

Presentation at New York City Council, Committee on Education, Hearing on Diversity in New York City Schools

December 11, 2014

New York City Council Chambers - City Hall

Ujju Aggarwal, Introduction to presentations by representatives from D3, D1, and D13

Good morning, my name is Ujju Aggarwal, and for over a decade, I have worked in Community School District 3. I am pleased to be here today to share the work that we in District 3 along with our partners in Districts 1 and 13 have been doing.

In addition to my long-time work in District 3, I am now a professor of public policy, and my research examines the post-Brown v. Board of Education policies and mechanisms that continue to produce what some have termed our apartheid education system, a term quite applicable to New York City's public schools. Indeed, New York State's public schools have been documented to be the most segregated in the country, and NYC's public school system is now ranked as the third most segregated school system in the country. Moreover, sixty years after the U.S. Supreme Court determined that separate but equal could never be so, the separation of New York City's students based on race and income continues to impact the futures of over one million students. This is not a matter of mere diversity or multiculturalism. Rather, it is a matter of racial justice. The separation of students by race, class, and language is directly tied to unequal learning environments, resources, curricula, school facilities, personnel, and more—which in turn, impact students' academic achievement levels. The federal guidelines issued by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (March 2014) argue just the same: that disparities in access to educational resources have negative effects on student learning.

Today, we have come here to share with you our joint policy initiative that we believe will successfully desegregate our public schools in Districts 1, 3, and 13 --- three districts that are at once extremely diverse and yet horribly segregated and strikingly unequal.

As we know, understanding the ways that race and class based inequities manifest in different contexts is of the utmost importance to knowing how to change the structures of segregation. As such, those rooted in local communities provide invaluable expertise that must not be underestimated. Based on this understanding, in our districts, we have engaged in long processes of dialogue, discussion, and research to build censuses about what the problems are facing our local schools and what can be done to fix them.

In each of our districts, we have come to the conclusion that a district-wide "controlled choice" policy is the best way forward.

As many of you know, controlled choice is an acclaimed and successful assignment methodology that was developed in the 1980s by Michael Alves and others in Cambridge, MA, as a way to voluntarily desegregate schools and avoid the imposition of court-ordered student assignment policies. Controlled choice has been implemented in over 30 school districts across the United States to respond to systemic segregation.

Based on our research, we have found that controlled choice is an educationally sound, transparent, and equity-driven method of assigning students to public schools.

Moreover, within five years of implementing a comprehensive, transparent, and equity driven controlled choice student assignment plan, all schools within a given district: 1) provide high-quality educational opportunities that encourage every student to thrive; 2) meet benchmarked goals for diversity; and 3) ensure that all schools are well-utilized and resourced.

We are confident that with the proper support and resources, Districts 1, 3, and 13 can be an effective pilot project that demonstrates the capacity for public schools to equitably serve and reflect diverse student populations. We were happy to share a proposal for this pilot with the Office of the Council to the Mayor earlier this year.

Representatives from our respective districts will now share updates with you on the groundwork we have established in each of our districts.

Thank you for your time, and we hope that you will join us: the need for change could never be more clear; it is now our responsibility to make it happen.