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Eric P. Ambroso

Arizona State University, eambroso@asu.edu

Erin Rotheram-Fuller

Arizona State University, Erin.Rotheram-Fuller@asu.edu

Daniel D. Liou

Arizona State University, dliou@asu.edu

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Interdistrict Choice and Teacher Beliefs: Implications for Educational Expectations, Equity, and Policymaking

*Eric Ambroso, Arizona State University
Erin Rotheram-Fuller, Arizona State University
and
Daniel D. Liou, Arizona State University*

In recent years, educational policies throughout the United States—often backed by powerful political interest groups and philanthropic foundations—have expanded provisions for school choice, which purported to allow families to decide between schooling options as if they were goods in a private market (Garcia, 2018). Various forms of school choice, including voucher programs, charter schools, magnet schools, and homeschooling, have been implemented throughout the country, representing one of the most dominant trends in U.S. educational policy over the past 25 years (Lavery & Carlson, 2014). A major component of this expansion is public school choice. Also called *open enrollment*, public school choice allows students to choose between public schools within (intradistrict choice) or outside of (interdistrict choice) their district of residence (Carlson, 2014). Interdistrict choice is currently the most widely used school choice program in the United States (Lavery & Carlson, 2014). Yet, despite its pervasiveness, we still understand little about whether interdistrict choice translates into educational equity to benefit the populations it is purported to serve.

Research examining the effects of interdistrict choice has primarily utilized district-level data to analyze issues concerning access and student-transfer flows (Lavery & Carlson, 2014). Although macro-level studies have shown that Students of Color are less likely to receive the full benefits of interdistrict choice (Mickelson,

Bottia, & Southworth, 2012; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014), this work does little to inform our understanding of how this particular student population is perceived at their destination school once choice is exercised. Additional research has examined the racial, gendered, and socio-emotional experiences of Students of Color attending predominantly White schools outside of their district of residence (e.g., Butler-Barnes, Lea, Leath, & Colin, 2016). Missing from the school choice literature, however, are studies examining teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards Students of Color when they are able to transfer to school districts that are externally perceived to be more viable but racially White and homogenous (Cherng, 2017). This is particularly troubling, given that teachers' beliefs and perceptual frameworks of students have long-term implications for students' academic success (Andrews & Gutwein, 2017).

Studies have suggested that teachers generally regard Students of Color as less capable than their White peers (e.g., Rojas & Liou, 2018; Yosso, 2005), which has contributed to deficit-oriented classroom practices (Rist, 2000) and increased teacher-student hostility and disciplinary interventions in school (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). These forms of negation have led Leonardo (2013) to argue that Students of Color are consciously and unconsciously treated differently in schools, a dynamic which he calls an educational racial contract. He argues that race and racism play a role in determining teachers' perceptions of students' educability, and in turn, they are often racially profiled and subsequently stratified through the structure and culture of schooling. With the increased use of interdistrict choice policies throughout the United States, there is a pressing need to examine teachers' beliefs

about Students of Color enrolled in schools outside of their district of residence.

Research Questions

This study explores changes that may have occurred as a result of an interdistrict choice policy and teachers' beliefs about the abilities of their in- and out-of-district students in three categories: (a) *academic*, which describes students' performance on standardized tests and graduation rates; (b) *communication*, which refers to their verbal and physical expressions; and (c) *behavior*, which represents their ability to adhere to explicit or implicit standards and expectations of their conduct in classrooms. In particular, we aim to illuminate teachers' beliefs about out-of-district students, most of whom are Students of Color at Desert High School (pseudonym), a large, metropolitan high school in Arizona, a state where lawmakers have continuously supported school choice policies and expanded the education market (Powers, Topper, & Silver, 2012). Through a two-year study, we document teachers' beliefs about out-of-district students and draw connections on the instances where teachers conflated Students of Color with those who were coming out-of-district as a method to racialize their educability and the extent they were valued at the school. To our knowledge, it is the first study to examine teachers' beliefs about students' capabilities in the context of interdistrict school choice policies. Specifically, we ask the following research questions:

Research Question 1: In what ways did school demographics, academic achievement, and behavior referrals change as a result of interdistrict choice policies?

Research Question 2: Did high school teachers' perceptions of their in-district and out-of-district students differ?

Literature Review

To provide some context on school choice in the United States, we review the existing literature in two sections. First, we provide a historical context to examine the support of free-market educational policies and interdistrict choice. Then, we describe how previous studies have linked those policies to educational equity in U.S. schools. Together, we highlight key research on the relationship between teachers' beliefs and students' academic outcomes before describing our conceptual framework.

Historical Context of School Choice

In the 1950s and 1960s, economist Milton Friedman advanced free-market theories of education in the United States, arguing that giving families a choice about where their children attend schools would encourage competition and improve academic outcomes for all students (Barkan, 2017; Frankenberg, Kotok, Schafft, & Mann, 2017). Although Friedman's (e.g., 1962) ideas had little policy impact at the time, the influence of free-market educational theories has grown in recent years along with the dominant narrative substantiated in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which claimed that the U.S. education system was failing and in need of radical reform to compete in the global economy (Mehta, 2013). Influential policy advocates have capitalized on the meganarrative to posit school choice as an alternative to residential-based school assignment to improve educational opportunities for students (Potterton, 2017). Over the past two decades, free-market policies have been supported by the U.S.

Department of Education (under the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama), entrepreneurs, various foundations and think tanks, and state politicians (mostly, but not all Republican) (Ravitch, 2016).

During that time, Betsy DeVos has been one of the most influential and active supporters of school choice (Barkan, 2017). Often working in tandem with organizations such as the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice and Americans for Prosperity, she championed school choice policies—such as vouchers and charter schools—that have drained Michigan’s public-school system of resources and opened the education market to investors (Ravitch, 2016). Since taking office as the U.S. Education Secretary in February 2017, DeVos has prioritized the expansion of free-market educational policies nationwide (Green, 2017), and some scholars believe that all states may soon be required to implement or expand school choice policies in order to receive federal funding (Garcia, 2018).

Historical context of interdistrict choice. Although details vary across states, there are primarily two types of interdistrict choice policies: voluntary and mandatory (Lavery & Carlson, 2014). In voluntary programs, school districts may decide whether to accept student transfers from other districts of residence. Mandatory programs require districts to accept student transfers, with specific conditions under which they can legally refuse. Generally, the per-pupil funding from the state follows the student to the new district, and, in some cases, transportation to and from school is also provided (Finnigan & Scarbrough, 2013). Two key assumptions underlie interdistrict policies: (1) if families are given the opportunity, they will choose better schools for their children (Powers et al.,

2012) and (2) by gaining access to educational resources that were traditionally limited to more affluent schools, Students of Color will experience gains in academic performance (Butler-Barnes et al., 2016).

Minnesota passed the nation’s first mandatory interdistrict choice policy in 1988, which required districts to accept students transferring from other districts of residence (Carlson, Lavery, & Witte, 2011). Similar bills were soon passed in states like Arizona, Colorado, and Nebraska, which all adopted mandatory interdistrict choice plans in the early 1990s (Carlson et al., 2011; Potterton, 2017). By 2014, interdistrict choice policies had expanded to more than 40 states (Lavery & Carlson, 2014), yet, research on the effects of interdistrict choice on educational equity is severely lacking (Bayer, Ferreira, & McMillan, 2007; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). While charter schools and private school vouchers have been at the center of intense political debates in recent years, interdistrict policies have managed to avoid the scrutiny of most scholars and policy analysts (Carlson et al., 2011). Compared to other school choice policies, interdistrict choice may seem harmless on its surface; students are free to attend their choice of existing public schools, regardless of their district of residence. However, Lavery and Carlson (2014) allege that, due to their widespread use, interdistrict school choice programs may have far more potential to alter the demographics and character of schools and districts. To better understand how these changes may affect educational equity, more research is needed that analyzes these changes and explores how Students of Color are perceived in schools outside of their districts of residence.

Interdistrict Choice and Educational Equity

Prior to the 1990s, the vast majority of students in the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) United States were assigned to schools based on their home address, explicitly linking residential location to access to quality education (Brunner, 2014). Due to patterns of income distribution and residential segregation, Students of Color have been consistently isolated in urban school districts with lower-quality schools, fewer educational opportunities, and less access to qualified teachers (Finnigan & Scarbrough, 2013; Frankenberg et al., 2017; Holme, Finnigan, & Diem, 2016; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). In response to the shortcomings of residential-based systems, proponents have cited the potential of interdistrict choice policies to increase educational outcomes for diverse student populations by weakening the link between school quality and residential location, thereby reducing disparities in educational opportunities across communities (Brunner, 2014; Forster, 2013; Henig & MacDonald, 2002). Addressing his State Board of Education in 2015, Arizona's Governor Doug Ducey echoed these sentiments by saying:

. . . choice, excellence, accountability, and results—don't work if they don't apply to all children in all corners of our state. It shouldn't matter what your zip code is—if you're a child in Arizona you deserve our absolute best. We've accepted that public education is a key responsibility of the state, and we need to ensure the benefits of our actions apply to all. (Taracena, 2015)

Unfortunately, much of the existing literature suggests that policies like interdistrict choice have not improved

educational outcomes for all students as Friedman and his colleagues predicted (see Frankenberg et al., 2017; Mickelson et al., 2012). Critics argue that free-market educational systems disproportionately benefit more affluent students from advantaged racial groups (Ravitch, 2016) and have contributed to the stratification of schools along the axes of race and social class (Bayer et al., 2007; Cobb & Glass, 1999; Lavery & Carlson, 2014). While interdistrict policies theoretically allow Students of Color to transfer to more advantaged districts with higher-quality schools, research has shown that Families of Color face structural barriers and are less able to utilize interdistrict choice to transfer their children to districts other than district of residence (e.g., Finnigan & Scarbrough, 2013; Mickelson et al., 2012; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). This discrepancy may be due, in part, to practical problems, such as reliable access to transportation or school proximity to home (Carlson, 2014; Frankenberg et al., 2017; Potterton, 2017). In the majority of states offering interdistrict choice, including Arizona, school districts are not required to provide transportation to out-of-district students (Wixon, 2017). Finnigan and Scarbrough (2013) offer another explanation, stating that Black families remain suspicious of interdistrict enrollment policies because of the “disproportionate burden on Students of Color to adapt to primarily white schools” (p. 145).

In addition, when Students of Color are able to exercise choice to attend a school outside of their district of residence, policy requirements do little to influence how teachers perceive students from various racial groups, which can play a major role in shaping students' educational experiences (Finnigan & Scarbrough, 2013). Butler-Barnes et al. (2016) describe the racialized and gendered experiences of Black female

students that utilize an interdistrict choice policy to attend a predominantly White, suburban school in Missouri. Their findings indicate that the students perceived the school to have a negative racial climate. Students reported experiencing differential treatment by teachers that included diminished academic expectations and more frequent disciplinary actions for classroom behavior. As a consequence, “the girls felt they had to work hard in this educational setting to prove they belonged, as well as belittle or ignore their racialized experiences to ensure they excelled academically” (Butler-Barnes et al., 2016, p. 11).

Teacher Beliefs About Students of Color

Students who report having teachers that believe in them are more successful in school (Cherng, 2017). Yet, Students of Color are often perceived as lacking the social capital needed to succeed in school (Yosso, 2005). These negative beliefs are dynamics known as deficit thinking, where students’ racial and other intersectional backgrounds are repeatedly used to predict their alleged inability to learn (Valencia, 2012). Research has suggested that, “after decades of equity-oriented reform, schools have yet to deter teachers’ racial biases and the systemic inequities” (Liou & Rojas, 2018, p. 3) that portray Students of Color as incapable and disinterested in academic achievement.

Teacher Beliefs About Academic Abilities

Liou and Rojas (2018) suggest that teachers’ racialized beliefs ultimately shape expectations for students, which may be described as both the instructional practices that exhibit the teacher’s personal beliefs (i.e., worldviews, perceptions, bias, and attitudes) and their assessment of a student’s performance (via test scores, grade point

average, school attendance, etc.). Negative teacher beliefs generally result in ineffective instructional practices and poor academic performance (Gay, 2013). Conversely, students perceived to have higher abilities are exposed to more rigorous coursework, and permitted to follow more stringent academic tracks, such as advanced placement courses. Delpit (2012) describes negative perceptions of Students of Color as one of the major problems in the ways that students are treated by teachers in the classroom. This may be especially true for Black students, who Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane (2004) claim are repeatedly perceived as academically inferior by teachers, leading to lower teacher expectations and a decreased sense of responsibility for their academic achievement.

Teacher Beliefs About Communication Abilities

In addition, the communication skills of Students of Color are often perceived negatively, leading to misunderstandings that can lead to conflict between students and teachers, and escalate tensions in a racially charged learning environment. Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) explain that teachers with negative perceptions of Students of Color often racialize and misinterpret their verbal and physical expressions, leading to disproportionate rates of behavioral discipline in schools. Research has shown that teachers are more likely to reward competitive and individualistic expressions commonly associated with White students compared to more active and community-oriented learning styles often exhibited by Students of Color (Tyler, Boykin, & Walton, 2006). In her ethnographic study, Ferguson (2000) documents patterns in teacher–student interactions to describe how behavior

interventions were fueled by teachers' overreacting to Students' of Color language and physical expressions. Black youth, in particular, are often stereotyped as dangerous and aggressive by their teachers (Devine & Elliot, 2000; Noguera & Akom, 2000). These misinterpretations can lead to inequitable disciplinary actions against students across racial and gender lines in school.

Teacher Beliefs About Behavior Abilities

When teachers perceive students as lacking interest and ability, they expect less from the students academically and assign them coursework that is less demanding (George, 1983). As a result, students may develop negative feelings toward school and act out in ways that are considered inappropriate (Hallinan, 2008). In the United States, where school disciplinary interventions are generally intended to preserve order and safety in classrooms, Students of Color, especially Black students, are subject to a disproportionate rate of disciplinary incidents (Wallace et al., 2008). Interventions may range from disciplinary referrals to out-of-school suspensions, which have been shown to contribute to racial gaps in academic achievement (Gregory et al., 2010). Students of Color who face interventions such as suspensions and expulsions have less time to prepare academically, potentially limiting their opportunities to attend college. Gregory et al. (2010) suggest that suspensions can also harm the learning process in other ways. Students who are not in class may become less attached to school, impacting their motivation to perform well academically. In the following section, we describe our conceptual framework to explain how and why Students of Color may be perceived through deficit ideologies at Desert High.

Conceptual Framework

We make use of two central concepts to argue that the out-of-district label has been used, consciously or not, by teachers as a proxy for race at Desert High School. Harris (1993) and Mills (1997) both illustrate how the racial hierarchy is maintained (with White students structurally positioned at the top) in systems like schools because of the interplay between race, racism and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Recognizing the groundwork laid by Harris, Mills, and other Critical Race Theorists (CRTs), we aim to question the systemic reproduction of the racial structure in society and examine the homeostatic devices, like schools, that keep the racial hierarchy in place (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Whiteness as Property

The concept of whiteness as property suggests that whiteness can be viewed as a property and kept from others to maintain advantages in a hegemonic social structure that has been developed and perpetuated by white supremacy. Scholars have argued that whiteness comes with privileges in U.S. society, many of which are evident in the education system, where affluent, white schools and districts receive significantly more funding and educational resources than schools that primarily serve Students of Color (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Wells & Crain, 1997). Harris (1993) argues that possession of whiteness also grants privileges and resources to individuals by rewarding students for exhibiting characteristics or behaviors associated with being White. She claims that the possession of whiteness has been operationalized as a valuable commodity, like property (e.g., real estate), that is fiercely guarded and systematically kept from People of Color. Through perceiving Students of Color as

less capable than their White peers, teachers assume that they should aspire to middle-class, White norms. The devaluation of the skills and values that are inherent in Communities of Color grants privilege to White students and marginalizes Students of Color for not possessing characteristics that teachers associate with whiteness. This process works to reinforce the racial hierarchy in the United States, with those possessing whiteness firmly entrenched in positions of power.

The Racial Contract

Like Harris (1993), Mills (1997) describes white supremacy as a major influence in modern social structures and alleges that it has been the dominant political system through the enactment of two separate social contracts, one for Whites and another for People of Color. In a society that claims to be race-neutral and that everyone is legally and politically protected under a same set of laws, the construction of whiteness is dependent on the subordination of People of Color. Whereas Whites can be their own signatories of their social contract, the rights of People of Color must be regulated by law written by White elites. Mills (1997) presents his concept of the racial contract as a means to recognize that white supremacy is a political system that advantages White people. Leonardo (2013) argues that the racial contract is still the “dominant contract in U.S. society and education one of its main racial state apparatuses” (p. 605). Just as the racial contract stipulates persons and subpersons in the United States, it also designates White students as knowers and Students of Color as subknowers in U.S. schools (Leonardo, 2013). As such, Students of Color are not considered students within the racial contract, but burdens of the education system that are uneducable.

Through this lens, we examine the issue of interdistrict enrollment in relation to the inequities it produces between White students and Students of Color. Finnigan and Scarbrough (2013) claim interdistrict choice policies that allow urban Students of Color to cross district boundary lines into suburban schools are among the few educational policy mechanisms that could potentially work against racial disparities in the traditional, residential-based public education. Yet, deep-held, societal beliefs about Students’ of Color (in)abilities continue to demote them to *subpersonhood* in white-dominant institutions like schools (Leonardo, 2013). The concept of the racial contract offers a way to view these underlying racial ideologies that grant privilege to certain students because of their possession of whiteness. Whether these violations are committed consciously or not, as may be the case with teachers’ beliefs about Students of Color, they reproduce the structural inequities experienced by People of Color in the United States and support the long-established racial hierarchy. This can be seen in micro-level interactions of teachers and students in schools, where Students of Color are subjected to differentiated rules and perceived as academically inferior for not possessing white, middle-class values. To better illustrate the case at Desert High, we provide some information about demographics, enrollment, academic achievement, and school disciplinary patterns below.

Methods

Desert High School

Desert High is part of a high-achieving district with a 90% graduation rate, 40 advanced placement courses, and 160 honors courses. Seven high schools in the district serve approximately 14,000 students,

who score well above state averages for SAT and ACT scores. The school is located in Desert City (pseudonym), an affluent suburb of a major American metropolis. Despite its close proximity to diverse urban and academic environments, Desert City remains racially homogenous, with 83% of the population classified as White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The median household income in Desert City is nearly \$90,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), which is more than 50% higher than the statewide median household income of Arizona (\$51,340) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). These demographics vary drastically from the student population at Desert High School, which has undergone significant demographic changes in recent years.

In the 2016-2017 academic year, the student body at Desert High was 24% Black, 30% Latinx, and 34% White. Public data for free and reduced-priced meals were not available. School administrators first approached the third author to study the effects of demographic changes to the student body at Desert High. In particular, the principal reported decreasing academic achievement and a deteriorating school climate in recent years, and he wanted to analyze how teachers' understandings of diversity could impact their instruction (Principal, personal communication, 2016).

Data Collection

School-level data on student demographics, academic achievement, and graduation rates across the 2010-2011 and 2016-2017 academic years were provided by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE). Behavioral referral data for 2015-2016 academic year was also retrieved from the Civil Rights Data Collection in order to examine suspension and expulsion rates for subgroups of students. In addition, to answer the second research question, a survey was

distributed to all full- and part-time teachers at Desert High School. The survey instrument included demographic questions about teachers' age, gender, ethnicity, and teaching experiences in addition to a Likert-type instrument measuring teachers' beliefs about students' skills. In particular, participants were asked to rate the academic, communication, and behavioral skills of their in-district and out-of-district students separately, on a scale of 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest), with one item for each domain (see Table 1). Definitions of in-district and out-of-district were not provided on the survey instrument. The rationale behind this methodological choice (based on conversations with teachers and administrators) was that teachers were conflating their perceptions of Students of Color and out-of-district students. The alpha reliability coefficient for our sample was .87, which indicates a high level of internal consistency in the instrument.

Table 1. *Survey items.*

Rate the abilities of your in-district students (0 = lowest, 100 = highest)											
	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Academic Skills											
Communication Skills											
Behavioral Skills											
Rate the abilities of your out-of-district students (0 = lowest, 100 = highest)											
	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Academic Skills											
Communication Skills											
Behavioral Skills											

Participants

Researchers received survey responses from 123 (of a possible 124) Desert High School teachers, of which 65% were females between the ages of 36 and 55. Nearly 80% of the teacher participants described themselves as White, which indicates that the teaching staff at Desert High was only slightly more diverse than the statewide

teaching force (Douglas, 2016). Of the respondents, 83% stated that they had been teaching for more than five years, and 65% had been specifically teaching at Desert High School for more than five years. Participants taught a variety of subjects, including English, math, science, social studies, foreign language, physical education, and special education.

Procedures

Demographic information on changes at the school was obtained from the school, district, and state websites on school enrollment, test scores, and behavior referral and suspension information. In addition, all full- and part-time teachers at Desert High School were sent a solicitation email from the researchers with an electronic link to complete an anonymous one-time survey. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and their survey responses would be confidential. All surveys were completed in the final month of the 2015-2016 school year, and all study activities were monitored and approved by the university IRB.

Data Analysis

Eleven participants did not complete the entire survey, leaving an overall sample size of 112 complete surveys for analysis. The analysis in this study focused on teachers' beliefs about their students. Specifically, we wanted to understand how teachers perceived the skills of in-district students and out-of-district students. To analyze data collected by the survey, we conducted a paired samples *t*-test, which measured the statistical significance of differences between dependent samples (Coladarci & Cobb, 2014).

Researcher Positionality

Ravitch and Carl (2016) call on researchers to reflect on how their own social location, positionality, and life experiences shape their meaning-making process and contribute to the assumptions and biases they bring to their research. The absence of this reflexivity has the potential to threaten the validity of a study and pose additional harm to communities of marginalized students who may already be defined by deficit ideologies (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2016). As a White, middle-class male, I (first author) am concerned about the so-called opportunity gaps that Milner (2010) claims contribute to the inequities that certain groups of students face in the U.S. education system. Specifically, I am motivated by the desire to better understand how systems, both ideological and structural, shape educational opportunities for all students. By writing about systemic racism in the United States as a White researcher, I am examining my own white privilege in an attempt to become "newly accountable" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 31). I also recognize my own limitations as a White scholar using a CRT framework and hope to follow in the path of others (e.g., Bergerson, 2003), not to advocate for my own interests or 'represent' Students of Color, but to fight against racism in educational settings.

Results

Changes at Desert High

To address our first research question about changes at Desert High School, we analyzed data provided by the ADE in order to identify trends between the 2010-2011 and 2016-2017 school years. Below we outline the effects of a mandatory interdistrict choice policy on student

demographics, academic achievement (standardized test scores and graduation rates), and behavioral referrals.

Student demographics. In 2016-2017, more than 2,500 total students were enrolled at Desert High, but the racial makeup of the student body looked very different than it did in years past (see Figure 1). From 2010-2011 to 2016-2017, the percentages of Black and Latinx students increased by 55% and 29%, respectively. During the same period, the number of White students decreased every year, with nearly 40% fewer White students attending in 2016-2017 than in 2010-2011. According to school administrators, these changes were the result of an interdistrict choice policy that attracted students from surrounding areas to Desert High, which had maintained an excellent reputation for academics (Principal, personal communication, 2016). Data provided by the school indicate that, in recent years, nearly 50% of students at Desert High come from other districts of residence.

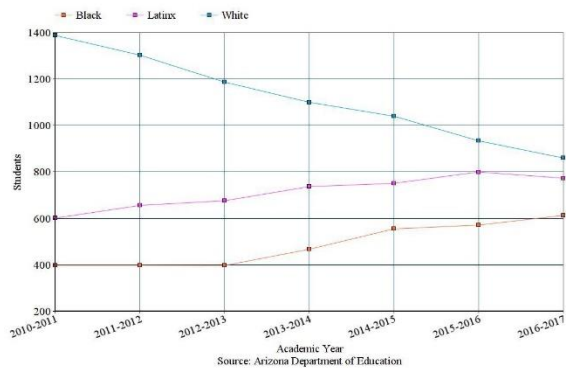


Figure 1. Student enrollment by race.

Academic achievement. Despite the administration’s concern about decreasing academic achievement due to demographic changes, standardized test scores at Desert High had changed very little over those years. Between 2010-2011 and 2013-14, the percentage of Desert High students passing the math, reading, writing, and science

sections of the Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) were almost identical (see Figure 2). In fact, the percentage of students passing the reading and writing sections of the exam actually increased during that time period. The percentage of students passing science was the only subject to decrease slightly between 2010-2011 and 2013-2014.

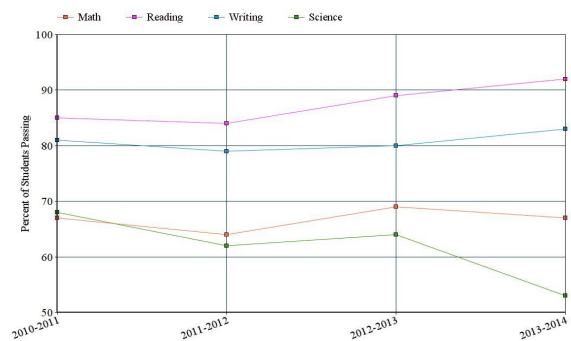


Figure 2. Percentage of Desert High students passing the AIMS exam by subject.

After 2014, when the AIMS exam was replaced with the AzMerit, student test scores continued to rise. The percentage of students passing the English language arts and math portions of the AzMerit improved drastically from 2014-2015 (17% and 19%) to 2015-2016 (37% and 47%). Yet, while increases in test scores might indicate improved academic achievement at Desert High from 2010-2011 to 2015-2016, graduation rates during the same time period paint a different picture (see Figure 3). This was measured using federal graduation rate data, which was reported in percentages (out of 100%) by the Arizona Department of Education. The graduation rate variable we utilize is a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, which includes standard high school diplomas, but excludes General Equivalency Diplomas. Comparing Desert High graduation rates between the 2010 and 2014 (the most recent year available) cohorts, the overall graduation rates for all

students declined, from 95% to 87%. Graduation rates for White students remained fairly constant, declining less than four percentage points between the years. However, graduation rates for Black students decreased significantly, from 98% in the 2010 cohort to 86% in the 2014 cohort. The drop in Latinx graduation rates was even more pronounced, from 94% in the 2010 cohort to 81% in the 2014 cohort.

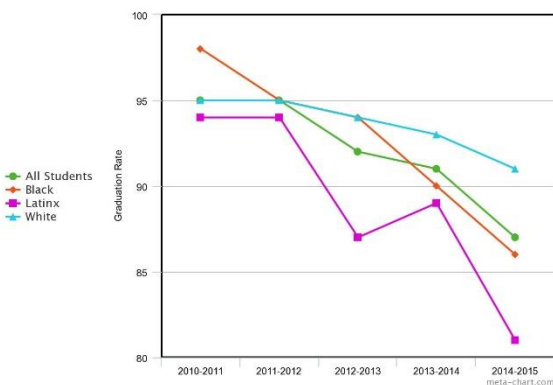


Figure 3. Graduation rates by race.

Behavioral referrals. In addition, Black students have been disproportionately subjected to out-of-school suspensions at Desert High (see Figure 4). The most recent discipline data available indicate that Black students accounted for nearly 45% of suspensions at Desert High School in the 2015-2016 academic year. This percentage of out-of-school suspensions is extremely high given that Black students made up less than 22% of the total student population in 2015-2016. This data supports findings from studies indicating that Black students are subjected to a disproportionate number of school disciplinary incidents (Gregory et al., 2010). Furthermore, the disproportionate rate of suspensions for Black students may also help to explain their lower graduation rate.

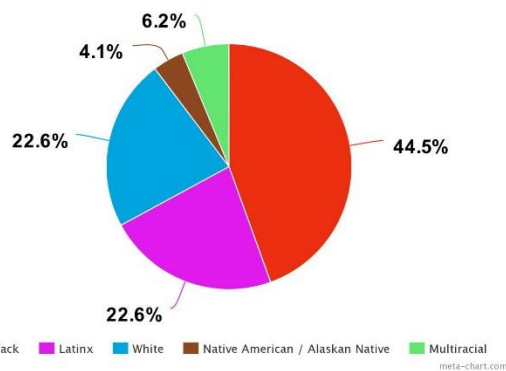


Figure 4. Out-of-school suspensions by race. Adapted from Civil Rights Data Collection (2016).

Perceptions of In-District and Out-of-District Students

To address our second research question, we analyzed survey data on teachers’ perceptions of their in- and out-of-district students. Table 1 details the results of the survey comparisons, which asked teachers at Desert High to rate the capabilities of in-district and out-of-district students. The second column provides participants’ average rating for in-district students and the third provides participants’ rating of out-of-district students. Rated on a scale of 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest), teachers rated out-of-district students significantly lower in all three categories: academic skills, communication skills, and behavioral skills (see Table 1). The *p*-values for these differences are all below the predetermined alpha level of .05, which is common in educational research (Coladarci & Cobb, 2014).

Table 2. Results of paired samples *t*-test.

Outcome	In-District	Out-of-District	P Value
Academic Skills	73.84 (13.49)	64.21 (16.91)	.000*
Communication Skills	73.02 (14.35)	65.4 (16.93)	.000*
Behavioral Skills	72.84 (14.57)	63.88 (17.52)	.000*

The average rating for in-district students’ academic skills (73.84) was

significantly higher than the rating for out-of-district students (64.21), $t(112) = 8.88$, $p < 0.05$, indicating that teachers rated in-district students nearly 9 scale points higher for academic skills. Interestingly, as more Students of Color transferred to Desert High from other districts, standardized test scores continued to rise. This relationship might suggest that teachers' ratings of academic skills had less to do with students' actual performance on exams and more to do with teachers' negative perceptions of out-of-district students, particularly those of color. The effects of teachers' negative perceptions are further evidenced by the fact that graduation rates for Students of Color decreased dramatically between the 2010 and 2014 cohorts, indicating that teachers' negative perceptions have real consequences in terms of students' academic achievement.

The average rating for communication skills was also significantly higher for in-district students (73.02) than out-of-district students (65.4), $t(110) = 7.011$, $p < 0.05$. As discussed previously, the vast majority of survey participants were White and had been teaching at Desert High for more than five years. Faced with a drastically more diverse student population in recent years, this finding indicates that teachers may be misinterpreting the verbal and physical expressions of Students of Color. Previous research suggests that these negative perceptions may exacerbate racial tensions at the school and lead to disproportionate rates of behavioral discipline for Students of Color (Gregory et al., 2010).

Finally, in-district students (72.84) were rated higher than out-of-district students (63.88) in behavioral skills, $t(109) = 7.092$, $p < 0.05$. Coupled with the increase in out-of-school suspensions for Students of Color at Desert High, this finding supports a growing body of literature that, in U.S. schools, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx Students are subjected to differentiated rules

and perceived as inferior to White students for not possessing valued (White) characteristics (e.g., Mills, 1997; Diamond et al., 2004; Gay, 2013). The negative perceptions of Students' of Color behavioral abilities may also be connected to their declining graduations rates at Desert High, as research suggests disciplinary interventions can impact students' motivation, attachment to school, and ability to participate in class (Gregory et al., 2010).

Secondary analyses were conducted that compared teacher ratings of students by teacher demographics. However, there were no differences in ratings of in- and out-of-district student skills in any of these domains based on teachers' age, race, gender, or years of teaching experience. Overall, our results reveal a significant global difference in teachers' beliefs about in-district and out-of-district students in all areas measured, which indicates that teachers perceive students coming from outside of the district—mostly Students of Color—as less capable in multiple domains than in-district students, who were predominantly White. These perceptions have reinforced the hierarchy entrenched in the educational racial contract that minimized the potential of Students of Color transferring to a well-resourced school district for better educational opportunities.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined demographic change as a result of interdistrict choice policies and teacher beliefs about in- and out-of-district students in a traditionally racially homogeneous, affluent high school in Arizona. Desert High offered an ideal case study to explore how the demographics of a school can change with these policies, and whether Students of Color entering from out-of-district areas were perceived similarly to students within district, who were

primarily White. Our findings are consistent with existing research that suggests that teachers view Students of Color as academically (e.g., Delpit, 2012; Diamond et al., 2004), communicatively (e.g., Ferguson, 2000; Tyler et al., 2006), and behaviorally (Gregory et al., 2010; Wallace et al., 2008) less capable than their White peers.

Although the phenomenon is not described in racial terms, the clearly changing demographics of the school suggests that teachers were discussing out-of-district students as a proxy for Students of Color. This deficit thinking about Students' of Color (in)abilities demotes them to *subpersonhood* at Desert High and grants privilege to those exhibiting characteristics or behaviors associated with being White (Leonardo, 2013). Despite interdistrict choice policies allowing students to attend schools of their choice, the persistent teacher beliefs suggest that out-of-district students are racialized and placed at risk for failure. Whether committed consciously or not, these racial attitudes have perpetuated structural inequities experienced by Students of Color and have significant implications for notions of educational expectations and equity-oriented policymaking.

Implications for Educational Expectations

Teacher expectations have long been linked with academic achievement. In his influential ethnographic study, Rist (2000) explains how a kindergarten teacher's expectations of her students contributed to the stratification of her classroom, which ultimately influenced students' behaviors and academic performance. As teachers' beliefs about students shape their academic expectations (e.g., Diamond et al., 2004; Rubie-Davies, 2010), our findings suggest

that interdistrict choice places Students of Color at a disadvantage at Desert High School.

Recently, scholars have explored the relationship between teacher expectations and academic performance of Students of Color. Delpit's (2012) study of classroom interactions between teachers and Black students described how lowered expectations for students led to less rigorous coursework and fewer academic opportunities. When Students of Color underperform as a result of low teacher expectations, it confirms teachers' initial beliefs and perpetuates a hierarchical racialized system in U.S. schools (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2016). Despite the influx of Black and Latinx students as a result of interdistrict choice at Desert High School, standardized test scores remained high, suggesting that out-of-district students were performing similarly to their classmates academically. However, teachers still rated out-of-district students as less capable, showing the persistence of their beliefs about Students of Color despite their actual performance on exams. The link between lowered perceptions and educational expectations may be related to the declining graduation rates of Students of Color at Desert High.

Implications for Equity

Given that interdistrict choice policies led to significant demographic changes in the student body at Desert High in recent years, the survey results point to teachers' beliefs about an increasingly diverse student body. Despite no decrease in test scores, school administrators repeatedly reported a decline in school climate. These results suggest that future educational policies aimed at increasing equity go beyond fostering competition between schools to improve educational outcomes for all students.

Policymakers might focus on creating teacher preparation programs centered on producing teachers who purposely work to improve equity with Students of Color in their classrooms (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016). Ladson-Billings (2000) stresses the importance of teachers using anti-deficit frameworks to reinforce students' identities and life experiences. The implications of negative teacher beliefs have been well documented and have long-lasting consequences for students, making the role of teachers even more important (Milner, 2010).

Implications for Policy

Given the potential of interdistrict choice policies to affect racial and socioeconomic characteristics of school districts (Carlson et al., 2011) and the assumption that teachers' perceptions of certain groups of students may perpetuate existing social inequalities in schools (Cherng, 2017), our findings hold significant implications for policymakers weighing the benefits and risks of school choice. At a time when policymakers, including the U.S. Secretary of Education, are encouraging the expansion of school choice programs throughout the United States, this study represents a significant step in exploring open enrollment policies as a means to address social and cultural stratification in U.S. schools. Our findings support previous work on the connections between teacher beliefs, student demographics, and teacher expectations (Cherng, 2017; Diamond et al., 2004), and indicate that negative perceptions of students may perpetuate long-standing social inequalities, even after Students of Color exercise choice to attend school in more advantaged districts. Through the process of rewarding certain groups of students for exhibiting characteristics or behaviors associated with being White, teachers may

legitimate the deficit perspectives that are often assigned to students from marginalized racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups and reinforce the racial contract that continues to portray Students of Color as less than their White counterparts. Before continuing to recommend and expand school choice policies, such as interdistrict choice, policymakers should better examine the social and systemic impact of these policies on the students they are purported to serve.

Limitations

Limitations to this research make continued exploration of this topic important. Teachers were asked to rate students as a whole and not individually, so the results reflect teacher impressions of in- and out-of-district students as a group and not individual student strengths or weaknesses. In addition, the three domains were explored with single items on the survey, and future research would benefit from exploring the nuances of each of these domains with multiple questions. The results reflect the beliefs of teachers in one school and may not be representative of teachers in other schools in which school choice has been established. Survey responses were also collected in the last month of an academic year, which may have had an impact on teachers' evaluations of their students. Additional research on this topic might collect survey responses at the beginning or middle of the academic year.

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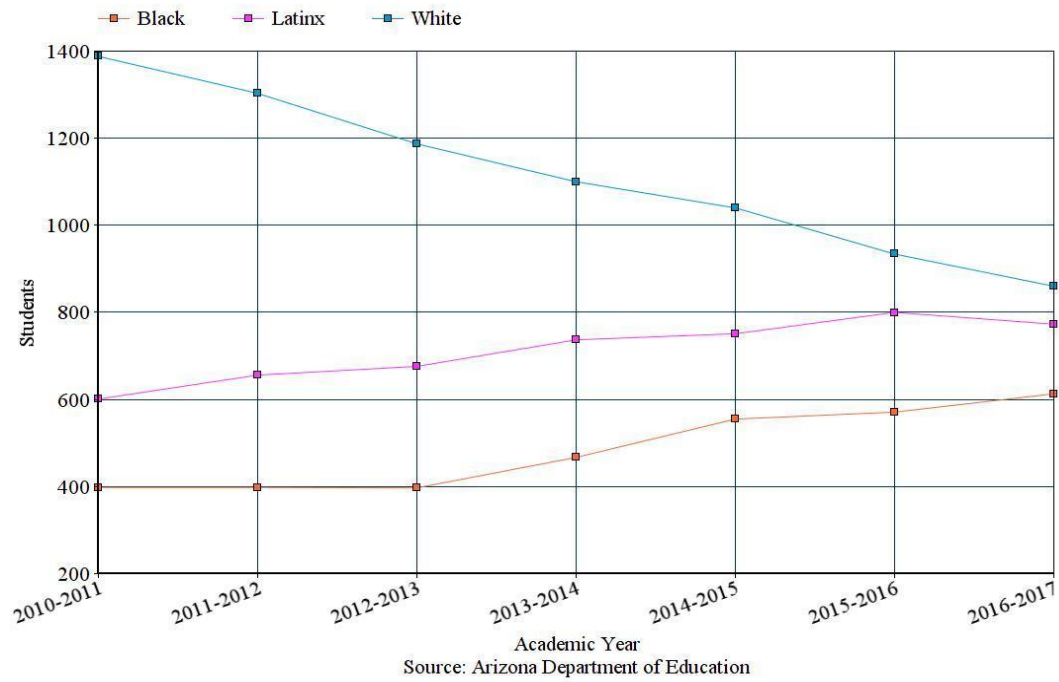
Appendix A

Table 1. *Survey items.*

Rate the abilities of your in-district students (0 = lowest, 100 = highest)											
	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Academic Skills											
Communication Skills											
Behavioral Skills											
Rate the abilities of your out-of-district students (0 = lowest, 100 = highest)											
	0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Academic Skills											
Communication Skills											
Behavioral Skills											

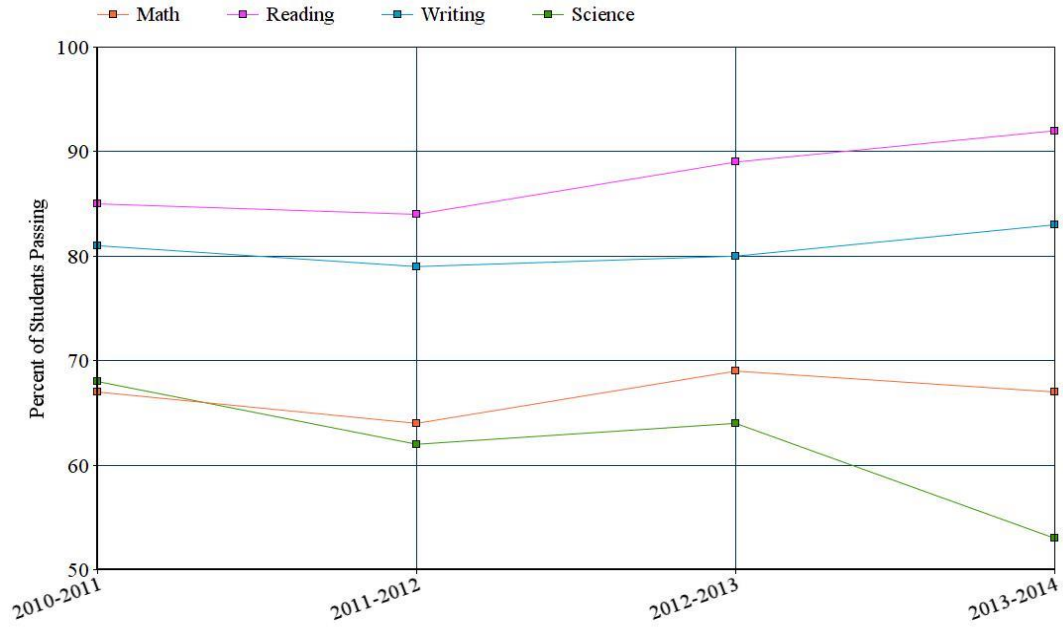
Appendix B

Figure 1. *Student enrollment by race.*



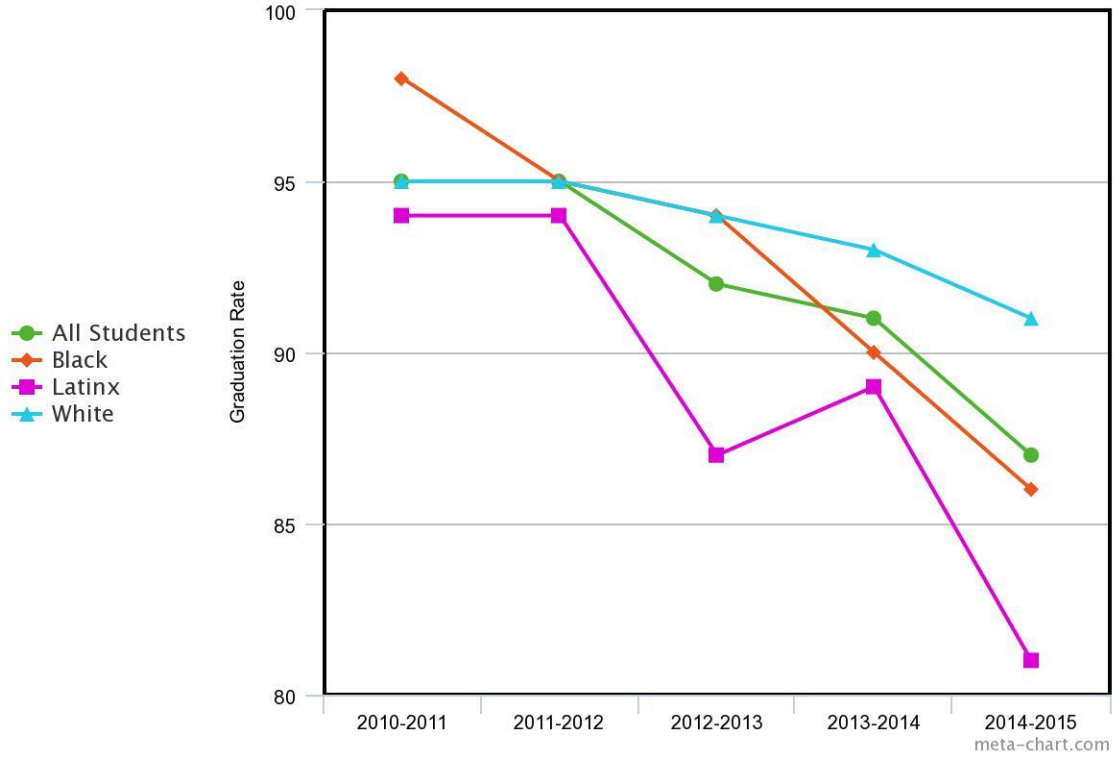
Appendix C

Figure 2. *Percentage of Desert High students passing the AIMS exam by subject.*



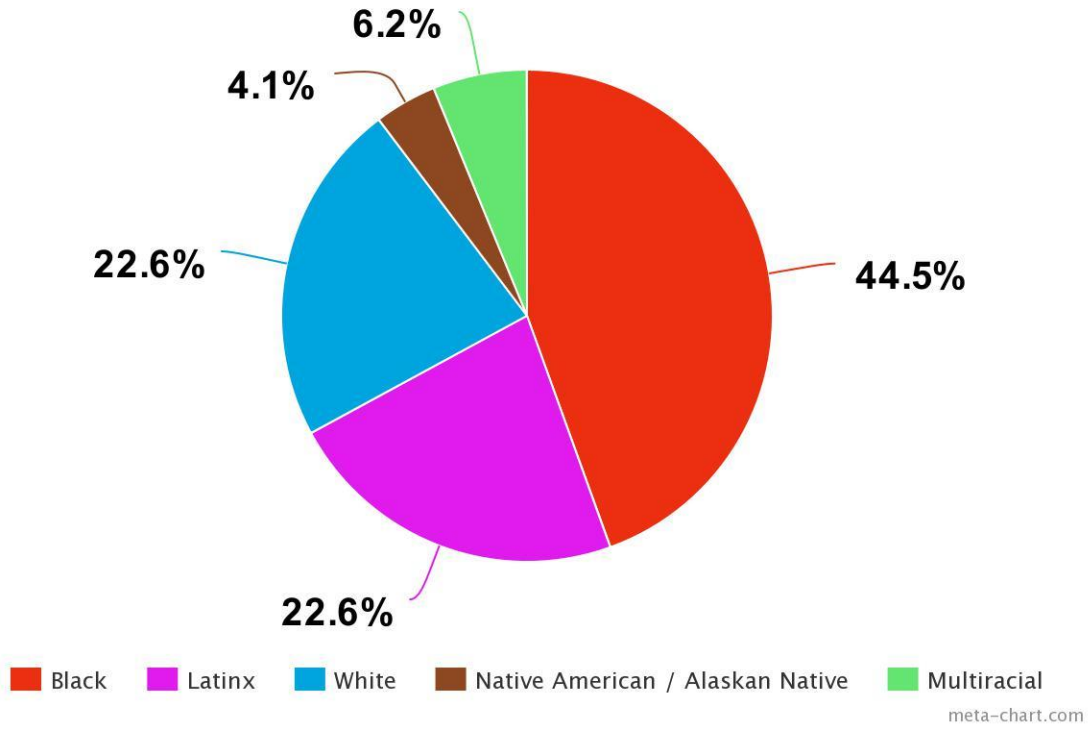
Appendix D

Figure 3. *Graduation rates by race.*



Appendix E

Figure 4. *Out-of-school suspensions by race. Adapted from Civil Rights Data Collection (2016).*



Appendix F

Table 2. *Results of paired samples t-test.*

Outcome	In-District	Out-of-District	P Value
Academic Skills	73.84 (13.49)	64.21 (16.91)	.000*
Communication Skills	73.02 (14.35)	65.4 (16.93)	.000*
Behavioral Skills	72.84 (14.57)	63.88 (17.52)	.000*