

Intra-district school choice, also known as open enrollment, has become an increasingly common feature of American large urban school districts. These policies give families the option of selecting public schools for their children that differ from their default, neighborhood schools; in some cases, open enrollment policies do away with default schools and ask that every family list a set of preferred schools (i.e. “mandatory choice” policies). Unfortunately, many schools in large urban school districts that have implemented these policies still serve a substantial majority of students from a single racial background. In order for open enrollment policies to have a positive effect upon racial integration in schools, it is necessary to understand what might limit their impact and under what (if any) conditions they can increase racial diversity.

This paper describes an agent-based model simulation of the school selection, assignment, and enrollment processes, and uses it to explore how families’ decisions, in conjunction with specific district policies, shape the racial composition of schools and the district itself in a large urban school district with open enrollment and mandatory choice policies. The ABM is built and calibrated using comprehensive data from school selections and enrollment decisions as well as the district’s assignment algorithm.

The baseline simulation depicts trends in enrollment absent any changes in policy, and shows that there is a large amount of anticipated stability in enrollment patterns over a ten year period. I then simulate trends in enrollment patterns under policy conditions that the district has or might consider implementing. I find that engagement efforts that successfully get all families in the district to participate in the school choice process has the largest positive impact on diversity in the district and that replacing information given to families about school achievement levels with school value-added measures causes the largest reduction in the gap between the achievement levels of the schools in which White and Asian students enroll and the

schools in which Black and Hispanic students enroll. Conversely, changes in the priority given to “low test score zones” negatively affect both diversity and racial disparities in enrolled school achievement levels.