveal an emphasis on diversity, while the rationales presented in the 2012 policy documents focus primarily on parent satisfaction. Despite this shift in priorities, the social mobility goal of schooling remained a prevalent factor in designing the Wake County student assignment policies.

Rationales for the Student Assignment Policies

As stated in the methodology section, language specifically mentioning diversity as a goal for the student assignment policy was coded as diversity. Of the five documents for the 2000 policy, 100% of them included diversity as a goal for the student assignment policy. Of the ten 2010 policy documents, three (30%) of them included diversity as a goal for the student assignment policy. Of the fifteen 2012 policy documents, two (13%) included diversity as a goal for the student assignment policy.

The universal educational success code included language referencing educational success for all students. One document (20%) for the 2000 policy included the goal of universal educational success. Five documents (50%) for the 2010 policy included the goal of universal educational success. Five documents (33%) for the 2012 policy included the goal of universal educational success.
The parent satisfaction code included language aimed at ensuring that the student assignment policy was designed to meet parent needs. None (0%) of the 2000 policy documents included the goal of parent satisfaction. Five documents (50%) for the 2010 policy included the goal of parent satisfaction. Ten documents (67%) for the 2012 policy included the goal of parent satisfaction.

The results of the analysis for rationale types can be viewed in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Rationales for Student Assignment Policies

As displayed in the chart, the rationales provided for Wake County’s student assignment policies reveal a shift in priorities over the course of twelve years. In 2000, the student assignment policy was largely focused on achieving diversity within the schools while keeping in mind universal educational success and failing to consider parent satisfaction. The student assignment policy included the following language as a goal for the policy: “Achieve student diversity in all schools” (Wake County, 2006). This
priority manifested itself in the creation of the mandatory student assignment policy designed to integrate schools based on socioeconomic status thereby increasing economic diversity within the schools.

In 2010, the issues of universal educational success and parent satisfaction were of increased importance as diversity began to fade. The 2010 policy is a clear representation of the transition period between the 2000 and 2012 polices. The 2010 policy documents mention diversity (30%) and half of the 2010 policy documents also include the goal of universal educational success stating a goal for the policy as “[a]chieving academic success for ALL children” (Wake County, 2010). This number is an increase from the single 2000 policy document mentioning this goal. This policy was designed to take parent satisfaction into consideration, but maintained that the Wake County magnet school program would still promote the issues of diversity and universal educational success.

The 2010 policy inspired much public debate. After facing criticism from numerous sources, including Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and the NAACP, for the policy, Wake County began to design a new policy—the 2012 policy. To determine the best policy for Wake County, the Wake County Superintendent designated a task force. As part of the work of this task force, numerous parent surveys were administered on a broad range of educational issues ranging from preferred methods of student assignment to preferred school calendar options. Regardless of the survey topic, parents responded with their opinion about the student assignment policy and their thoughts on the design of the 2012 policy. As an example, one such survey regarding school calendar options received the following response from a parent:
We bought a house because of the school! I do not understand the Russian roulette they play with the kids. I will have two very nervous kids going to a new school next year, 9th and 10th grade, when every other kid on the blocks surrounding us gets to stay because they have an older sibling. Please help fix this.....Why when we hear the band practice on the field at Wakefield which is 3 minutes down the road, my kids are getting sent 20 minutes away to Heritage? We moved to NC for the family and communities, they are tearing them apart! (Wake County Public School System 2010)

Given responses like the one above, it is not surprising that parent satisfaction became the primary focus of the 2012 policy. The 2012 policy continued to include universal educational success as a goal with 33% of the documents mentioning it. However, the 2012 policy saw only 13% of its relevant documents address the goal of diversity. The overwhelming priority for the 2012 policy was parent satisfaction with 67% of the policy documents including it as a goal for the student assignment policy. Wake County’s movement to a controlled choice model represents its desire to ensure that parent concerns were answered.

**Reinforcing or Improving Social Status**

The shift in the prioritization of these three goals for the student assignment policy reveals a shift in the type of social mobility the student assignment policy was designed to meet. The last question of the analysis examined whether the rationale type provided in the document focused on improving or reinforcing students’ social status. This segment of the analysis required the researcher to interpret whether the provided rationale served to reinforce or improve a student’s social status because the policy documents do not explicitly include such terms.

As stated in the methodology section, diversity and universal educational success were both coded as improving because the language used to promote these policies
emphasizes the need to provide opportunities to those students of lower socioeconomic status. The diversity language mimics the language used to support mandatory student assignment policies, which have been shown to be focused on improving students’ social status. The language focused referencing universal educational success is represented in each of the three common student assignment policies, and is aligned with improving students’ social status.

The documents that identified parent satisfaction as the rationale for the student assignment policy were coded as reinforcing because the parent concerns the Wake County Board was attempting to satisfy with the student assignment policy focused on the parents’ desires for their children to go to high-performing schools with other children who live in their communities. For example, “Children want to go to school with the kids from there (sic) neighborhoods, and would like to transition from elementary to middle school with the same group of kids” (Wake County, 2010, 3). This language articulates the parents’ concern that increasing opportunity for certain student groups will cause a loss in opportunity for their own children. Therefore, rather than a desire to improve students’ social status, this language represents the parents’ desire to reinforce students’ social status.

For the 2000 policy term, 5 documents (100%) included a rationale for the student assignment policy focused on improving students’ social status. None of the documents for the 2000 policy term included rationales focused on reinforcing students’ social status. For the 2010 policy term, seven documents (70%) included a rationale for the student assignment policy focused on improving students’ social status and five documents (50%) included a rationale for the student assignment policy focused on
reinforcing students’ social status. For the 2012 policy term, seven documents (47%) included a rationale focused on improving students’ social status and ten documents (67%) included a rationale focused on reinforcing students’ social status.

The results of this analysis are displayed below in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Rationales for Student Assignment Policy Aimed at Reinforcing or Improving Students’ Social Status

As evidenced by the analysis, the priorities motivating changes to student assignment policies shifted from improving students’ social status to reinforcing social status. The underlying causes for the shift from improving social status to reinforcing social status were not examined by this study, but may be linked to many factors. First, the larger education policy context shifted significantly during this time period. The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act and an increased emphasis on accountability

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1 Two documents included rationales for the student assignment policy that fell into both categories.
may have influenced parental perceptions of the schools their children were attending. Additionally, the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Parents Involved in Community Schools* revealed that mandatory student assignment policies are no longer in legal favor. Finally, the economic recession may have played a critical role in shifting the focus of the more affluent parents to reinforcing their child’s social status. In times of economic prosperity, the concept of providing each student with an opportunity to acquire additional education credentials does not provide a threat to the social status of the more affluent. However, if those parents perceive limited job options for their children when they enter the workforce, affluent parents are more likely to desire a reinforcement of their superior social status to ensure their children have an increased chance of future economic success. The role each of these factors played in the policy changes, if any, was not examined by this study. Examining the underlying causes for the shift in social mobility focus from improving social status to reinforcing social status is a possibility for a future study.

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2 The unemployment rate in Wake County, North Carolina went from 2.4% in January 2000 to 9.3% in January 2010. As of January 2012, the unemployment rate in Wake County was 8.1%. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

The changes in Wake County’s student assignment policies over the last 12 years were motivated by the social mobility goal of schooling. However, the desire for social mobility manifested itself in different forms over the years—diversity, universal educational success, and parent satisfaction. These shifts in stakeholder focus exhibit the disparity between the prominent education rhetoric of creating equal opportunities for all students and the reality of stakeholder expectations for education. Implementing policies based on these three rationales, the Wake County Board of Education attempted to meet the needs of all education stakeholders. The rationales used to justify the evolution of student assignment policies in Wake County capture the conflict within Labaree’s social mobility goal of schooling—it is impossible to address both aspects of the social mobility goal of schooling simultaneously because providing opportunities for the improvement of students’ social positions inevitably reinforces those same positions.
APPENDIX A

PROTOCOL FOR COLLECTING, SCREENING, AND CODING POLICY SOURCES
This document review protocol was designed to answer the following research questions: Are any of the Wake County student assignment policies designed to contribute to social mobility—the reinforcement or potential improvement of a student’s social position? Specifically, what rationales are provided for each of the three student assignment policies? Are the provided rationales more explicitly focused on improving a student’s social status or reinforcing it?

Data Collection Procedures

Search Parameters

A systematic scan of policy-related sources focusing on the Wake County student assignment policy was conducted through searches of the Wake County website. Searches were focused on policy documents published in 1998 or later.

Search Terms

The search relied on the following search terms:

- Student assignment policy
- Integration policy
- Socioeconomic status
- Neighborhood schools
- School choice
- Parent response
- Public response

Screening Criteria
Searches were limited to policy documents published in 1998 or later that discussed a Wake County student assignment policy and were published or authored by an individual or organization that may have influenced the creation or implementation of the policy. The researcher limited the review of documents to those included in the first five pages of search results. Results of searches underwent a cursory screening, Phase I, for general relevance to the student assignment policy. The following information was taken into consideration during Phase I screening:

- **Date of publication**: 1998 or later.
- **Publisher**: Wake County Public School District, Wake County Board of Education, Wake County Public School District Evaluation and Research Department, and others.
- **Type of document**: Formal policy document, supporting policy documents, commentaries regarding policy, press releases, research reports, strategic planning documents, and others.
- **Topic focus**: The main focus of the source is on a Wake County student assignment policy. Sources that focus on specific aspects of a Wake County student assignment policy were selected for review. Sources in which a Wake County student assignment policy is a secondary focus were excluded from review unless the source discussed the rationale for the student assignment policy.

For documents that passed this initial screening, the following information was imported into an Excel database to assist with screening for specific references to the student assignment policy, Phase II:
Document Coding Procedures

Documents were coded using an Excel coding template. The documents went through two rounds of coding. The first round of coding focused on the policy term and the document’s inclusion of a rationale for the Wake County student assignment policy. The second round of coding focused on only those documents that provided a rationale for the student assignment policy. This round of coding examined whether the rationale given for the student assignment policy included a focus on the social mobility goal of schooling.
Policy Term and Inclusion of Rationale for Student Assignment Policy

The documents were first coded by policy term, using the following sections: 2000 policy, 2010 policy, 2012 policy. If the document did not refer to a specific policy term, the document was eliminated from subsequent coding.

The next step of the coding process involved a review for how the author(s) defined the rationale for the student assignment policy. If the document did not provide a rationale for the student assignment policy, the document was eliminated from subsequent coding.

Rationale for the Student Assignment Policy and Social Mobility

After reducing the documents to only those including a rationale for the student assignment policy, the documents were then coded to respond to the following three questions:

1. What is the rationale given for the student assignment policy? After several readings of each set of documents, the researcher identified three types of rationales for the student assignment policy: diversity, universal educational success, and parent satisfaction. The documents were coded according to these three rationale types. If the rationale(s) provided in a document addressed more than one rationale type, the document was coded according to both types.

2. Does the rationale given relate to the issue of social mobility? As explained in the Methodology section of the thesis, the researcher determined that all rationales given related to the issue of social mobility because each of them is aimed at reinforcing or improving a student’s social position.
3. If the rationale given does relate to social mobility, is the rationale aimed at reinforcing or improving students’ social status? As explained in the Methodology section of the thesis, rationale types were coded in the following manner: diversity as improving, universal educational success as improving and parent satisfaction as reinforcing. Diversity and universal educational success were coded as improving students’ social position because the language used to promote these policies emphasizes the need to provide opportunities to those students of lower socioeconomic status. Parent satisfaction was coded as reinforcing students’ social position because the parent concerns the Wake County Board was attempting to satisfy with the student assignment policy focused on the parents’ desires for their children to go to high-performing schools with other children who live in their communities. If the rationale(s) provided in a document were aimed at both reinforcing and improving students’ social status, the document was coded according to both types.

Coding and Analysis Procedures

Analysis Methods and Planned Product

The research documents were maintained in electronic form, and all codes were entered into an Excel database.

The thesis describes the various rationales given for each of the three student assignment policies and discusses whether a majority of these rationales are focused on Labaree’s social mobility goal of schooling. The thesis also discusses whether the documents focus on social mobility in terms of reinforcing or improving students’ social status.
Limitations

The analysis of the documents related to the initial policy was limited by an inability to obtain all of the documents related to the implementation of the 2000 policy. The school district website providing a detailed description of the policy is no longer available and it is likely that similar information is no longer available as well. Additionally, the inability to conduct independent parallel coding with another researcher may have limited the ability to appropriately categorize the emerging themes and categories.
REFERENCE LIST


*Parents Involved in Community Schools vs. Seattle District No. 1, 551 U.S. 701* (2007).


VITA

Alicia Nichole Garcia was born in Austin, Texas and raised in San Antonio, Texas. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, she attended the University of Notre Dame where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in the Program of Liberal Studies and Political Science in 2004. From 2004 through 2007, she also attended the University of Texas School of Law, where she received a Doctor of Jurisprudence, with Honors, in 2007. Alicia was admitted to the Illinois Bar Association in 2007 and practiced law for three years at the law firm of Scariano, Himes and Petrarca, Chartered.

Currently, Alicia is a Policy Analyst at American Institutes for Research. She lives in Chicago, Illinois.