

Responses to Mary Mann's Questions to Dr. Bing
Michael Alves and Nancy McArdle
Sept. 26, 2025

1. *Do you agree with The New Jersey Policy Institute that the expansion of the Interdistrict School Choice is "the best remedy to diversify schools"?*

Not as presently designed and implemented.

Since New Jersey's Interdistrict School Choice program was established in the 2000-2001 school year, there has been no evidence that the program, which allows students who reside in a particular public school district to voluntarily enroll in a school in another public school district, has worked to promote diversity and reduce racial/ethnic and socioeconomic isolation in any of the State's 23 intensely segregated school districts. Therefore, there is no basis to expect that expanding this program that currently has no provision or requirement for promoting racial/ethnic or socioeconomic integration would somehow promote diversity.

Interdistrict Magnet Schools

While there is no evidence that voluntary, interdistrict school choice policies without diversity provisions have worked in eliminating racial/ethnic and socioeconomic isolation, interdistrict magnet schools are viewed by civil rights advocates to be a potentially effective desegregation technique. The most frequently cited workable model for interdistrict magnet schools is the program resulting from the *Sheff v. O'Neill* desegregation case (filed 1989; decided 1996), which involved Hartford, CT and its surrounding suburbs. Although originally adjudicated as a race-conscious desegregation case, Sheff's interdistrict magnet schools currently enroll students based on a desegregative, multifaceted, controlled-choice, socioeconomic admissions policy that was designed by Michael Alves and his colleagues in 2019.

2. How could possible statewide remedies impact SOMSD's III?

The impact on SOMSD's III would depend on the terms of a statewide remedy and whether such a remedy would replace III or be implemented in conjunction with III. In the case of an interdistrict magnet school with a desegregative, multifaceted, controlled-choice, socioeconomic admissions policy, if SOMSD chose to participate (or if participation was mandated—unlikely), it is quite possible that SOMSD would enroll more low-income and racial/ethnic minority students from Newark and other predominately low-income communities, given that SOMSD has relatively high SES and low minority student population compared to those areas.

Without diversity requirements, the impact of expanding Interdistrict School Choice would hinge on program design—including whether transportation is provided and which districts participate. Research has shown that relatively high income students are more likely to take advantage of interdistrict choice and to exit from less advantaged contexts to more advantaged ones. Because SOMSD is a relatively advantaged and highly regarded district, it is probable that few students would choose to transfer out. However, it is possible that some (generally high SES) students living closer to Millburn might choose to transfer to that high-performing district, if possible. The odds of such transfers might be greater under a continuation of III, since SOMSD students are not guaranteed their closest SOMSD school and may find Millburn to be both nearby and desirable. At the same time, SOMSD, would be an attractive option for many students living in nearby but less advantaged districts, such as Newark. In the absence of diversity requirements, participation would likely skew toward more advantaged students from sending districts, with transfers into SOMSD concentrated among those families—particularly if transportation is not

offered. However, the precise effects on III and on SOMSD are difficult to predict without program specifics.

Expanding SOMSD III as a statewide remedy?

The SOMSD III nearest school, socioeconomic, desegregative student assignment policy is not likely or suitable to be adopted as a remedy for statewide segregation. However, the policy has tremendous transfer value for promoting intradistrict socioeconomic and racial/ethnic diversity in other school districts throughout New Jersey. Another possible intradistrict model is the controlled-choice student assignment plan which was originally adopted by the Montclair School District in 1985 and based on the race-conscious, controlled-choice plan developed for Cambridge, MA by Michael Alves in 1981.

3. What do you think has been the most successful aspect of III? Or is it too early to tell?

Among the most successful aspects of the III is that it has achieved socio-economic integration in a manner that has been both peaceful and effective. For example, in 2020-21, using the prior attendance-zone assignment method, the share of Kindergarten students at Seth Boyden Elementary who were Low SES was 43 percentage points above the District average (across all Kindergarten students). In contrast, by 2024-25, the share of Kindergarten students at Seth Boyden who were Low SES was just 4 percentage points above the District average. The III also dramatically reduced the significant over-representation of Black students and under-representation of White students at Seth Boyden that had existed prior to III's introduction.

Furthermore, by introducing integration one grade per year in elementary and middle schools, III allowed already-assigned students to stay at their assigned school (no forced moves).

Additionally, by incorporating the family-friendly feature of assigning newly enrolled students to the same school as their already enrolled sibling (if that is the family's preference), it has kept siblings together.

Can you talk about the importance of the Rutgers Recommendations in remedying access and equity issues?

The [Rutgers Recommendations](#) deal with a number of important issues related to access and equity, including: disparities in achievement, curriculum, discipline, special education, gifted/honor programs, intervention and referral services, as well as culture and climate. These are all critically important to ensuring that a school district is not only desegregated but also truly integrated and supports all students in reaching their full potential. However, our expertise is in creating plans that avoid socio-economic and racial isolation across schools. Therefore, while we affirm the efforts of the Rutgers plan, commenting on its specific provisions is beyond the scope of our expertise.

4. You've signaled possible potential changes to III, such as changing the variance percentage. Why are these changes necessary? How do we ensure they don't erode integration?

We believe that suggestions about potential changes to the III have come from the school board or perhaps from the administration. While we have not suggested substantive changes ourselves, we have aimed to be responsive to inquiries about the possible effects of changes to the III algorithm. For example, we were asked by a board committee to perform sensitivity analyses on

the effect of changing the SES variance percentage from +/-5 percentage points to +/-7.5 points and +/-10 percentage points. We believe that this request was motivated by a desire to have more children attend their closest school. **With regard to any potential change to the algorithm, it is critical to test its effects on integration.** In the case of increasing the SES variance, the estimated impact on the percentage of Kindergarten students being assigned to their closest school was modest. In our beta test using a +/-5 pct. point variance, 56% of students were assigned to their closest school. With a +/-10 pct. point variance, 59% of students were assigned to their closest school. At the same time, the percentage of Low SES students assigned to Seth Boyden went from 5.1 pct. points above the Kindergarten average to 9.9 pct. points above the average. Weighing the relative costs and benefits to algorithm changes is a key responsibility of the school board and administration.