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Factors That Influence School Board Policy Making: The Political Context of Student Diversity in Urban-Suburban Districts

Sarah Diem[1], Erica Frankenberg[2], and Colleen Cleary[1]

Abstract

Purpose: This article examines factors that affect school board policy making about student diversity within two southern urban-suburban school districts experiencing changing demographics: Jefferson County Public Schools and the Wake County Public School System. Both districts have a history of voluntary integration efforts, and research shows that racially diverse countywide districts can make integration more feasible. However, as courts constrain mechanisms used in policies to establish/maintain racial integration, it is crucial to examine how school boards make policy decisions while navigating the politics of their communities and competing conceptions surrounding racial diversity. **Research Method/Approach:** This study employed qualitative case study methods to understand under what circumstances school boards are creating policy, paying particular attention to the local sociopolitical and geographic contexts. Data collected consisted of 37 interviews with school district officials and community stakeholders. Mainstream and specialty media articles, legal documents, and policy documents from the districts or other governmental bodies also

[1]University of Missouri–Columbia, Columbia, MO, USA
[2]Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Sarah Diem, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, University of Missouri–Columbia, 202 Hill Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, USA.
Email: diems@missouri.edu

helped frame the local contexts. **Findings and Lessons Learned:** The two districts in our study illustrate political and legal factors that create complex environments to pursue school-level diversity even in districts with a long history of diversity policies. Our study also illustrates the difficult role of the superintendent and school boards in leading diverse communities with different histories and experiences as they navigate the local politics of diversity amid a variety of competing policy goals. We conclude with implications including the importance of remaining vigilant about student diversity efforts and perfecting technical details to minimize politicization about diversity policies.

Keywords
empirical paper, school boards, racial and economic diversity, policy making, politics

There are over 14,000 school boards in the United States, making educational policy decisions on everything from teacher salaries to curriculum (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005). School boards are political institutions whose members at times clash over competing interests, broker deals to advance their own independent agendas, and exert power over their constituencies (Howell, 2005). While school boards are meant to be centers of democratic participation, how a school board mobilizes to advance their policy goals affects the level of democratic participation in educational policy making (Trujillo, 2013). Moreover, a school board's commitment (or lack thereof) to racial diversity can greatly influence how diversity policies are implemented and what outcomes are achieved (Fraga, Rodriguez, & Erlichson, 2005). Yet there is relatively little research that investigates these local political institutions that govern public school districts, and how the communities in these districts influence the political process, particularly when it comes to issues surrounding diversity.[1]

School boards matter. While there is a growing push for more standardization in public education, the history of public schooling has vested authority in the local level of school board governance. Locally elected school board members have been governing public education for centuries; they exist to carry out states' constitutional guarantees of public education. However, whereas these individuals oversaw nearly all aspects of public education during the 19th century, school board members today must compete with various political actors and their individual interests at the local, state, and federal levels, as well as with interest groups that seek to influence their agenda. Despite this, school boards have an enormous impact on public education,

shaping policies that have consequences for local school districts and communities. For example, while the federal government issued guidance about the permissibility of race-conscious student assignment policies in 2011—policies that explicitly take the racial/ethnic background of an individual or groups of people into consideration when determining student assignment—it is ultimately up to school boards to decide whether they are willing to take the legal and/or political risk to implement such policies. At a time in which inequality is rising, and because past research has noted reasons that school boards may be less likely to pursue policies promoting racial progress (Fraga et al., 2005; Hochschild, 2005), it is crucial that we examine how school boards exercise their power as policy-making bodies and what factors influence these processes when it comes to student diversity.

This article focuses on factors that affect school board policy making about student diversity within two urban-suburban school districts and communities in the South experiencing changing demographics: Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS; Louisville, Kentucky) and the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS; Raleigh, North Carolina). Both districts have a history of desegregation[2] efforts, and research shows that racially diverse countywide districts can generally make integration[3] *more* feasible than metropolitan areas that are more fragmented (Orfield, 2001). However, both communities are experiencing enclave growth as more White families are moving to exclusive suburbs within the district boundaries while, overall, the share of students of color is growing in both districts, including some movement to suburban areas as well as concentrating in the central city of each district (WCPSS, 2013b). There has also been a shift in how communities are conceptualized from entire countywide districts to smaller neighborhoods within the districts (Diem, Frankenberg, Cleary, & Ali, 2014), making the politics around student assignment potentially more contentious among school board members. Furthermore, as the mechanisms used in policies to establish and/or maintain racial integration continue to be constrained by the courts, it is crucial to assess how school boards navigate the politics of the communities they represent and their competing conceptions, and how they make policy decisions. We conclude the article by discussing cross-case themes of both case study sites and lessons learned for policy making and leadership.

Research Background

This study is grounded in several bodies of literature that helped shape our analysis, including desegregation and school board politics, the relationship between superintendents and school boards, and the manner in which school boards engage stakeholders in the policy-making process. Together, they

illuminate the context within which policy making around student diversity is shaped by district leaders and other participants in the policy process.

School Boards and Local Control

School boards are a unique form of democratic governance meant to keep educational policy decisions in the hands of local citizens (Land, 2002). Early school board members were typically elected by neighborhoods; by the late 19th century, school boards had become enmeshed in local politics. When this began to lead to patronage, corruption, and failure to account for the needs of increasingly diverse student populations, education reformers made an attempt to expunge politics from schooling (Hess, 2008; Land, 2002). School board members began to be elected from the city or district at-large, rather than by ward or neighborhood. School board elections were moved off-cycle so that they were not held at the same time as elections for state or federal offices, and were deemed nonpartisan (Hess, 2008).

The vast majority of modern school districts are legally and politically independent from county or municipal governments (Briffault, 2005). Currently, 96% of school board members are elected, although appointed school boards are becoming increasingly common in urban areas as mayors take control over city school systems (Briffault, 2005; Wong & Shen, 2005). School board members are disproportionately White when compared to the racial composition of public schools (Hess, 2010; Maeroff, 2011). Some argue that Progressive Era reforms—particularly the move to at-large elections—have hindered the ability of working-class citizens and people of color to win office and may result in school boards that are not representative of the district population (Berkman & Plutzer, 2005; Hochschild, 2005).

Local school boards enjoy considerable autonomy to dictate the policy and direction of their district, and the U.S. Supreme Court has frequently reiterated the value of local control in the governance of American schools (Briffault, 2005). Yet school boards have increasingly seen local policy-making power eroded by state and federal legislation (Howell, 2005; Land, 2002), especially through accountability measures such as those contained in the No Child Left Behind Act that threaten state or mayoral takeover for districts that fail to meet performance goals (Trujillo, 2013). Following *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), several U.S. Supreme Court decisions grappled with the tension between desegregation and local control by school boards: (1) until the early 1970s, the Court restricted what boards could do in terms of student assignment to gain compliance with efforts to eradicate dual (segregated) systems of school (*Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, 1968); (2) in the mid-1970s through the 1990s, the Court favored

local control at the expense of further efforts to comply with desegregation standards (*Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell*, 1991; *Freeman v. Pitts*, 1992; *Milliken v. Bradley*, 1974; *Missouri v. Jenkins*, 1995); and (3) in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007), the Court ironically turned its back on local control *and* struck down desegregation policies. These judgments have affected the policy-making power of school boards regarding issues of desegregation, making it increasingly difficult for districts to establish and maintain racially diverse schooling environments that are key to achieving equity of opportunity for all students.

School Boards' Commitment to Racial Diversity

School boards' commitment to racial diversity can wax and wane over time. Indeed, a district's commitment can vary depending on who is seated on the school board in districts with voluntary desegregation policies (Smith, Kedrowski, & Ellis, 2004). Additionally, population growth and changes in the racial and economic makeup of a district can influence school boards to be more or less supportive of efforts to promote diversity in schools (Diem et al., 2014). While school districts under desegregation decrees issued from the courts are legally obligated to follow those orders, how they are carried out can vary greatly depending on the will of the school board (Fraga et al., 2005; Trujillo, 2013). School boards that support racial diversity can leverage a court order to gain the support of groups that have resisted their efforts. Alternatively, school boards resistant to desegregation can find ways to comply with court orders and not achieve meaningful desegregation. Fraga et al.'s (2005) case study of the San Francisco Unified School District found that as control of the school board shifted between majorities that did and did not support the desegregation decree, the district's fulfillment of the decree shifted as well. This was largely due to the school board's ability to select a superintendent who would implement policies in such a way that the outcomes would meet the board's expectations.

One of the challenges that all school boards face is accommodating the wishes of parents. For committed school boards, meeting racial diversity goals may be especially difficult if White parents are resistant to the means to achieve such goals. In districts that are racially diverse but remain majority White, creating policies that are agreeable to the majority can be a difficult task. An analysis of all desegregation-related public opinion polls that are publically available found that while most Whites agree with school desegregation in principle and believe that it has benefited Blacks and the nation as a whole, somewhat fewer believe that Whites have benefitted from school

desegregation as well (Frankenberg & Jacobsen, 2011; see also Hochschild & Scott, 1998). Furthermore, Whites have not been as supportive of the methods used to accomplish school desegregation, which in public opinion surveys has often asked parents about support for "busing." A representative sample of public school parents in a large, racially and economically diverse countywide district were surveyed, and it was found that parents simultaneously hold competing viewpoints about policies that seek racial and socioeconomic diversity: Parents support such diversity policies but prefer that their children attend schools close to home, making it nearly impossible to balance given current demographic trends and school capacity (Diem et al., 2014; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2011).

Asking parents about less politicized means of accomplishing desegregated schools has been done rarely, but when surveyed in the 1970s, there was more support for options such as creating more housing for low-income people in middle-income neighborhoods or redrawing district boundaries to assist in accomplishing school desegregation than there was for busing (Frankenberg & Jacobsen, 2011). Whites are also less supportive of the federal government's intervention in school policy to ensure that schools are desegregated (Hochschild, 2006). School boards are put in the difficult position of striving to meet diversity goals while being responsive to parents, including parents resistant to the means to accomplish desegregation.

Politicization of School Boards

Despite Progressive Era school reformers' attempts to remove the influence of party politics from school governance (Hess, 2008; Land, 2002), some maintain that these reforms have not had the effect of isolating school boards from the politics that exist in other forms of government (Danzberger, 1994; Smith et al., 2004). For one, some school board members view the position as a stepping-stone to other public offices (Danzberger, 1994). This ambition gives school board members an incentive to align with a political party, even if the school board is technically nonpartisan. Second, running for election can require a great deal of funds, and fund-raising efforts can often be helped by the support of established political groups. Although school board elections are theoretically nonpartisan, political campaign contributions made to school board candidates has been on the rise. For example, in North Carolina, during the 2009 school board election, the two largest contributors to the Wake County Republican Party, who funded candidates running on an antidiversity policy platform, were from the John Locke Society, whose mission is to limit the government agenda across the state (Mayer, 2011). In another recent school board election in Douglas County, Colorado, in which vouchers

and other market-based reforms were being debated, there was heavy involvement by the state's Republican Party as well as liberal-leaning teachers unions during the campaign process. The American Federation of Teachers provided funding for and endorsed a slate of candidates (Reuter, 2013), while Americans for Prosperity, an advocacy group founded by David Koch that has ties to the Tea Party, ran television ads in support of candidates (Torres, 2013). The race became so contentious that 16 former school board members signed an open letter in *The Denver Post* urging the school board to return to nonpartisan practices (Buckius & Leonard, 2013). State Republican Party Chairman Ryan Call declared that it was only the beginning of increased involvement by the Republican Party in school board elections across the state saying, "'. . . in some ways the most impactful policies are enacted at the local level'" (Torres, 2013).

As elected officials, school board members must be responsive to interest groups that wish to see their perspectives mirrored in school policies (Danzberger, 1994). Interest groups can play a large role in not only the decisions that the school board makes but also in who is sitting on the school board. Since school board elections are generally not held at the same time as elections for other public offices, voter turnout can be quite low. Typically, fewer than a quarter of eligible voters decide school board races (Hochschild & Kolarick, 1997; Wong & Shen, 2005). Voter apathy allows these special interests to have a disproportionate influence on school board elections, and therefore school board policy (Hess & Leal, 2005). A survey of superintendents found that 70% felt there were members of their school board who represented specific, narrow constituencies (Farkas, Foley, & Duffett, 2001). Additionally, superintendents reported that those with special interests and agendas often dominate school board meetings. Finally, research has shown that school boards spend more than half of their time on administration and responding to the concerns of parents and interest groups, which leaves little time to develop or oversee policy (Hochschild, 2005).

School Board–Superintendent Relationships

School boards are modeled after corporate boards: Boards focus on policy issues while the superintendent handles the day-to-day management of the school district. Selection of the superintendent is usually the most significant policy decision that a school board makes, and it gives them considerable power (Hess, 2008; Land, 2002). After all, the superintendent is charged with implementing the board's policy decisions and the person selected sets the tone for the district (Fraga et al., 2005).

The desire for personal power or to have influence over a specific issue is a driving factor in some school board members' motivation to serve (Mountford, 2004). Some board members leverage their power to fire the superintendent to ensure that the superintendent bends to the wishes of the board (Trujillo, 2013). Considering school board members' power over superintendents, it is not surprising that "the relationship between school board members and superintendents is often characterized as controversial, arduous, and challenging" (Mountford, 2004, p. 705). Yet, when surveyed, the vast majority (87%) of superintendents described their relationship with their school board as "mostly cooperative," and the majority (70%) of school board members felt similarly about their relationship with their superintendent (Farkas et al., 2001). Indeed, the challenges of working with a board that may be divided on issues as well as conflict between the superintendent and board members themselves can make remaining in the position daunting for the superintendent (Grissom, 2014; Mountford, 2008).

School Boards' Efforts to Build Community Support Around Policy Making

How school boards approach policy making and local participation affects the ability of the public to engage in school policy decisions as well as the outcomes of policy actions. Some school board members view policy setting as "an exercise in persuasion and a private process" (Trujillo, 2013, p. 346). They seek to influence other board members to carry out their personal vision for the school district without fully engaging the community in the process, and use coercion with administrators and teachers to ensure that policy is implemented to their satisfaction at the school level. When board members engage in this autocratic leadership style, democratic participation is limited, and even other board members may be excluded from the policy-making process (Trujillo, 2013).

Alternatively, when school board members seek input from stakeholders and engage in collaborative processes, more voices are likely to be heard (Hess, 2010). A collaborative approach gives marginalized constituents the opportunity to provide input in the policy-making process, which is particularly important for constituents who may otherwise be marginalized when there is no member of the board who represents their views. Additionally, open, democratic policy-making processes are more likely to result in an equitable distribution of resources than those made in private consultation (Hess, 2010).

Research Design and Methodology

To better understand local policy making and how school boards navigate the politics of their communities and their conceptions about racial (and to a lesser extent, socioeconomic) diversity, we used qualitative case study methodology. Qualitative research case studies focus on the processes, meanings, and understandings of a particular phenomenon, resulting in products that can be extremely descriptive and rich in nature (Merriam, 1998). This approach helped us explore how, where, and under what circumstances school boards are creating and making meaning of policy, paying particular attention to the influence of specific social, political, and geographic contexts in this process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In our study, we purposefully selected two cases that are increasingly being affected by local school board politics and have, in different ways, been at the center of the debate on student diversity in public schools in recent years: JCPS in metropolitan Louisville, Kentucky, and the WCPSS in metropolitan Raleigh, North Carolina. Both JCPS and WCPSS are countywide districts that encompass large geographic areas and incorporate the city and surrounding suburbs within their boundaries and, therefore, in their diversity policies. Furthermore, both districts' student assignment policies have been fraught with political and, in JCPS, legal challenges. Our case studies of the JCPS and WCPSS Boards of Education are part of a larger study we are conducting on the two districts in which we seek to (1) understand how demographic change influences public support for, and the implementation of, diversity policies; (2) examine the politics of diversity in environments that question race-conscious diversity policies; and (3) analyze local policy making. In this article, our guiding research questions are the following: What factors affect school board policy making about school diversity and the politics of diversity in two diverse, urban-suburban districts? How do the politics of diversity affect implementation of diversity policies in each district?

Data Collection

Fieldwork took place during the 2012-2013 academic year. Data collection in our two case study sites focused on similar variables in each (George & McKeown, 1985). At each site we examined (1) activities by district and community leaders to promote policies aimed at affecting diversity, (2) any legal action and/or response affecting diversity policies, and (3) past, present, and projected effects of diversity policies. We gathered qualitative data using a common, flexible interview protocol from a wide range of semistructured interviews with local school district officials—school attorneys,

Table 1. Interviews Conducted by Site.

Role	Wake County Public School System	Jefferson County Public Schools
School district officials:		
District employee (current)	3	8
District employee (former)	1	0
School board (current)	2	2
School board (former)	4	3
Community stakeholders:		
Business	1	2
City/county government	1	1
Community activist	3	2
Nonprofit group	3	0
Local media	0	1
Total	18	19

school board members, and central office personnel—as well as community stakeholders, including civil rights activists, representatives of parents' groups, other supporters or opponents of district student assignment policies (e.g., newly formed community groups, conservative foundations), and local media members. Our interviewees, who were both Black and White, were selected based on their past and/or current involvement with the districts' student assignment policies as indicated through positions assumed within the districts (i.e., board members, student assignment staff, and superintendents), district policy documents, court filings, and media articles about the policies. We also asked interviewees to recommend stakeholders in the communities to speak with to ensure our sample was representative of those individuals intimately involved in policy making in the districts. Thirty-seven individuals agreed to be interviewed (see Table 1); other potential interviewees were either not available at the time we were conducting interviews or would not agree to be interviewed. We asked questions about perceptions of demographic changes occurring within the districts, the process by which the districts designed and implemented their student assignment policies, who the stakeholders were and why they were in favor of/opposed to the policies, how the composition of a school board affects decisions about student assignment policies, how well the governance structure (school board) in the districts is understood in the community, what should be the goals of the districts' policy for assigning students to schools, and why families are choosing some schools over others.

We obtained consent from the participants to be included in the study and offered them four levels of confidentiality for their interviews: (1) agree to be quoted by name and position, (2) agree to be quoted only by position, (3) agree to be quoted anonymously, and (4) not quoted at all. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. We also reviewed documents to triangulate our interview data, including media articles from each county's major newspapers, TV stations, blogs, and specialty media; legal documents such as court filings and decisions; and policy documents from the district or other governmental bodies (e.g., state legislature).

Data Analysis

Our coding process of the interviews began by establishing emerging themes from within each case and then across both cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We compared the emerging themes from each site via analytic memos and regular meetings of our research team. We created codes derived from the literature described above on school boards, policy making, politics, and diversity to supplement and contextualize our initially established themes. We paid particular attention to how interviewees described each district's school board, including how their school board members conceptualized diversity and viewed diversity policies, the political dynamics of the school board, the relationship between the superintendent and the school board, and the school board's role in mobilizing their communities around diversity efforts. We reread the interview data, triangulating them with data obtained from multiple documents collected, and refined our coding process until we felt our interpretations were consistent and confirmed by the evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Themes were eventually grouped in four ways: school boards' commitment to diversity, politicization of the school boards, superintendent–school board relationships, and efforts to build community support for the diversity policies.

Since our study involved two cases, data were analyzed in two stages using within-case and cross-case analyses. We constructed within-case narratives for JCPS and WCPSS that describe school board politics, factors that influence local policy making, political coalitions that have developed around student assignment policies, and any policies or legal action (or threat) considered or adopted both at the district level and other relevant state/federal governmental bodies and agencies (e.g., Kentucky and North Carolina state legislatures, U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights). These within-case analyses formed the basis of our cross-case comparison of similarities and differences (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Case Studies

The results brought forward in this article illustrate how "school boards and supporters of their majority factions remain critical players in setting the course of much educational policy" (Fraga et al., 2005, p. 126). Indeed, the politics of school boards can either help or hinder efforts to establish or maintain policies that seek to provide equitable educational opportunities within districts. The two districts in our study illustrate the political and legal factors that create complex environments to pursue school-level diversity even in districts with a long history of diversity policies.

Wake County Public School System

The WCPSS is the largest school district in North Carolina and 16th largest in the United States, serving a population of nearly 150,000 students across 169 schools. The number of students in WCPSS has tripled since 1980 and is projected to increase by another 40,000 students over the next 10 years. The racial/ethnic makeup of the district includes a majority White student population (49.1%), followed by 24.4% Black or African American, 15.4% Hispanic or Latino, 6.5% Asian, and 4.2% students who identify as two or more races. Approximately 33.7% of WCPSS students participate in the free and reduced-price lunch program, the indicator of poverty within the district (WCPSS, 2013b). WCPSS formed in 1976 from a merger of the Wake County Schools and Raleigh City Schools. At the time, the Raleigh City Schools had violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in programs receiving federal financial assistance, and thus was faced with the loss of federal funding. Indeed, the U.S. Office of Civil Rights was the impetus for the district merger. However, in spite of political opposition to the merger, the business community saw the economic benefits of merging the two districts and its potential for curtailing White flight from inner-city schools and became a strong advocate of the countywide district.

Following the merger, the newly formed WCPSS Board of Education implemented a plan that helped establish and maintain racial diversity across the district. The initial plan called for schools to have a minority composition of between 15% and 45% at every school, which reflected a 15% variance from the 30% minority population average at the time throughout the district (McNeal & Oxholm, 2009). By 1999, the plan continued to remain effective as only 21% of Black students attended predominantly non-White schools (Silberman, 2002). However, given decisions by the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit (which has jurisdiction over North Carolina)

that limited race-conscious policies by school districts, district leaders became concerned about the ability to legally use race to assign students. In 2000, the district moved away from its race-conscious plan in favor of a race-neutral approach, a policy that uses indicators other than race to achieve diversity. Under this new plan, the district sought to maintain diversity by using socioeconomic status and academic achievement as race-neutral factors; that is, a school could not have a population of more than 40% low-income students or no more than 25% of students performing below grade level.[4]

While complaints were voiced concerning the race-neutral plan and reassignments had to be made in order to cope with the constant growth in the district, the plan and support for it remained relatively intact for 10 years (Flinspach & Banks, 2005; Siegel-Hawley, 2011). In 2009, however, a school board election would prove detrimental to the diversity plan as four new members who ran on an antidiversity policy platform were elected. Almost immediately upon the election of the new board members, accompanied with an incumbent member who also opposed the plan, control swung in favor of those opposed to the diversity plan, and it was dismantled in March 2010. In the subsequent school board election of 2011, the community showed their disapproval of the antidiversity policy measures taken by the school board and elected five new members in favor of implementing a district diversity policy (Hui & Goldsmith, 2011). However, before the newly elected school board members assumed their roles, the board approved a student assignment policy that gave families choices and preferences for schools based on proximity to their homes without giving consideration to any type of diversity. While the new policy was implemented in the 2012-2013 school year, in May 2013, the new board gave approval to a revised student assignment policy that is currently being implemented. The policy focuses on stability, proximity, and operational efficiency while also providing choice and minimizing high concentrations of low-performing and low-income students at each school (WCPSS, 2013a). The details around including diversity once again have yet to be resolved.

Board commitment to diversity. The recent political upheaval in WCPSS has had a direct impact on the board's current efforts to recommit itself to diversity. Prior to the 2009 school board election, there was minimal representation by opponents to the student assignment policy on the school board, and our interviewees told us that board members consistently supported diversity efforts. A former board member recalled how the "entire board was strongly in support of diversity in concept." She went on to say that although the board was made up of a variety of differing political persuasions,

> when it came to issues that we believed had to do with really creating a sound, equitable infrastructure for learning and schools, everybody had come to the center on this [diversity]. So there was a lot of agreement about that issue.

Part of this agreement is also due to what Flinspach and Banks (2005) refer to as the board's "in-service education" around the importance of school diversity. They found that

> educating new board members about school diversity has helped change more than one board member's stance toward the assignment policy and has passed the responsibility for a system of "healthy" schools down from one Wake County school board to the next. (p. 276)

One board member told us that he felt the "public angst" toward the district's student assignment policy building since 1999, when the first school bond issue since the 1976 district merger was defeated by voters (see also Hui, 2013b). He went on to say that what he saw "started to happen in 2009 and the election leading up to that . . . a distortion of facts. I saw partisan politics beginning to interfere with education," which ultimately allowed an opportunity for a faction of antidiversity policy individuals to "use community instability" to gain control of the school board. Another community member told us how student achievement was used during the school board election as a way to garner support for their antidiversity policy efforts. He told us,

> And they [school board candidates running on anti-diversity policy platforms] used achievement as the new buzzword. And they try to come up with some fancy statistics saying, we got diversity, but guess what? African American kids are still not graduating from school. We got diversity, but they fall behind in reading, math, and science. So what has diversity done? . . . I think they did a masterful job of convincing the citizens—some of the citizens of Wake County—that diversity is a bad word and it was not needed, not necessary.

As a result of the 2009 election, it became clear that a commitment to a diversity policy among a majority of the school board members was no longer a priority as comments made to the media by these individuals indicated that immediate action would be taken to dismantle the diversity policy (Geary, 2011). However, a 2010 WCPSS survey of more than 40,000 parents found that almost 95% were satisfied with their child's school assignment. Furthermore, the majority of WCPSS teachers were in support of the plan as well (Geary, 2011). This was reflected in the larger community, according to a community member, who described how

> the community came out in protest [against removing the diversity plan]. . . . It was really a community protest, saying that this is not what we want for our kids. And we knew those who were suffering most were in the urban communities. . . . It wasn't just people in southeast Raleigh, or the NAACP that really wanted this. No. It was across the board.

The community's desire to ensure that a diversity policy was once again a priority within the district was reflected in the election of a majority of prodiversity policy school board members in both 2011 and 2013 (Hui, Goldsmith, & Garfield, 2011; Kenney, 2013). The most recent election of a majority Democratic school board may provide a window of opportunity for the board to recommit itself to a diversity policy, as indicated by their recent use of student demographics for overflow choices for students that selected schools that are capped out (Hui, 2014). However, as one community member suggested to us, it is going to take much more than just the board supporting diversity policy efforts to establish integrated schools. He stated,

> Forcing these things on the Board of Education is going to result in the same behaviors over and over and over again . . . because we're asking the board to solve what is inherently a community problem. . . . Can the community come to some consensus on what diversity is, why they're doing it, how they want to do it, before people begin to perceive that they don't know where we're going?

The Great Schools of Wake Coalition, formed during the battle over the diversity policy in WCPSS, is a coalition of community organizations, citizens, and business leaders who advocate for and help inform the community about educational issues in WCPSS. According to several interviewees, Great Schools has become one of the most influential groups in Wake County around the district's diversity policy.

Politicization of the board. Throughout our interviews with members of the Wake County community, we heard consistently that school board politics had never been a hotly contested issue within the district until the 2009 school board election. We heard from interviewees, "It [the WCPSS Board of Education] wasn't considered a political body, but at the 2009 election all of the sudden you have Republicans and Democrats and they both have opposite views on school assignment," and "I never knew what board members were, Republican or Democrat, until that election. That was never an issue." According to another interviewee, "for the first time in the school district's history the Republican party ran a team, a ticket."

Since its inception in 1976, the WCPSS Board of Education has always had a mixture of Republicans and Democrats serving on the board. However, according to a former superintendent, regardless of party affiliation, school board members were always concerned with what types of policies are being created and implemented that are in the best interest of WCPSS students. A school board member told us,

> You know, we have Republicans and Democrats on this board always, but you didn't have to know what everybody's politics were. And they all worked on behalf of the students. We had many, many, many Republicans who served on this school board, who supported our diversity policies in the past, and it didn't have to be all or nothing.

The results of the 2009 WCPSS Board of Education election shocked the Wake County community. Seats in four zones largely representing suburban Wake County were being contested and resulted in a Republican sweep of the school board. One interviewee told us that it was not "well understood by the people [Wake County community] that candidates were running on 'we need neighborhood schools,' so that was the one board election when the Republicans were elected; the turnout was 13 percent." The new school board members were elected by less than 5% of the county's registered voters (Geary, 2011). According to an interviewee,

> Immediately upon appointment, the now majority Republican board came out with a mandate that would change everything and they did it very quickly and it really made people unhappy that they were not playing nice and doing the normal thing and getting buy in. They were just pushing their agenda because they had the majority. So, that, to me, was the start of more of the partisan look. . . . And then, the next election, several of the Republicans got voted out and Democrats were in charge. So, that's when the partisanship started and it's continued since.

In Wake County, according to a community member, "partisan politics now saturate every decision . . . every decision is based on party politics." Moreover, whereas school board elections were never part of the dominant discourse within the district, according to an interviewee, "now it's all we talk about."

On October 8, 2013, four seats on the WCPSS Board of Education were up for grabs and Democrats won all of them. While the voter turnout rate was only 14%, the officially nonpartisan nine-member school board now includes eight Democrats. The results of the election ended the tenure of the Republican members who had swept the 2009 board elections and immediately begun to

dismantle the district's diversity policy. One of the newly elected members commented that as a result of the election, she feels the board is now in a good position to make "consistent policy" and stay "a steady course, so that we can actually take a look at the impact our decisions have over time" (Kenney, 2013).

As the WCPSS Board of Education continues its work in articulating what it means by diversity and how this will be exemplified in a student assignment policy, they must also consider how their attempts to construct said policy may affect the district's operating budget. In the state of North Carolina, school boards have no taxing authority and county commissioners approve budgets for local school systems. Thus, according to an interviewee, "Your ability to get along with your county commissioner is critical." In Wake County, the seven-member board of county commissioners is "a true two party board," divided 4-3 with the majority representing the Republican Party. While the commissioners do not have a vote when it comes to a WCPSS diversity policy, they are able to express their views on student assignment and, according to another interviewee, "If they see things they don't like happening in the school district then they have some leverage in that they appropriate lots of money" (see also Hui, 2012). Thus, even though the WCPSS board majority now support implementing a diversity policy for the district, they still face other hurdles that may potentially derail their efforts along the way.

Superintendent–school board relationship. On August 1, 2013, Jim Merrill began his tenure as the WCPSS Superintendent, the third person to assume the position in 3 years. Merrill took office after 3 tumultuous years of school board politics that saw the resignation of one superintendent and the firing of another. In 2010, a month prior to the school board's vote to end the district's diversity policy, then-superintendent Del Burns announced his decision to retire at the end of the school year, stating he could no longer serve the district "in good conscience" as long they moved forward with a policy he believed would result in segregated schools ("Burns to Resign as Wake Schools Superintendent," 2010). The board subsequently fired Burns, replacing him with Donna Hargens as interim superintendent (Hargens is the current JCPS superintendent), before hiring Anthony Tata in January 2011. Tata was a former Army general backed by the Republican school board majority whose only educational experience included 20 months as the Chief Operating Officer at Washington, D.C. Public Schools under then-Chief Executive Officer Michelle Rhee, and a Broad Foundation training program for potential superintendents (Hui, 2013a). In September 2012, less than 20 months on the job, the WCPSS Board of Education voted along party lines to fire Tata. The

Democratic majority felt Tata was a polarizing figure and cited his inability to bridge the political divisions that plagued the school board as the reason for his removal (Goldsmith & Hui, 2012).

Since the 2009 school board election, superintendent–school board relationships in WCPSS have become divided along party lines, making it extremely difficult for the board to come to any type of agreement on policy decisions, particularly when it came to the district's student assignment policy. As the board itself became fractured, the role of the superintendent became even more important as the leader of the district would need to be someone who could, according to an interviewee, "help the board stay focused on what is considered the main thing, and if you're working with children, then that's the main thing." It becomes very difficult for a superintendent to effectively do his or her job when the school board itself cannot agree on how to handle district issues. Speaking to the problematic nature of working in a district with a divisive, partisan school board, a former superintendent told us,

> And now it means that any superintendent coming into that situation, their question is are you with "us," or are you with "them"? And it doesn't really matter what you bring to the table, it's an "us" or "them." And once they decide that you're with "them," you don't get the kind of cooperation from that group that you want. So that's a problem.

When the board was discussing changes being made to the assignment policy in 2011, a board member told us how he felt the superintendent [Tata] "undermined his board" by failing to include them in the process, which only served to perpetuate the already shaky superintendent–school board relationship. He stated,

> The superintendent did not choose to work as a team. He chose to work with some of these—I'm not even going to say partisan—but they were agenda-driven folks. . . . And that was most clearly seen in rolling out those assignment maps without even giving us the opportunity to review them. . . . He came to us with his plan, assured us that it was going to be fine, assured that his choice plan was not going to result in significantly more transportation than we had before, only to find out in a memo from him on the 27th of August that we're driving 20% more miles. I voted no on that plan. I don't regret that I voted no on it, because I didn't believe the information I was given. And I don't like spin.

The conflict created by partisan politics can inhibit healthy working relationships between superintendents and school boards that are necessary for

the creation and support of diversity policies that meet the needs of the community. With a more stable school board, perhaps Superintendent Merrill will be given the opportunity to build a constructive relationship to lead Wake County's renewed efforts to pursue diversity.

Efforts to build community support for policy. The WCPSS Board of Education has had a historic commitment to reaching out to the community and working together to make sure they are "in the loop" when it comes to decision making. A former board member emphasized the importance of listening to the community's concerns "whether it's through public hearings around the county or by tallying up concerns that are left on the district's hotline."

Engaging the community is seen as crucial to the district, according to a former superintendent, as it is the community who will ultimately decide if "it wants to do something to help its schools." The district and board had been successful in their community efforts because they have

> had progressive boards . . . a progressive community. We were tied to the faith community, we were tied to the business community. . . . The president of the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce and smaller chambers, and I and the county manager and the city manager met monthly to talk about issues. . . . The ministers had their own organizations and I met with them. And so we're touching all of these bases to make certain that we never lose sight of where our community is.

The school board has also set up board advisory councils that meet at least four times a year (see WCPSS, 2012). Each school board member has a group they meet with that is composed of all of the principals within their board district as well as a parent representative from each of the schools. One board member talked to us about a recent advisory council meeting she had in her district and how they talk "openly about where we are in the assignment process and I invited them all to go online to see the draft that they could see at the moment and to give me their feedback via e-mail." The district has an online portal where parents can provide feedback about the district. District staff then compiles and categorizes the feedback to provide the board with data that can be used to tweak policies. The board tries to be as transparent as possible in its decision making and believes that by putting information on the website, even in draft form, it allows individuals (or at least those with Internet access) to be more engaged with the district and have more opportunities to address their concerns.

According to an interviewee, "During the best days of Wake County it was about the community, during the worst days of Wake County, it once again is

about the community." The Wake County community is very passionate about its schools, and, according to an interviewee, the concern expressed by many was that

> we had a system [diversity policy] that worked, it worked for a long time under Bill McNeal, when he was superintendent, we had these tremendous gains. . . . And we made tremendous gains in closing the achievement gap between White and minority students, etc., etc. And I think there are things that we can do to continue to achieve. And just because we hit a bump in the road, doesn't mean we can throw the baby out with the bath water. . . . I understand completely why people are disturbed in small, relatively small numbers compared to the county. This is an 831 square-mile county, so it's a big place. So, the perception there is that children were reassigned. And the excuse became, well, because we were busing for diversity. So, it goes back to Great Schools are trying to provide factual data to the public so they really understand what the root cause of the problem is. Silly us. Emotion is what sells and elects people, unfortunately, and it isn't always backed up by truth.

These sentiments expressed by Wake County community members illustrate, perhaps in comparison to perceptions about the past, the importance for the district to be as transparent as possible and to engage the community in a manner that is open, honest, and meaningful so that policy decisions being made are representative of the entire community. If the WCPSS board is interested in bringing more stability and consistency to the district in terms of its student assignment policy, it will have to be consistent in informing the rapidly changing community how its efforts around diversity will ultimately affect policy.

Jefferson County Public Schools

The JCPS district formed in the 1970s as a result of a court-ordered merger during the desegregation era. It enrolls approximately 100,000 students and just under half are White. Black students are the second largest group, at 37%, and nearly two thirds of students are low-income (JCPS, 2012). Although there was initially tremendous resistance to desegregating the new city-county district, over time, the district's plan allowed for more flexibility and compliance was very high. By the time the district was declared unitary in 2000, the plan was popular and the district had experienced tremendous benefits from the plan such that the board agreed to continue implementing the controlled choice assignment plan. The policy divided the district into 12 noncontiguous zones and permitted families to choose what school to attend within their zone, aiming to have 15% to 50% Black students in every school.

A few years later, several parents who did not get their choice of schools alleged that the district was unfairly discriminating against their children on the basis of race. In 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down JCPS's voluntary diversity policy, holding that while the goals of voluntary integration were constitutional, the means that JCPS and Seattle had used were impermissible (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007).

Two days after the Supreme Court decision, the district's new superintendent took office; yet district leaders and staff vowed to continue to pursue diversity within the parameters of the law. Part of the new approach to diversity in JCPS meant broadening their former focus on racial diversity to a more multifaceted conceptualization of diversity including socioeconomic status. The district spent the next year consulting with national experts, and in spring 2008, the board adopted a plan strongly advocated by then-Superintendent Sheldon Berman. To comply with the Supreme Court's directive of not using individual student racial status, the district categorized students by the geography of where they lived: either in "A" areas, which had residents with lower educational attainment, lower income, and higher numbers of students of color, or "B" areas, which was the remainder of the county. The district's new goal was to have 15% to 50% of students in each school from "A" areas. Additionally, the district replaced its 12 noncontiguous zones with six zones, and several stretched the width of the county.

Implementation during the first 2 years (fall 2009 and fall 2010) was rocky, and the board brought in experts to advise them on revising the plan to be more effective.[5] Later that fall, the school board voted not to renew the Superintendent's contract (Konz, 2010). In summer 2011, the board hired Donna Hargens, who had been interim superintendent in Wake County (Goldsmith & Hui, 2011). That fall, the consultants suggested revisions to the diversity plan, which were adopted after minor tweaks by the district staff. These changes included refining the conception of multifactor diversity from A/B to more fine-grained measures of 1, 2, or 3; replacing the six clusters with 13 smaller ones; and making other changes to improve the implementation and equity of the plan (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2011).

Board commitment to diversity. One of the commonalities across virtually all interviewees in JCPS was that, unprompted and regardless of whom the interviewee was, they commented on the school board's commitment to diversity. Their conception of diversity often reflected the race-conscious measure of diversity in use in the district. A senior district official, for example, commented on how (in comparison to Wake County, which loomed large as a cautionary example among several we interviewed), "all seven school board

members" agree on "the district's commitment to diversity." A longtime district staff member agreed,

> Since '83, all of the school boards I've worked for . . . the majority of the people on the school board were for diversity. And I believe that initially, it was the reaction of the riots that occurred in '76, '77 and this city-county attitude and all that. And they had to say now we've got to have a culture. The Jefferson County Public Schools and diversity is an important value. I really believe that. Now, there's variance within the school board as to who is really committed and I'm going to go along with it because I want to make sure that we're a unified group. But when push comes to shove, usually our school board has been there.

Each of the current or past school board members interviewed discussed the board's commitment to diversity through student assignment, and many linked this directly to their view that the vast majority of the community supported diverse schools. While noting that some segments of the community were irritated with the continual changes to the student assignment plan after *Parents Involved* (2007), a board member noted that most of the community was supportive of student assignment. Another noted, "There's a tremendous number of parents out there, way over 90%, that they're okay . . . they understand [student assignment], and I believe this community wants diversity." Given that all board members had successfully faced reelection in the aftermath of the *Parents Involved* decision, it is not surprising that they took to heart the way the community (and voters) felt about the policy.

Board members also expressed pride in their commitment to diversity even with the *Parents Involved* setback. This sentiment was framed as the district fighting against the courts and other obstacles like the state legislature. Possibly this extended fight against various entities has helped the district coalesce around the student assignment policy as part of its identity, as it was repeatedly mentioned by several district leaders. Said a just retired board member,

> There's a little bit of this pride in ownership that the board had said, this is our position. Of course we fought the case through the federal courts. And advocated for what we are currently doing. And it was pretty much the same board, so I don't think the board, having taken that position, and having maintained diverse schools for a number of years, that board was not going to suddenly say, well, it's not worth it. I think what we are going to do is say, okay, given the parameters that we now have, how can we try to accomplish what we had before?

A staff member who works on student assignment echoed this pride around the board's commitment to diversity. She noted,

> When we got the ruling, one of the things that I'm most proud of is that our board came back and said, we're still very committed to diversity. And we could have easily said, okay let's go back to neighborhood schools or we put up a good fight and now let's move on. But our board was very committed to keeping diverse schools in Jefferson County. They saw the value and in fact they took this opportunity really I think to broaden the definition of diversity.

A board member noted the board had never considered a neighborhood schools policy even fighting against neighborhood school legislation at the state level, a fact not lost on community groups. A civil rights leader commented,

> Although we can be critical, I do have a lot of respect for JCPS because they didn't do what Seattle did. The school board has stood up and when they [the state legislature] passed that bill on neighborhood schools, they opposed it.

It is likely that the community leaders and the broad base of support for the district's diversity policy makes it easier for the board to sustain their own commitment.

The only questions about commitment to diversity came around the specifics of the new diversity policy adopted by the board in 2012, in particular, the new multifactor conceptualization of diversity. According to the teachers' union president,

> I think [the new plan has] been a significant diminution of the commitment to diversity. But, as you diminish that commitment, you get less blowback from the more affluent parents who don't want their kids to have to ride a bus in order to help us integrate schools.

He viewed the new plan as a way to hold on to some type of diversity while appeasing those who wanted neighborhood schools. Another interviewee remarked that while there was community support for racially diverse schools—which we found to be the case during our fieldwork—other types of diversity incorporated into the new plan were not as widely appreciated.

Politicization of the board. The JCPS school board, until the 2012 election, had had remarkably little turnover, which may have helped contribute to less politicization in the arena of school integration. Four members had served at least three terms, two of whom had served since 1990. Two others took office

in 2006, and the shortest tenure was that of Diane Porter, appointed to a vacancy in the district primarily serving the city of Louisville in 2010. As one community member noted, "The core group, the majority that supported the plan has really stuck around."

Carol Haddad, who began serving on the school board in the 1970s, may best exemplify the stability and nonpoliticization of the board. According to one interviewee, early on, "She was at one point if not an outright opponent [of the diversity plan], at least skeptical. But she changed her position and became a strong supporter." In fact, in 2012, she went to Lexington to testify against the proposed neighborhood schools bill that would have imperiled JCPS's integration efforts.

Even in the 2012 election, which occurred the month prior to our fieldwork in JCPS, the sense from the school board members who did not run for reelection was that they had made it through the tumult after *Parents Involved* (2007), and the district was in a good place to withstand board transition. Said one retiring board member,

> I never really planned to stay on for 22 years—every time I've come up for reelection, it seems like there's always been something that's going to happen within the next couple of years, that they wanted some stability on the board. And a time or two it had to do with the student assignment plan. And, so this time I think we're in good shape.

Furthermore, the fact that the three new board members seemed to be supportive of the existing student assignment policy over the many neighborhood schools candidates further solidified for many of our interviewees that the board elections had not become politicized (Konz, 2012a).

While the end result of the November 6, 2012, elections left interviewees feeling a sense of stability, several admitted that the election campaign was more political than they had remembered (Katayama, 2012; Konz, 2012b, 2012c). Describing the preceding few months, one board member listed the groups involved:

> Tea party, anti-busing. It was the whole nine yards. They really got into it, wanted charter schools. . . . And it's never been an election all the years I've run that it was ever like this. Except in '75.

Likewise, a staff member commented that the district was still committed to diversity but said, "I didn't know going into November 6 if we were going to be still standing . . . [but] it seems fairly decisive."

Additionally, other community leaders talked about community education efforts around the 2012 election. Such efforts included making sure each ward had a good pool of candidates, raising the profile of the board, and

ensuring that each candidate's opinions on various topics were well-known. Importantly, they also helped establish what was within the purview of a well-functioning board. As a number of interviewees proudly noted, it spoke highly of JCPS that one of the most powerful men in Louisville, David Jones Jr., head of Humana, ran for (and won) election to the board. We believe that community support of the plan and stability of board members who have been prodiversity make politicization (thus far) a nonissue in JCPS.

Superintendent–school board relationship. With the lesser politicization of the school board in JCPS, there has not been much conflict in the superintendent–school board relationship over student assignment, although decades of official district commitment to racial diversity masked differences in how superintendents approached the student assignment policy. In addition, perhaps due to some issues with the previous superintendent, a number of school board members emphasized their ownership of student assignment strongly in our interviews, saying that it was the board's responsibility, and they relied on the staff for implementation.

The JCPS school board has maintained a stable, strong commitment to voluntary integration even as the legal context and specific parameters of the diversity policy have shifted. The current superintendent Donna Hargens has typically avoided making comments about whether she favors a diversity policy, at one point saying that student assignment reflects "public value choices" best left to "the board's governance role" (Kenning, 2011). Following the JCPS victory in state court to be able to maintain its diversity-focused student assignment policy, Hargens commented, "Success again, is less [about] transportation times, but [instead] using the census data to maintain and enhance the diversity within the system" ("Mixed Reaction to KY Supreme Court Ruling Favoring JCPS," 2013). A senior staff member also expressed her commitment to diversity, saying, "I understand the value of diversity. I understand that . . . it wasn't hard to recruit teachers anywhere and that it was just a real asset of [the district]." Thus, along with senior district staff members committed to racial and socioeconomic diversity and having ushered the district through several student assignment changes, JCPS currently has a united view among its leadership of commitment to diversity. Several interviewees noted the importance of having both superintendents and boards jointly committed to pursuing integration.

Several interviewees commented that all recent superintendents had been supportive of diversity, although one longtime staff member noted that racial diversity was still, to some extent, an impediment for some. Talking of the last four superintendents, he said, "I think they would all like to be in a school district that didn't have a discussion around diversity." He added that some of

the superintendents were "leery about talking race. . . . When you talk race, chances are you're going to upset somebody in this diverse group. You shouldn't be talking race. No, you should be talking race." Given the differing opinions about the salience of race among the public at large, particularly between Whites and people of color (Cox, 2014), it is not surprising that educational leaders might not be comfortable having an open, continuing conversation about racial diversity and the need for an integration plan even with the community and school board's general support for voluntary integration.

A major theme among district staff and board members was how the previous superintendent had micromanaged the board into adopting a plan after *Parents Involved* (2007) that had created political backlash, which subsequently caused the district to modify that plan. One of the major problems that arose in implementing the first post–*Parents Involved* plan was the switch from 12 to 6 zones, which was championed by the former superintendent (Berman, 2013). Several zones stretched across the length of the sprawling county and resulted in the perception of long bus rides for some students; these 6 zones were replaced by 13 smaller zones. A staff member described the former superintendent as having "a really strong vision of where he wanted to see student assignment go. He was very hands-on and involved, and really made most of the decisions around where we were headed with student assignment."

Reflecting on this experience, one board member noted this 2009 policy change had been a mistake. He said,

> We went along with a six contiguous cluster plan versus a non-contiguous plan which was very, very similar to what we'd always been doing, what the community knew, what the community understood. So we made a gross departure from the way we'd been doing things.

I: And why did the board—if they didn't believe in the six clusters, why did you all vote for it?

R: Because . . . we had a superintendent at the time that wanted it his way. And so he convinced…the administrative people that we trusted to tell us this was the best route to go. And then, . . . being a policy maker you meet twice a month, you get some information between meetings, but you have to trust these folks. And when they come in and they tell you this is going to work then you take them at their word.

Others we interviewed echoed this sentiment. One board member referred to the six-cluster plan as "destroying" the success of prior plans using noncontiguous zones.

Other interviewees pointed out the challenge the former superintendent had in that his term began just days after the Supreme Court decision was handed down invalidating the district's assignment plan and yet the board charged him with coming up with a new plan that would comply with the Court's decision. His newness, one interviewee thought, meant that

> he didn't understand the complexity of how we had arrived at the existing clusters, because he was new to the community. The existing clusters had been built up over time very organically. . . . And it would have been a whole lot easier and we would have saved several years of controversy if we had built the new plan on the existing clusters. But for various reasons he didn't want to do that.

In contrast with her predecessor, Dr. Hargens was described as committed to a diversity policy but more focused on student achievement; board members lauded her focus on achievement when they hired her ("Donna Hargens Named JCPS Superintendent," 2011). In terms of the decisions that needed to be made about revising the student assignment plan, she was seen as less hands-on and more concentrated on the bigger picture issues in terms of support for the policy. One staff member described her and the school board as "want[ing] to have diversity, but they want to have it at a lower conversation level . . . and they will want data to show that what we're doing student assignment wise is helping kids achieve." Ironically, the vote to change the student assignment policy during Dr. Hargens term was more mixed (5-2) as compared to vote during the prior administration, which was 7-0, despite her efforts to ratchet down the attention paid to student assignment.

Efforts to build community support for policy. Mobilization against JCPS's student assignment policies after the turbulent 1970s has been minimal. Frequent surveys of the community have shown widespread support for the ideals of the student assignment plan (e.g., Orfield & Frankenberg, 2011). A longtime observer of the district described the lack of mobilization:

> I was always struck by how little organizing, how little response came up compared to North Carolina. I mean, you had the parents who were upset they didn't get their choice of school. And they were usually suburban, upper-middle class areas where the schools are very popular. They didn't get into the one that they wanted, so they blamed the plan. . . . I got the sense that it was a function of how well the plan had worked over the years and how accepted student assignment had become. Obviously, it was a really tumultuous thing in the '70s here, but over time and with the inclusion of choice, I think it just became to be an accepted part of education here. . . . I think the success of it to

> some extent, took away the urgency to support it for a lot of the groups that maybe it was in their interest to support.

A school board member also concurred that one of the reasons the plan has had relatively little opposition is that people liked being able to use the choice plan to travel across the county for a variety of different kinds of unique educational options, in addition to general comfort—or at least not dissatisfaction—with racial diversity.

A number of people we interviewed talked about the ways in which the district is currently focusing on improving the technical pieces of administering the policy to improve its implementation and therefore reduce the potential mobilization against not only the means of accomplishing the plan but also the goals themselves. This manifested itself in a number of ways. The new director of student assignment remarked,

> My goal is to make [student assignment] so high functioning that the issue goes away as a political thing. Every time there's a problem, a technical, logistical, transportation problem, that's another reason why people say, well, we should go back to neighborhood schools.

Several staff members described the importance of trying to reach traditionally hard-to-reach groups, to help ensure they understood their options and submitted applications on time. This was especially critical as the district shifted from paper applications to online applications for school choice options. One of the staffers noted the balancing act the district faced, however:

> We really need to focus in on making a lot of the technical pieces better. And I think we're working on that piece. And how do you keep up the conversation about diversity and the importance of it without raising it back up to the larger conversations that could put it in jeopardy?

An additional aspect of how to improve the plan to limit mobilization against the plan was a realization by district leaders that they needed to be clearer about how the plan functioned. Said one staffer, "The community doesn't understand our system very well at all. And that's a problem." He attributed this lack of understanding to fueling some parents' belief that they had been assigned a school they didn't want because of their child's race, which was no longer the case. A board member commented,

> The people in my community could not explain to you whether we have 6 clusters or 13 clusters. Because we keep changing it. . . . They need to

> understand what we're doing and they'll never understand as long as we keep changing it.

Particularly because of the choice-based nature of the student assignment policy, not only does clearer information potentially minimize resistance to the plan, but it also would help the plan function more effectively. Promisingly, one staff member described efforts to work with the community to help get input in the policy revision process. They have subsequently formed an advisory committee of stakeholders to advise on implementation and to make sure the community is comfortable with the plans and understands their options.

Several people commented on how the district was using data as a way to counter "myths" that were used to try to get the community to mobilize against the policy. A school board member described those opposed to the plan as not really looking deeply enough at the data to understand the big picture in terms of the plan's effectiveness. The media, he felt, was complicit in some of the lack of understanding. Likewise, a district staff member described efforts to demonstrate that some of the concerns raised in the latest plan revisions were not empirically sound. For example, for parents concerned about losing the number of school choices under the 6-cluster plan, the district crunched data and found that most parents were not actually taking advantage of geographically far-flung options and, as a result, reducing the number of school choices in the 13-cluster plan would have minimal effect. Their opinion was that the district had successfully for decades used data to try to examine some of the emotional aspects of different desegregation plans.

Discussion

This study sought to better understand the factors influencing the school board policy-making process in two suburbanizing countywide districts, each with a history of voluntary desegregation efforts, grappling with racial and socioeconomic diversity in highly politicized environments. Our findings highlight the powerful role of school boards in carrying out (or eliminating) diversity policies (Fraga et al., 2005; Trujillo, 2013) and how the makeup of these governance structures has an impact on whether student assignment will result in integrated schooling environments (Smith et al., 2004). We also explored how the political contexts of communities within large countywide districts affect policy making given the new legal limitations imposed on them as a result of the *Parents Involved* (2007) decision. The ruling forced districts to think of new ways to integrate schools without

relying on race as the sole factor in their assignment policies, as well as reconsider whether diversity (of any kind, but particularly racial) was still worth it; as a result, it has made the development and/or existence of enclave schools more meaningful to educational policy. In some places, this has resulted in districts limiting the extent they seek to diversify schools. Thus, the findings from our study have implications for school board members and superintendents in a post–*Parents Involved* era that has limited options for districts that wish to pursue integrated school environments. By focusing on two urban-suburban districts, our research also extends prior work examining the politics of diversity in urban districts to countywide districts experiencing rapid suburbanization.

School board policy making, as our case studies illustrate, can be highly influenced by the social and political contexts in which school districts are situated. School boards face the difficult task of navigating the politics of their communities and the competing interests surrounding diversity and deciding on policies that accommodate *and* appease their constituents. The results brought forward in this article illustrate how the stability of school boards can play a major factor in much of districts' policy-making efforts. The instability of school boards can result in superintendent transition, policy change, and community backlash against the policy change. Specifically, our findings reveal how school board stability contributes directly to school board–superintendent relationships, the politicization of school boards, efforts to engage the community around student assignment policies, and school boards' abilities to remain vigilant about diversity within their districts.

The suddenness of going from beginning to seriously question the socioeconomic diversity policy to actually ending it was surprising to many in Wake County. Prior to this—and still is the case nominally—the school board had been a nonpartisan governing body that was very supportive and nationally recognized as committed to the district's diversity policy (Duncan, 2011; Flinspach & Banks, 2005; Williams, 2012). With the entrance of partisan politics into the school board race at a time of relatively low civic capacity around diversity, a bloc of candidates who questioned the district's long-running and popular diversity policy captured a majority of school board seats. These candidates were able to tap into existing antigovernment sentiment, supported by local and nonlocal groups, and immediately shift the district's long-standing commitment to racial then socioeconomic diversity as they now held a majority of the board seats (Smith et al., 2004). This election belatedly mobilized civil rights groups and spurred the creation of new interest groups, which were unable to prevent the board majority from ending the diversity policy. The election also resulted in the resignation of one

superintendent and the hiring of another who was believed to be more in line with the new board majority's interests. The small faction of voters who elected the new slate of board members in 2009 had a disparate influence on school board policy *and* district leadership (Hess & Leal, 2005), which should be cause for concern for districts seeking consistency in their diversity efforts. During the 2011 school board election, with a higher voter turnout in some of the board districts, these prodiversity interest groups helped elect board members—who then subsequently fired the newly appointed superintendent—that are currently reevaluating the diversity policy to ensure that diversity is indeed being achieved (Frankenberg & Diem, 2013).

Turnover and politicization of the Wake County Board of Education have made it harder to sustain its diversity efforts as the district has not been able to achieve any sort of stability when it comes to policy making. This situation remains in flux, and highly politicized. However, with a newly appointed superintendent who is a veteran educator (unlike his predecessor) and a school board that is now majority Democratic and will likely remain so for at least 4 years, the district may regain some of the stability it possessed prior to the 2009 board elections.

In JCPS, community groups have not mobilized in the same way as in Wake County around the board's continued backing of the race-conscious diversity policy. Furthermore, while the district has also experienced recent turnover at the superintendent level (two superintendents over the past 6 years), the political environment was not as turbulent as in Wake County amid a context in which we saw lesser politicization of the school board. Additionally, the design of the JCPS student assignment policy also provides for more choice among parents, which allows them to have more agency over where their child attends school. (By comparison, in Wake County, student assignment and choice were framed as competing interests.) That is not to say that the community has not had an impact on the policy making of the JCPS board. Indeed, the design of the JCPS diversity policy has gone through several iterations over the past few years in response first to the Supreme Court ruling and then to the concern of long bus rides and the desire by some parents to advocate for neighborhood schools while other groups were concerned about equity of options and allocation of choices. Furthermore, the school board has had pressure from external actors to contend with the following: federal and state court lawsuits challenging their diversity efforts, state legislative efforts targeting their student assignment plan, and even a gubernatorial candidate who ran, in part, on opposition to the JCPS policy. However, in our interviews conducted shortly after the 2012 school board elections (in which all neighborhood school candidates were defeated), interviewees were confident that the board would retain its commitment to the

diversity policy and that most significant opposition to the plan was in the past. They instead were focusing on smaller, technical implementation type questions instead of, as in Wake County, continuing to debate whether the district should have a diversity policy or not.

In JCPS, the district—and school board particularly—forged an identity around embracing the importance of creating racially diverse schools over time as its student assignment policy was repeatedly challenged both legally and politically. Interviewees in the district commended the board for its unwavering commitment, even if they disagreed about some of the ways in which the board has pursued racial diversity. Board members themselves expressed pride in their leadership in this area, which when combined with their stability, helps explain how the district has remained committed to implementing different variations of its student assignment policy. The situation is more complicated in WCPSS, where prior to 2009, board members were described as committed to diversity, but as the board election grew politicized, new members came on to the board who said they were committed to diversity but not to the diversity policy. While it is unclear whether the public was unhappy with the diversity policy given the small turnout in the 2009 board elections, interviews suggested that there may have been more community dissent about WCPSS's earlier socioeconomic diversity policy than in JCPS, which undoubtedly also influenced the board's commitment (Diem et al., 2014).

Our study also illustrates the very difficult role of the superintendent, leading diverse communities with different histories and experiences in navigating the local politics of diversity where district leadership must weigh a variety of competing policy goals. School boards have a tremendous amount of power over superintendents (Mountford, 2004), which can make working with and for them extremely challenging. Relationships between school boards and superintendents are also complicated by the short tenure of superintendents (Grissom & Andersen, 2012), as evident in both WCPSS and JCPS. While superintendents may leave their positions for a number of reasons—job dissatisfaction, district characteristics, opportunity to move to larger districts, and so on—studies of superintendent turnover show that working with school board members is cited most often as a main contributor (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Parker, 1996; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). In WCPSS and JCPS, school board–superintendent relationships have been particularly contentious in recent years. For example, former superintendents Tata (WCPSS) and Berman (JCPS) both took active leadership positions on the issue of diversity but encountered some difficulties with their boards, in part due to their actions during the process of considering student assignment policy alternatives. When those decisions then received pushback from the

community, the superintendents found themselves in precarious positions. Alternatively, the current superintendent of JCPS, who has not taken as active a role on student assignment as her predecessor, seems to have a better relationship with the board because she puts the onus on the board to make policy decisions and is committed to following those decisions.

Finally, after years of policy and political instability—to varying degrees—a common theme in both districts was focusing on improving the technical details of each policy as a way to try to prevent the policies from giving district residents the opportunity to create a larger controversy about the necessity of the plan more generally. JCPS district officials, for example, spoke about how they had consistently tried to make student assignment a less emotionally charged conversation in the district, from using data to examine claims to making smaller or minor changes in the policy to make sure the plan functioned properly. With several iterations of the policy, it will be important to leave one in place long enough that JCPS does not have to explain again the details of the new plan. WCPSS is not as far along in policy implementation as JCPS, but it too has emphasized the importance of transparency in its process. The role of new groups like Great Schools can aid this process by helping bring data to bear on emotionally charged arguments that have been influential in WCPSS politics during the last 5 years.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Several implications emerge from our findings for policy making and leadership in districts and communities grappling with the politics of diversity around student assignment. Implicit in both of these cases is the challenge of leadership in racially and economically diverse communities, perhaps particularly when trying to reflect this diversity—amid residential segregation—at the school level through voluntarily adopted diversity policies. The details of how to achieve diversity are complicated, pitting racial diversity even in an accepted community against other goals of parents and/or the district. School board members and superintendents must continually monitor effectiveness of the policy and support while also understanding the legal context (e.g., federal or state court rulings) and political context (e.g., state legislature, county commissioners, and/or other federal/state educational priorities). An implication for researchers from this study is the need to support board members and superintendents in this work through working with them on technical design questions, assessing community satisfaction, and/or in partnering with community engagement efforts. The way in which technical details of the plan can fuel political opposition suggests the urgency to design an effective system that is also administrated transparently by the district. At a time

when school quality varies and student assignment means allocating educational opportunity, student assignments will likely be carefully monitored by the community and interest groups. Trusting that whatever plan is adopted is fairly applied to all as it seeks to create diversity is paramount.

School board and superintendents may find ongoing education efforts about diversity by professional associations like the National School Boards Association helpful. The U.S. Department of Education and its Equity Assistance Centers should also increase efforts to work with specific local contexts in this complex area. While school board members may not have any required training or expertise prior to gaining a district leadership role, certification programs for superintendents should include coursework on district policy and politics as well as understanding the changing student and neighborhood demographics and their implications for schools. Professional organizations could also create a peer network or mentoring group to help connect superintendents in districts employing various kinds of diversity policies.

The experiences of these districts suggest the need for school board members and superintendents to remain vigilant about diversity, even if it is a long-established policy value in the district and community. Despite the relative stability in JCPS, as recently as 2012, interviewees were not sure that the commitment to the integration policy would survive the school board election. It remains to be seen how the new WCPSS board, with a substantial majority committed to diversity (albeit, as of yet, unspecified diversity), will reflect this commitment in redesigning its student assignment policy given the political context within which the board is operating and the lack of details to date in current student assignment policy. Thus, an additional implication may be that once diversity has been taken off the table—even temporarily—it is difficult to regain consensus around the type of diversity as a goal and how to pursue it.

Future research is needed to examine school board policy making around diversity (race-conscious *and* race-neutral) in districts outside of the South, because of the particular nature of school segregation and race in this region of the country, to determine if comparable factors play a role in the policy process. Similar projects in urban- or suburban-only school districts may also be beneficial to conduct to identify any contrasts with the city-suburban districts in this project. Additionally, one of the differences between the two districts is that JCPS used a controlled choice assignment policy that used a measure of diversity to create diverse schools while WCPSS employed a mandatory assignment policy. School choice of all kinds is increasingly popular and is being used in innovative ways to further integration (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). Though it is impossible to know from this study, further

research should examine whether the politics of diversity differ depending on whether the district uses some type of school choice policy. In such an instance, permitting choice in addition to the district's striving for diverse assignments allows for more parental buy-in, thereby diffusing possible opposition.

Without strong community support, it can be difficult for superintendents and school boards to survive the politics of diversity around student assignment policies. In many districts, school board elections are every held every 2 years, and with each election, the possibility of losing support of members for a district's diversity policy exists. Thus, superintendents and school boards alike must engage in conversations with their communities about the growing racial and economic segregation occurring in schools and why racial and/or socioeconomic diversity policies are still important mechanisms for providing equitable learning opportunities in what some community members may see as a "postracial" environment. It is interesting to note that in both districts there seems to be a desire on the part of the school boards to lower the volume of the conversations surrounding student assignment—volume that was turned up by *Parents Involved* for JCPS, and by earlier court decisions and large demographic changes in WCPSS—in part because it can be so politically charged. Both school boards seem to want to coalesce around student achievement, and some even want the districts to eventually move past the issue. Yet can a district truly be quietly committed to diversity at a time in which many communities remain deeply stratified? The examples of Wake and Jefferson counties illustrate the complicated political context of school board policy making amid an environment where establishing and maintaining diversity policies may be continuously challenged.

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Notes

1. Our primary interest is racial diversity in this study, that is, how different racial groups are represented in schools across the districts analyzed. It is important to note that both districts currently use different dimensions of student or neighborhood

characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status and educational attainment) to achieve diverse schools. Thus, while we use diversity to mean racial diversity, in these districts, like others, socioeconomic diversity is also part of the districts' goals.

2. Desegregation is defined as the process (e.g., policy) by which school districts seek to eliminate the isolation or separation of students from different racial groups and achieve racial balance within schools. While desegregation was traditionally the goal during the era of court oversight, because of the changing jurisprudence, the goal now is typically referred to as diversity.
3. Integration refers to the social and academic interactions that take place among different groups of students once they are brought together in desegregated school settings.
4. Though the plan was aimed at reducing the concentrations of students by their socioeconomic and academic characteristics, this plan was also largely effective in reducing racial concentrations (Siegel-Hawley, 2011).
5. The second author was part of the team evaluating the student assignment policy.

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Author Biographies

Sarah Diem is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri. She received her PhD in educational policy & planning at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on the sociopolitical and geographic contexts of education, paying particular attention to how politics, leadership, and implementation of educational policy affect diversity outcomes.

Erica Frankenberg (EdD, Harvard University, AB, Dartmouth College) is an associate professor in the Department of Education Policy Studies at the Pennsylvania State University. Her research interests focus on racial desegregation and inequality in K-12 schools. Recent book publications include *Educational Delusions? Why Choice Can Deepen Inequality and How to Make It Fair*, *The Resegregation of Suburban Schools: A Hidden Crisis in American Education*, and *Integrating Schools in a Changing Society: New Policies and Legal Options for a Multiracial Generation*.

Colleen Cleary is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri. Her research interests include the relationship between schools and communities and the politics of education.