



## Study of the Voluntary Public School Choice Program: Interim Report



**Study of the  
Voluntary Public School Choice Program  
Interim Report**

For

U.S. Department of Education  
Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development

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## PREFACE

This report, *Study of the Voluntary Public School Choice Program Interim Report*, discusses the evaluation findings during the first three years of implementation of the Voluntary Public School Choice (VPSC) Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Education.

The report is part of an ongoing national evaluation of the VPSC Program being conducted by COSMOS Corporation. Robert K. Yin of COSMOS Corporation is the project director, and he, along with Pirkko Ahonen and Dawn Kim, authored the present document. The evaluation is supported under a task order and contract with the Department. Adrienne Hosek of the Department's Policy and Program Studies Service served as the contracting officer's representative during the preparation of this report.





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **The National Evaluation of the Voluntary Public School Choice (VPSC) Program**

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*<sup>1</sup> expanded public school choice opportunities for students, particularly for those attending schools in need of improvement. The new accountability requirements in Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* (Title I, Section 1116[b]) require districts to offer public school choice to students in Title I schools that are identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring as a result of not meeting state definitions for adequate yearly progress (AYP) (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).<sup>2</sup> In addition, Congress created the VPSC Program (Title V, Subpart 3, Section 5241) to support the emergence and growth of choice initiatives across the country. The purpose of the program is to assist states and local school districts in the development of innovative strategies to expand options for students, and to encourage transfers of students from low-performing to higher-performing schools.

The VPSC Program functions independently from the choice provisions in Title I and provides funds to a relatively small number of sites across the country. In October 2002, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) awarded five-year grants to 13 applicants. Awards ranged in size from \$3.4 million to \$17.8 million for an average award of \$9.2 million, or approximately \$1.8 million per year. The VPSC-funded sites included: the state of Arkansas; Albany, N.Y.; Chicago, Ill.; the state of Florida; Hartsdale, N.Y.; Hillsborough County, Fla.; La Quinta, Calif.; Miami, Fla.; the state of Minnesota; Swanzey, N.H.; New Haven, Conn.; Portland, Oreg.; and Rockford, Ill.

This report presents interim findings from the National Evaluation of the VPSC Program, covering the first three years of implementation, from the fall of 2002 through the summer of 2005. Over a five-year period, the congressionally mandated evaluation is charged with assessing the program's progress in meeting the goals and fulfilling the intent of the VPSC Program's legislation. As directed by Congress, the evaluation addresses three central questions:

- 1) What are the characteristics of the VPSC Program's grantees?
- 2) How and to what extent does the VPSC Program promote educational equity and excellence?

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<sup>1</sup> The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (P.L.107-110) amended the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*.

<sup>2</sup> The law requires that if all schools in a district have not made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for two or more consecutive years, the district shall, "to the extent practicable," establish a cooperative agreement of transfer with other districts in the surrounding area (U.S. Department of Education, February 2004, p. 17).

3) What academic achievement is associated with the VPSC Program?

Question one relates to basic descriptive information about the program sites and their implementation strategies, including activities related to community outreach and capacity-building within participating schools.

Question two relates to the stated goals of the VPSC legislation, which stipulated four priorities in the selection of sites:

- (a) Provide the widest possible choice to students in participating schools,
- (b) Promote transfers of students from low-performing to higher-performing schools,
- (c) Include interdistrict partnerships to allow students to transfer to a school in another district from their original school, and
- (d) Require sites to use funds to support student transportation services or costs (on the assumption that this would more likely enable students to attend more distant schools).

The extent the program met the goal of providing “the widest possible choice to students” is measured by the overall student participation and participation rates in the VPSC Program’s choice initiatives. When available, the report also presents data on the numbers of transfers from low- to higher-performing schools, and evidence of interdistrict partnerships and transportation costs. By design, these priorities do not necessarily reflect the only ways in which an evaluation could define “educational equity and excellence.” However, they link directly to the legislation’s stated priorities for implementation. Exploring other definitions and collecting data to address them were beyond the scope of the evaluation.

Question three pertains to Congress’s interest in having the evaluation investigate the achievement outcomes associated with the VPSC Program. The current report includes a discussion of the efforts to date to collect achievement data. The results of this analysis will be presented in the final report.

## **Main Findings**

The evaluation is based on a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods (see chapter 2 of this report). Among other features, it draws from multiple data sources, including site visits, surveys, program documents, and student achievement records. Data collection will continue through the end of the five-year grant cycle, which ends in the spring of 2007. The evaluation data suggest the following interim trends regarding the VPSC Program’s choice activities, student enrollment, and progress on its priorities.

## Characteristics of the VPSC Sites

The 13 VPSC sites are located in various parts of the country. Ten sites are located in predominantly urban areas, two in areas that cover both urban and rural regions, and one in an entirely rural area. Ten of the locales represent a residential population of over 100,000 people each. The public school student populations in the communities are mostly diverse and poor. Nonwhite students comprise over 60 percent of the student population at seven school systems represented by the sites. Similarly, over 60 percent of the students are eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program<sup>3</sup> at seven of the sites.

The sites vary greatly in the design of their choice initiatives; they differ widely in the number of students served, the number of participating public schools, and the capacity to accommodate transfers. In addition, they differ by how they define choice zones and manage the flow of students among participating schools. Despite this variation, sites have pursued some common paths.

First, although unique, school choice initiatives tended to fall under four major categories based on how sites have defined choice arrangements and directed the flow of transferring students:

- Five of the sites designated specific schools to be either sending schools or receiving schools but not both.
- Five sites defined initiatives whereby the same schools could be both sending and receiving.
- One site established a within-school initiative, in which students choose from education programs within the same school and do not transfer between schools.
- Two sites have initiatives that have involved a mixture of the first three types.

Second, all sites focused on two core activities throughout the implementation process: 1) engaging parents and community members; and 2) building capacity at schools to attract and accommodate choice transfers. As part of the parent and community activity, sites' actions went beyond a rich array of outreach, marketing, and communication efforts. The sites also engaged parents and community representatives in developing and implementing the choice initiatives.

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<sup>3</sup> The Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program is part of the National School Lunch Program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The program provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 26 million students each school day. Children from families with incomes at or below 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. For the period July 1, 2004, through June 30, 2005, 185 percent of the poverty level was \$34,873 for a family of four (USDA, 2004).

As part of the capacity-enhancing activity, sites started new academic programs or subjects, purchased supplies and equipment for schools, and provided professional development to teaching staffs. However, none of the sites reported hiring more staff or taking other steps simply to expand the number of seats. The sites' capacity-enhancing activities were therefore not necessarily accompanied by an increase in the number of seats or classrooms at the receiving schools.

## **Educational Equity and Excellence**

The first three years of the VPSC Program has produced considerable participation on the part of enrolling students. The sites' experiences have been as follows:

***Participants.*** The numbers of eligible students, applicants, and enrollees in the VPSC Program all have increased during the first three years of the program.

- The number of VPSC sites enrolling students each year has steadily increased. Out of 13 sites total, the number has increased from five the initial year, to ten and 12 in years 2 and 3 respectively.
- The capacity within sites to accommodate greater numbers of enrollees has increased over time, from 1,087 students in 2002–03 to 7,445 students in 2003–04, and to 16,163 students in 2004–05 (see figure 1).

***Participation rates.*** Over the VPSC Program's first three years, there were also increases in the rates of participation, measured by three ratios, the number of: 1) enrolling to applying students; 2) applying to eligible students; and 3) enrolling to eligible students.

- The proportion of enrolling students to those who applied increased from 47.4 percent in 2003–04 to 56.9 percent in 2004–05.
- Similarly, the proportion of eligible students who applied increased from 2.1 percent to 3.3 percent during the same period.
- The enrollment-to-eligible ratio showed the greatest rate of increase, from 0.5 percent in 2002–03 and 1.0 percent in 2003–04, to 1.9 percent in 2004–05. This rate is similar to those experienced at the outset of other public school choice initiatives, including those implemented under the Title I accountability provisions in the *NCLB Act of 2001*.

***Variety of choices among educational programs.*** Progress has been substantial on the first of the four priorities. The variety of educational programs within the VPSC-funded initiatives and among other non-VPSC initiatives at each site has meant that students can choose from a large and diverse number of academic programs.

## Exhibit ES-1

### Eligible, Applying, and Enrolling Students During the First Three Years of the VPSC Program (Fall 2002 to Summer 2005)

Enrollment School Year	No. of sites enrolling students	Eligible		Applying		Enrolling	
		No. of sites reporting	No. of students	No. of sites reporting	No. of students*	No. of sites reporting	No. of students
2002-03	5	4	219,690	5	1,391	5	**1,087
2003-04	10	10	**755,387	10	**15,721	10	**7,445
2004-05	12	11	862,396	11	28,388	11	16,163

\*Applicant count is based on the number of applications received by the sites.

\*\*Estimates of participant numbers differ from earlier reports. Adjustments to the earlier estimates are based on new information from the sites, as of August 2005.

#### ***Transfer of students from low-performing schools to higher-performing schools.***

These transfers are likely to have comprised only a portion of the students enrolled in the VPSC initiatives. First, fewer than half of the VPSC sites have created choice arrangements with predesignated sending and receiving schools, and of these, only four have limited their enrollment to transfers from low- to higher-performing schools.

Second, the majority of the sites permit a mixture of transfers that are not limited to students moving from low- to higher-performing schools. Moreover, the sites permitting this mixture have not always distinguished the portion of transfers from low- to higher-performing schools. Of those that did, only 5 percent of their students had transferred from low- to higher-performing schools.

Overall, combining these sites with those with predesignated sending and receiving schools, the low- to higher-performing transfers only represent 13.8 percent of the total transfers. However, the actual portion could be larger or smaller, depending on the nature of the transfers at the sites that did not track or document the pattern of their transfers.

***Implementation of interdistrict approaches.*** Only four of the 13 sites provide interdistrict options, allowing students to transfer to schools outside their home district.

***Student transportation services or costs.*** Relative to enrollment, transportation costs did not increase proportionately as might have been expected, as the VPSC initiatives permitted many students who were already attending distant schools to select schools closer to home.

## **Academic Achievement**

The final report for the National Evaluation of the VPSC Program will contain results of the analysis of student achievement records collected over the entire period of program implementation. The analysis will look at both school and student level performance when possible, to assess the achievement outcomes associated with the VPSC Program.

- **Individual-Level Student Achievement Data.** The evaluation will attempt to compare the achievement outcomes of students enrolled in the VPSC-funded initiative to a similar group of students who did not enroll. The analysis will be limited to sites that have detailed and accurate records for individual students enrolled in the program and those in the comparison group. In preparation for the final report, the VPSC sites are now receiving technical assistance for collecting individual-level student achievement data. However, there are several issues with data quality and reliability, which may restrict future analysis.
- **Systems-Level Student Achievement Data.** The final report will also measure performance trends for schools participating in the initiative. The achievement outcomes of students in these schools will be compared to students in a similar group of schools not participating in the initiative.

## **Useful Choice Practices**

A major motive underlying the creation of the VPSC Program is the hope that the sites' experiences might serve as models to districts across the country wanting to initiate or strengthen their own public school choice options and practices. Even at this early stage, several potentially useful practices have emerged from the program. Part of the national evaluation's work has been to document these and other workable strategies. These strategies include the design of choice initiatives; parent involvement in choice arrangements; and capacity-enhancing activities to augment or strengthen schools' educational programs. In this manner, the VPSC Program's experiences can ultimately help to strengthen public school choice initiatives across the country.

## 1. OVERVIEW

### **The National Evaluation of the Voluntary Public School Choice (VPSC) Program**

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*<sup>4</sup> expanded public school choice opportunities for students, particularly for those attending schools in need of improvement. The new accountability requirements in Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* (Title I, Section 1116[b]) require districts to offer public school choice to students in Title I schools that are identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring as a result of not meeting state definitions for adequate yearly progress (AYP) (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).<sup>5</sup> In addition, Congress created the VPSC Program (Title V, Subpart 3, Section 5241) to support the emergence and growth of choice initiatives across the country. The purpose of the program is to assist state and local school districts in the development of innovative strategies to expand options for students, and to encourage transfers of students from low- to higher-performing schools.

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- 1) What are the characteristics of the VPSC Program's grantees?
- 2) How and to what extent does the VPSC Program promote educational equity and excellence?

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## Exhibit 1

### Location of the Voluntary Public School Choice (VPSC) Grantees

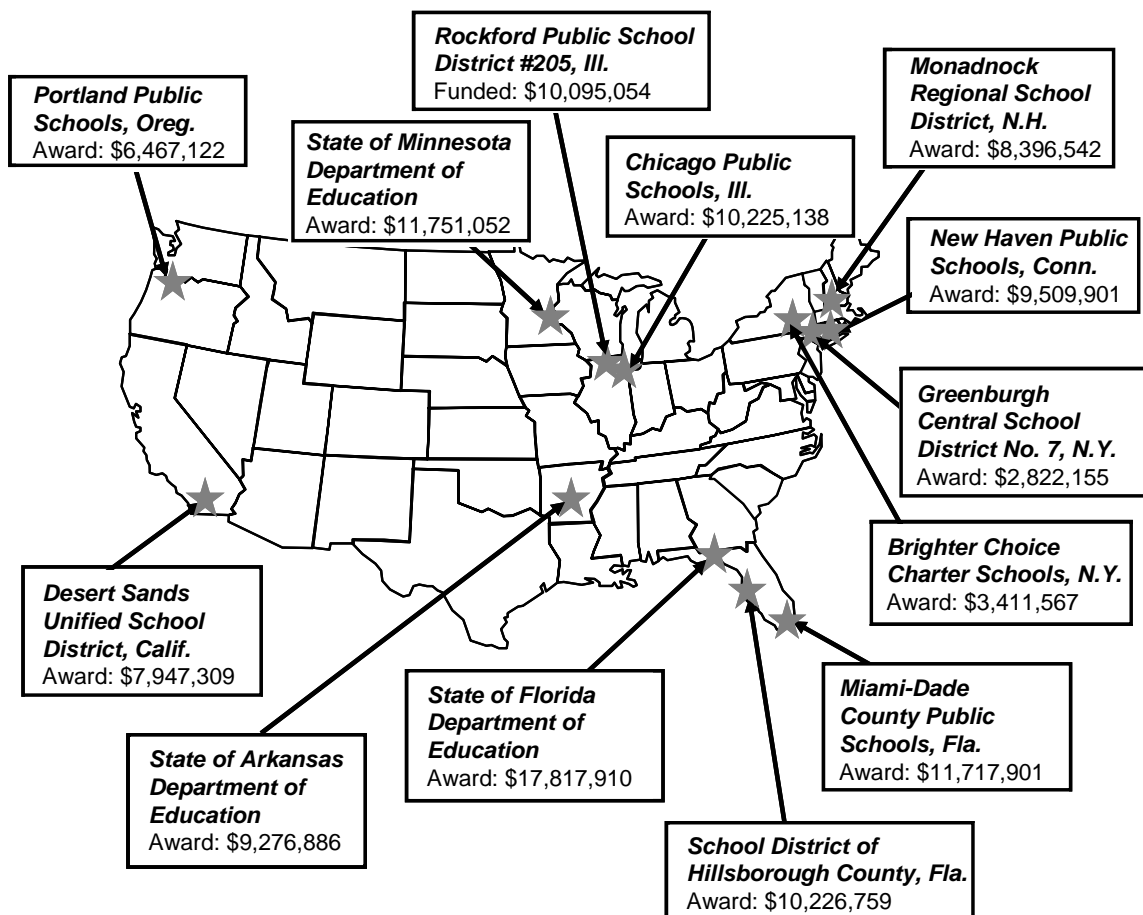


Exhibit Reads: One of the 13 VPSC sites is in Portland, Oreg., and received a five-year VPSC award of \$6,467,122.

### 3) What academic achievement is associated with the VPSC Program?

Question one relates to basic descriptive information about the program sites and their implementation strategies, including activities related to community outreach and capacity-building within participating schools.

Question two relates to the stated goals of the VPSC legislation, which stipulated four priorities in the selection of sites:

- (a) Provide the widest possible choice to students in participating schools,

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The extent the program met the goal of providing “the widest possible choice to students” is measured by the overall student participation and participation rates in the VPSC Program’s choice initiatives. When available, the report also presents data on the numbers of transfers from low- to higher-performing schools, and evidence of interdistrict partnerships and transportation costs. By design, these priorities do not necessarily reflect the only ways in which an evaluation could define “educational equity and excellence.” However, they link directly to the legislation’s stated priorities for implementation. Exploring other definitions and collecting data to address them were beyond the scope of the evaluation.

Question three pertains to Congress’s interest in having the evaluation investigate the achievement outcomes associated with the VPSC Program. The current report includes a discussion of the efforts to collect achievement data and a plan for analysis. The results of this analysis will be presented in the final report.

The current report analyzes data from multiple sources using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. The evaluation team conducted field studies of VPSC Program and comparison sites during the 2003–04 and 2004–05 school years, when team members visited administrative offices, parent information centers, and two participating schools at each site. In addition, the team carried out surveys of schools involved with the VPSC initiatives in both years, to corroborate the implementation of the VPSC initiatives at the school level. The evaluation also draws from program documents and student achievement records from the first three years of implementation. Data collection will continue through the end of the five-year grant cycle, which concludes in the fall of 2007.

Chapter 1 of the report outlines the purpose of the national evaluation, introduces the VPSC Program, and reviews previous research on public school choice.

Chapter 2 presents the methodology of the national evaluation.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed analysis of the characteristics of the VPSC Program and VPSC sites. This chapter categorizes sites by four types of choice arrangements, describes the schools participating in the choice initiatives, and documents the important program practices.

Chapter 4 reports the progress being made by the VPSC Program to provide greater opportunities for students to participate in public school choice. The chapter examines trends in eligibility, applications, and enrollment at the sites. In addition, it discusses the degree to which choice has provided students greater opportunity to move from low-performing to higher-performing schools.

Finally, chapter 5 of the report summarizes the interim findings and their implications for the program, policymaking, and future research. The chapter also identifies useful choice practices that may be emerging from the VPSC Program. The evaluation will continue to monitor these practices as possible suggestions for other districts to emulate in designing their own choice initiatives.

## **Previous Research**

Public school choice under the VPSC Program is one of several ways of providing students with optional schooling opportunities (e.g., Ravitch and Viteritti, 1997; and Henig and Sugarman, 1999). Other opportunities include publicly funded vouchers, tax credits, or tax deductions that can be used for public or private schools; privately funded school choice; dual enrollment; home-schooling; and privately operated public schools such as the Edison schools (e.g., Fuller and Elmore, 1996; Hill, Pierce, and Guthrie, 1997; Education Commission of the States, 2001; Heritage Foundation, 2001; Greene, 2002; Moe, 2003; and Betts and Loveless, 2005).

All of these efforts seek to improve educational outcomes. These outcomes include the opportunity to attend better schools, hopefully leading to improved student learning. Additional benefits include improved matches between educational offerings and students' interests.

At the same time, choice initiatives have created debate because of their possible association with other, less valued by-products. A major concern has to do with the possible increase in social stratification (i.e., the extent to which schools undesirably differ according to racial or ethnic distinctions) of students across schools,<sup>6</sup> either by racial and ethnic distinctions or by social class distinctions. Whether and how such stratification occurs (e.g., Lee and Burkam, 2002; and Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor, 2003) or can be avoided in the design of choice initiatives in the first place (e.g., Willie, Edwards, and Alves, 2002; Scott, 2005; and Gill, 2005) remains a subject of debate and continued inquiry.

In some cases, these or other concerns have resulted in community resistance to choice options (e.g., Moe, 2003). For instance, suburban homeowners have expressed displeasure over the potential threat to their property values posed by shifting school enrollments (Nechyba, 2003; and Reback, 2005).

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<sup>6</sup> To give but one example from a much more extensive literature, a recently completed study of magnet schools examined but found little income-based stratification associated with the presence of magnet school choice (Archbald, 2004).

***Public school choice initiatives can vary considerably.*** Nevertheless, with the hope of attaining the claimed benefits, school systems across the country have been implementing an increasing array of public school choice initiatives. The initiatives follow no single model and vary considerably. Whatever the case, the choices are to be among public schools (only) and should be distinguished from initiatives offering choices for both public and private schools (including schools with religious affiliations).

Among the choice initiatives limited to public schools, possibly the most common variants, found widely across the country, have been *magnet programs* and *charter schools*. The magnet programs permit schools to offer a standard curriculum but then to specialize in certain subjects or use learning themes to attract students (e.g., Christenson et al., 2003). Charter schools are publicly funded but operate independently of school districts and can define their own instructional programs (e.g., Loveless, 2002; Miron and Nelson, 2002; Finnigan et al., 2004; and Ross, 2005).<sup>7</sup>

Though less frequently found, the broadest arrangement among public schools calls for *open enrollment*. In this arrangement, school systems do not initially assign students to any school. Rather, students express their preferences during the preceding spring semester by applying to any of the public schools in the system. One of the oldest, districtwide open enrollment arrangements has been in place in Cambridge, Mass., since 1981 (Peterkin, 1991; and Willie, Edwards, and Alves, 2002). As another example, students at Community District Four of New York City (Teske et al., 2000) submit applications, listing up to six schools they wish to attend. About 60 percent of the students usually receive their first choice (Cookson and Shroff, 1997).

Another arrangement offers *transfer* options, in which students can apply to enroll at a public school other than their assigned school. Districts may restrict the number of applications, based on the availability of seats at receiving schools or on other pre-stipulated criteria. The restrictions effectively limit the number of choices and students able to participate in the arrangement. When transfers occur, they are considered to be from a *sending* school to a *receiving* school. A common policy objective is to define low-performing schools as the desired set of sending schools and higher-performing schools as the desired set of receiving schools.

Additional variation among choice initiatives arises from the extent of regional cooperation in an initiative. The choice arrangements may exist within a single district alone (*intra*-district) or between two or more districts (*inter*-district). In some cases, choice options may cover the whole state, such as the initiatives in Minnesota (Cookson and Shroff, 1997; and Boyd, Hare, and Nathan, 2002); Wisconsin (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1999); or Colorado (Benigno, 2000). Conversely, the options may pertain only to a small set of schools inside a geographic zone within a district.

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<sup>7</sup> Because of the nature of the VPSC Program, the review does not try to address the vast literatures on specific forms of school choice, including school voucher initiatives, magnet school programs, or charter schools.

Finally, arrangements vary according to their application processes, selection procedures, coverage of transportation and tuition costs, and other administrative procedures. For instance, districts can offer choice options to students at every grade level or only for certain entry grades. As another administrative variation, once exercising a choice, a student may be able to continue through the entire feeder set of schools or may have to reapply when moving, from elementary to middle or from middle to high school. Districts also may offer different options by grade level. For example, many districts have zonal limits for elementary and middle schools but districtwide choices for high schools. As a final feature, analysts also have given considerable attention to the nature of outreach efforts and the amount and type of the information needed by families and students to make appropriate educational choices (e.g., Hamilton and Guin, 2005).

All these and other variations serve as a backdrop to the initiatives implemented under the VPSC Program. The program has provided a continuing opportunity for local districts to expand or start new choice initiatives through its funding support and technical assistance. The lessons learned from the VPSC Program can suggest improved ways for districts across the country to implement the expanded Title I choice options in the future.

***Public school choice has drawn increasing policy interest because of its possible association with desired educational benefits at two levels.*** Such benefits may occur regardless of the particular variation in choice arrangement.

At the first level, the academic performance for participating students may improve, in part because they have chosen schools associated with high achievement (e.g., Cullen, Jacob, and Levitt, 2005). Student performance also may improve because students are able to choose schools with programs more closely match personal and career interests (e.g., Hastings, Kane, and Staiger, 2005 and 2006).

Although an increasing number of studies have examined the benefits to participating students, no consistent findings have emerged. For instance, small or no gains in student achievement have been reported, and changes in other aspects of student performance, such as dropout and suspension rates, also have been mixed (e.g., Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor, 2003; and Cullen, Jacob, and Levitt, 2005). Overall, one review of choice outcomes by a panel of experts concluded that:

“...Existing research paints a mixed and complicated picture. Choice could indeed lead to the benefits its supporters expect, or the harm its opponents fear. If so, the effects, both positive and negative, are less certain and more situation-dependent than advocates on either side acknowledge” (National Working Commission, 2004, p. 23).

At the second level, the presence of choice options in a system may lead to the improvement of every school in the system. Presumably, schools will compete to retain and attract students if their budgets are linked to enrollment levels (e.g., Goldhaber et al., 2005). Thus, much of the interest in school choice, including public school choice, is related to a sensitivity to economic market conditions and greater competition among schools, leading to improved performance or what Hoxby (2001) calls “school productivity” (e.g., Chubb and Moe, 1990; Belfield and Levin, 2002; Moe, 2003; and Betts, 2005).

Competition can affect all schools in a system, even if the number of students actually enrolling in a choice initiative is low. For instance, nearly 95 percent of Arizona public school students remain in district schools, despite a proliferation of charter schools. The charters do not replace the district schools, but they push the district schools to compete, to win back the charter parents (Center for Education Reform, cited by National Working Commission, 2004, p. 27). Hoxby (2002), noting that choice is about school *supply*, points to the fact that the *threat of competition* matters and can be demonstrated through economic models. Thus, even with a small number of transferring students, all schools in a system may still try to improve themselves because of the threat that more students would want to leave in the future, should such improvement not occur.

Systemwide effects are nevertheless not easily detected. The most potent situation may occur when students’ tuitions and other costs are transferred directly as a result of students exercising choice (e.g., National Working Commission, 2004). The Seattle Public Schools has long used a choice arrangement whereby such costs not only transfer but are *weighted*: Students in special education, as well as in other special categories requiring more schooling efforts, have larger tuitions associated with their transfer than students not in such categories. The weights are deliberately defined so that schools cannot have a balanced budget if they do not attract any such students. Under these circumstances, the Seattle system reports that schools do respond competitively (COSMOS, 2004).

Other choice initiatives that started in the 1990s also have reported systemwide effects. These include the open enrollment initiative in Cambridge, Mass., (Peterkin, 1991) and the response to a voucher (but not public school) initiative in Milwaukee (Gardner, 2002). In both of these two cases, the claims included increases in student achievement as well as gains in market share (the proportion of all K–12 students in a geographic area enrolled in the public school system). Similarly, District Four experienced significantly rising, annual test scores in reading and math from 1973 to 1996, compared to all other districts in New York City, in conjunction with the district’s expansion of its public school choice initiative (Teske et al., 2000).

Possibly the clearest system response to the threat of competition was reported by Greene (2001) in Florida. Starting in 1999–00, students attending schools that received two “F” grades in four years were eligible to receive opportunity scholarships to attend other schools. Greene’s study showed that schools receiving their first failing grade, facing the prospect of student out-transfers, exhibited exceptionally large gains in the proportion of their students passing the state assessment, to avoid receiving a second “F” designation.

At the same time, system effects may be small (e.g., Figlio and Rouse, 2006) or may not always be found (e.g., Nechyba and Heise, 2000). In addition, some of the systemic effects may not be desirable. For instance, schools may spend more time and money on public relations and the marketing of schools rather than on the needed academic programming (Powers and Cookson, 1999).

Because of their potential importance, the possibility of changes at either of the two levels deserves monitoring. The present evaluation is therefore using individual-level data to track possible changes among participating students and school-level data to track possible systemwide changes at any given VPSC site. The analyses of individual student level data are planned for the final report.

## 2. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The national evaluation follows mixed quantitative and qualitative methods, using data from a variety of original and archival sources. This breadth of information will help to address the three central evaluation questions previously presented in chapter 1.

### Evaluation Design

The evaluation design is a nested design. At the *school-level*, the relevant schools at each site can be depicted as a “system of schools.” The systems can consist of any combination of the following types of schools:

- (a) Schools *from* which students have transferred (*sending* schools);
- (b) Schools *to* which students have transferred (*receiving* schools);
- (c) Schools *to* which students have transferred *and from* which students have transferred (same schools are *both sending and receiving* schools); and
- (d) Schools eligible to serve as sending schools, receiving schools, or both sending and receiving but in which no transfers may have occurred (*other eligible* schools).

Aggregate (school-level) data will be collected about the trends in academic performance of these different types of schools, to permit comparisons. These data also will cover the demographic characteristics of the enrolled students.

At the *student-level* in the nested design, the relevant students include the following:

- (a) Students applying for transfer and then transferring (*enrollees*);
- (b) Students applying for transfer but not transferring, either by their own decision or because their applications could not be honored—e.g., due to a lack of seats (*applicants*); and
- (c) Students eligible to apply (*eligibles*).

The national evaluation will use student-level data, gathered by the 13 sites, to compare the trends among these groups of students.

**Definition of comparison sites.** For each of the VPSC sites, the evaluation team has selected a comparison site. The comparisons do not include schools that are any part of the “system” of schools participating in a VPSC initiative.



In addition to being outside of the “system” of schools, the selected comparison sites have several preferred characteristics. First, they were selected based on proximity to the VPSC site, using the following criteria:

- For sites that limit choice to a well-defined zone or zones in their district, the comparison site is a similar set of other schools outside of the zone(s) but in the same district;
- For sites whose choice initiatives cover the whole district, the comparison site is another district in the same state;
- For sites that cover multiple districts (e.g., a metropolitan area or a rural area), the comparison site is a similar kind of multiple-district area in the same state; and
- For statewide sites, the comparison sites are nonparticipating districts in the same state that are similar to the participating districts.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the comparison sites are comparable to the VPSC sites in academic performance, demographic characteristics, and enrollment size. In cases in which all three criteria could not be met, priority was given to the first two.

Third, the comparison sites had few available public school choice opportunities similar to the VPSC Program at the time of selection. However, the comparison sites are not “no treatment” sites. For instance, across the country, virtually every district offers magnet and charter schools, and these same choice programs exist at many of the VPSC sites. Similarly, eligible districts also must offer choice related to Title I provisions. Given these conditions, the general goal was to identify comparison sites that had no choice initiatives resembling those at the VPSC sites, as funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s VPSC Program.

***Definition of the initiatives being studied.*** The national evaluation defines the initiatives under evaluation as the ones being supported by VPSC funds. The use of VPSC funds has not only defined the initiatives of interest but also has helped focus on specific facets of the initiatives. For instance, for some of the 13 sites, the bulk of the funds were used to support and enhance parent information centers; other sites have invested heavily in parent outreach and media campaigns; yet others have provided funds for new educational programs at *receiving schools* to increase their capacity and attractiveness to serve transferring students. The use of funds also has usefully directed the national evaluation’s attention to more specific activities, while still attending to the overall VPSC choice initiatives at the 13 sites.

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<sup>8</sup> The fact that all districts are eligible to participate may create a complication. However, this complication was considered less troublesome than selecting sites from an entirely separate state, where the choice and other educational policy conditions could be entirely different.

At the same time, there are two complications that diminish the evaluation’s ability to determine a direct association between the VPSC Program and school or student outcomes.

***Other choice initiatives at the same site.*** First, the VPSC-funded initiative may not be the only public school choice initiative at a site. In fact, nearly all of the sites already had a variety of other initiatives ongoing, at the onset of the VPSC initiative. These other options included magnet and charter schools, Title I public school choice, and a variety of other choice options offered by the district or state. For instance, several of the VPSC sites are located in states that offer open enrollment to all students to attend any public school in the entire state. Overall, even when sites used VPSC funds exclusively to support the VPSC Program’s initiatives, they had other unrelated choice initiatives operating at the same time (see exhibit 2).

**Exhibit 2**

**Other Public School Choice Options at the VPSC Program Sites  
(Fall 2002 to Summer 2005)**

<b>Other choice options</b>	<b>Number of sites with other public school choice options in addition to the VPSC-funded initiative*</b>
<b>Magnet schools</b>	12
<b>Charter schools</b>	12
<b>Title I choice</b>	10
<b>Interdistrict options</b>	7
<b>Other district options</b>	7
<b>Other state options</b>	7
<b>Total for all 13 sites</b>	<b>**55</b>

\*Individual VPSC Program sites can appear under more than one type of choice option.

\*\*On average, each of the 13 sites had four or more public school choice options in addition to the VPSC-funded initiative.

Sources: Analysis of site visit data and Grant Performance Reports.

Exhibit Reads: Of the 13 sites, 12 sites had magnet schools in addition to the VPSC-funded initiative.

***Expansion of existing programs.*** Second, the VPSC Program permitted applicants to expand existing arrangements and not just establish new ones. The majority of the sites have chosen to expand existing initiatives. Separating the VPSC-funded portion of a choice initiative from other aspects of the initiative has not been easy or precisely delineated.

## Data Collection

The relevant data include: multiple site visits to the VPSC sites; site visits to the comparison sites, mainly to confirm the absence of a VPSC-like initiative at the site and to document the nature of other choice options that may be in place; surveys covering an average of 50 schools at each VPSC site; and the collection of archival data about the participating students and the performance of schools in the district (or the site) as a whole. The archival data are collected for all of the relevant schools, including those at the comparison sites.

For the site visits and school survey, the instruments include:

- (A) Protocol A: Interview with the VPSC Project Director and Staff (a site visit instrument, covering VPSC implementation and trends associated with VPSC and largely directed at the VPSC project director and staff);
- (B) Protocol B: Interview with Other Participating Persons (a site visit instrument directed to school principals, teachers, or parents of transferring and non-transferring students);
- (C) Protocol C: Interview with the Comparison Site District and Title I Staff (a comparison site instrument, mainly for collecting data from district offices); and
- (D) School Survey (a school survey instrument—see appendix—directed to principals of schools participating in the VPSC initiatives and to administrators of participating districts in the two statewide initiatives).

The list of instruments does not include the collection and analysis of quantitative archival data, to address the evaluation questions related to student achievement. School-level data come from existing databases compiled by the U.S. Department of Education (the Department), providing annual data for nearly every school in the country, starting with the year 1998–99. These databases may be supplemented by Web site data from state departments of education. Student-level data are compiled and provided to the national evaluation by the 13 VPSC sites.

The completed national evaluation will then have covered the entire five-year VPSC Program and have drawn from multiple sources of evidence, as follows:

- Annual (2002–03 through 2006–07):
  - Original VPSC grant applications (summer 2002 only);
  - Grant performance reports from each VPSC Program site;
  - Individual records of participating students and a comparison group; and

- School-level records of student achievement trends at VPSC Program sites and comparison sites.
- Selected Years (2003–04, 2004–05, and 2006–07):
  - Field studies of VPSC Program sites and comparisons
  - Surveys of schools participating in the VPSC Program’s initiatives.

**Site visits.** The site visits covered the VPSC project site as well as one sending school and one receiving school (or two participating schools at those sites not designating specific sending and receiving schools). The sites chose two schools with a lot of choice activity (i.e., many transferring students), so that the site visit team could observe and learn about the VPSC Program’s initiative in action at the school level.

A two-person team conducted the site visits. During the first two rounds, the site visits occurred in the second semester of the school year. These visits included interviews of administrative staff from the state or district agency, parent information centers, and any affiliated organizations. The third round of site visits will be conducted during 2006–07.

**School survey.** School surveys gather data from schools participating in the VPSC initiatives and mainly corroborate the participation in the VPSC initiatives by specific schools.

During the first three years of the study, the evaluation team collected survey data from 410 schools in 2003–04 and 659 schools in 2004–05. At most sites, all of the schools that were eligible to participate in the choice initiative were included in the survey. Two statewide initiatives were the exceptions. At one statewide site, a random sample of approximately 50 schools in each of two participating districts completed the survey. At the second site, no schools were surveyed; instead, the 12 districts with ten or more students participating in the choice initiative were asked to complete the survey at the district level.<sup>9</sup>

The school survey takes the form of a closed-ended questionnaire to the schools participating in the VPSC initiatives (see appendix).<sup>10</sup> The survey, directed at the schools’ principals, collects information about: student demographics; school performance; the choice options available to students; the percentages of students taking part in these options; the methods by which choice information is shared with parents; and the receipt of professional development by staff members related to school choice.

**Performance reports.** The data collection also covers the VPSC grantees’ annual performance reports submitted to the VPSC Program Office at the Department. Each year, the office issues reporting requirements, based in part on the data collection suggestions by

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<sup>9</sup> At this site, the district is the appropriate respondent because many of the participating students are not assigned to specific schools, either prior to or as part of the VPSC initiative.

<sup>10</sup> Participating schools were those with students who were either eligible for or enrolled in a VPSC-funded initiative.

the national evaluation team. During the first three years, the evaluation team suggested that the sites provide more detailed descriptions of their VPSC initiatives. Recently, the VPSC Program Office has agreed to request more detailed expenditure information from the sites in 2005–06 and 2006–07, so that the evaluation team can more thoroughly analyze these expenditures.

## **Analytic Priorities**

The distinctive contribution of the national evaluation will be to conduct a cross-site analysis to arrive at findings for the VPSC Program as a whole, rather than assessing the accomplishments at any given site. The nature of the cross-site analysis will vary according to the scope of the data supplied by the sites.

*Individual student-level analyses.* VPSC sites have been submitting records of individual student achievement. The records primarily contain achievement scores of students prior to enrolling as part of a VPSC-funded initiative.

The VPSC sites' student-level data submissions to date suggest that the sites need additional assistance in compiling the desired individual student-level records. The VPSC Program is currently engaging a technical assistance provider to help sites compile the needed records.

*School-level analyses.* To examine systems-level performance at every site, the evaluation will rely on sources other than the VPSC sites. The major source, both archival and available to the public, is a database compiled by the Department (the National Longitudinal School-Level State Assessment Score Database) to be supplemented, when needed, by school-level scores posted on states' Web sites.

To analyze the data, the national evaluation team has developed and fully tested a procedure for aggregating trend data across different sites and states (Yin, Schmidt, and Besag, 2006). The procedure aggregates the various trends to estimate an "effect size" for the VPSC Program as a whole (Cohen, 1988; and Lipsey and Wilson, 1993). The aggregation procedure therefore assumes the form of a meta-analysis, as if findings by the VPSC sites were findings from separate research studies.

The final analysis will compare preprogram and concurrent trends. In addition, the analysis will compare the differences with those at the comparison group of (non-VPSC) schools. The relevant analysis therefore consists of comparing the "differences [in the VPSC and non-VPSC groups] between differences [in preprogram and concurrent trends]." The unit of analysis is the school, providing the ability to compare the academic performance at different grade-level bands (elementary school, middle school, and high

school<sup>11</sup>) for the VPSC Program. Finally, separate analyses will examine scores in reading and in mathematics.

*Qualitative analyses.* The general analytic strategy in dealing with qualitative data is to examine the extent to which plausible arguments can be made regarding any relationship between a VPSC initiative and subsequent educational outcomes, including student achievement.

The analysis will initially focus on within-site conditions. A key technique will be to assemble the VPSC Program's features, prior to actual data collection, into an evaluation framework. The framework should attempt to "explain," in qualitative terms, how various actions and events can theoretically produce the desired outputs relating to educational equity and excellence (Evaluation Question Two). Qualitative data from the site visits and other documentation will then be used to test the framework's theory. An important part of this procedure is to search for and understand the role of possible rival explanations (Yin, 2000). For instance, ongoing district or school policies apart from the VPSC initiative may be strongly associated with the observed outputs.

The qualitative analysis will also consider conditions across sites, looking at trends associated with all VPSC sites. For instance, findings and lessons from the VPSC Program could reveal different types of choice initiatives, with the 13 sites arrayed into groups based on the design of their VPSC-funded choice program. The subgroups could help provide greater insight into the associated outcomes from choice initiatives and also serve as practical examples to be evaluated by other districts in the future.

Another analytic priority comes from an expressed need, by the Department, for the national evaluation to report new information about useful practices for conducting choice initiatives. From the national evaluation, such information on choice initiatives would serve at least two audiences: districts implementing the choice provisions of Title I and districts wanting to start or strengthen their own public school choice initiatives independent of the Title I requirements.

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<sup>11</sup> The definition of the bands followed the definitions used by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), accommodating the varied conditions confronted across the country: "elementary" includes low grades from pre-K to 3 with high grades up to the 8th grade; "middle" includes low grades from 4 to 7 with high grades from 4 to 9; and "high" includes low grades from 7 to 12 with a high grade of 12 only.



### 3. VPSC PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

In the VPSC Program, the Department awarded grants to three types of organizations: 1) nine local or regional school districts; 2) three state education agencies; and 3) one nonprofit, charter school organization. Two of the three state education agencies contracted with other organizations to implement their choice initiatives. For example, one site allocated funds primarily to districts throughout the state to support local school choice plans, as well as to an area university to assist these districts with the operation of choice information centers.

The 13 VPSC sites are located in various parts of the country. Ten sites are located in predominantly urban areas, two in areas that cover both urban and rural regions, and one in an entirely rural area (see exhibit 3). Ten of the locales represent a total population of over 100,000 people each. The public school student populations in the communities are mostly diverse and poor. Nonwhite students comprise over 60 percent of the student population at seven school systems represented by the sites. Similarly, over 60 percent of the students are eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program<sup>12</sup> at seven of the sites.

The VPSC sites vary greatly in the design of their choice initiatives. They differ widely in the number of students served, the number of participating public schools, and the capacity to accommodate transfers. In addition, they differ by how they define choice zones and manage the flow of students among participating schools (see exhibit 4 for brief descriptions).

Despite this variation, sites have pursued some common paths. First, although unique, school choice initiatives tended to fall under four major categories based on how sites have defined choice arrangements and directed the flow of transferring students. Second, all sites focused on two core activities throughout the implementation process: 1) engaging parents and community members; and 2) building capacity at schools to attract and accommodate choice transfers.

#### **Types of Choice Arrangements**

The VPSC Program allows grantees to design choice initiatives to meet their own needs. Nevertheless, going beyond the unique circumstances at each site, the VPSC

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<sup>12</sup> The Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program is part of the National School Lunch Program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The program provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 26 million students each school day. Children from families with incomes at or below 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. For the period July 1, 2004, through June 30, 2005, 185 percent of the poverty level was \$34,873 for a family of four (USDA, 2004).



### Exhibit 3

#### Context of the VPSC Sites: Community Characteristics

Characteristic	No. of sites
<b>Type of community:</b>	
Urban	10
Rural	1
Mixed	2
<b>Population:</b>	
Under 100,000	3
100,000 to 1million	6
Over 1million	4
<b>Public school enrollment:</b>	
<b>No. of students enrolled</b>	
Under 25,000	4
25,000–100,000	4
Over 100,000	5
<b>Percent nonwhite</b>	
Under 30	1
30–60	5
Over 60	7
<b>Percent eligible for the Free And Reduced-Price Lunch program</b>	
Under 30	1
30–60	5
Over 60	7

Source: NCES-Common Core of Data.

Exhibit Reads: Ten of the VPSC sites are located in urban areas.

Program appears to be supporting four types of choice arrangements (see exhibit 5) that provide a fuller understanding of the ways that public school choice can work.

*First, five of the VPSC Program’s initiatives designated specific schools to be either sending schools or receiving schools but not both.* In this first type, students attending sending schools are eligible to transfer, and their choices are limited to a select group of receiving schools. At these sites, VPSC funds mainly supported the strengthening or capacity-enhancement at the receiving schools.

Under this first arrangement, four of the sites have defined their sending schools as “low-performing” according to the *NCLB* criteria regarding schools identified for improvement. However, because the VPSC legislation does not prescribe a standard for

## Exhibit 4

### Brief Descriptions of the VPSC Program's Choice Initiatives (Fall 2002 to Summer 2005)

VPSC grantee	Award amount (\$ million)	Description of initiative
1. <b>Arkansas Department of Education</b>	\$9.3	Has supported three cohorts of students attending an off-campus (residential or community) program to receive a rigorous and comprehensive, self-paced education, delivered online and aligned with the state's standards (requires students to take state assessment). The program covered K-5 in 2002-03, K-7 in 2003-04, and K-8 starting in 2004-05.
2. <b>Brighter Choice Charter Schools, N.Y.</b>	\$3.4	Opened its first three charter schools in Albany in 2005-06. In preparation, the site continued to educate the public on Title I choice; support charter school development; and coordinate supplemental educational services in two districts.
3. <b>Chicago Public Schools, Ill.</b>	\$10.2	Has supported two cohorts of students (K-8) attending neighborhood learning clusters (NLCs) of four-to-six schools each. Four clusters started in 2003-04, three started in 2004-05, and two started in 2005-06. There is a new school in each cluster, and existing schools develop magnet themes; clusters have coordinators; and schools receive VPSC funds.
4. <b>Desert Sands Unified School District, Calif.</b>	\$7.9	Has supported two cohorts of students transferring from low-performing sending schools to higher-performing receiving schools (K-12). Funds help augment curricula at receiving schools with environmental studies theme to make them more attractive to transferring students.
5. <b>Florida Department of Education</b>	\$17.8	Has supported student transfers beginning in 2004-05. Funds assist a subset of districts to expand choice options (could cover K-12); funds are allocated to mentor districts (already successful at choice options) and mentee districts (needing to expand options), and postsecondary institutions (to start school choice information and assistance centers).
6. <b>Greenburgh Central School District No. 7, N.Y.</b>	\$2.8	Has supported two cohorts of middle and high school students (7-12) attending new academies of choice in middle and high school. Beginning in 2004-05, three elementary schools implemented the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (IB) to offer choice to all K-6 students.
7. <b>Hillsborough County School District, Fla.</b>	\$10.2	Has supported a districtwide controlled choice initiative (K-12), starting 2004-05, involving seven zones or regions and the creation or expansion of 51 "attractor" programs at existing schools to maintain or increase student diversity. Plans for the initiative were in place well before VPSC, which only partially supports the initiative.
8. <b>Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Fla.</b>	\$11.7	Has targeted two of eight transportation zones in the district. Provides funds to create choice programs at under-enrolled schools (K-12). In 2003-2004, the site opened one new "commuter" school in Zone 1. In 2004-05, the site created or enhanced choice programs at a total of nine schools in Zone 1, and four schools in Zone 2.
9. <b>Minnesota Department of Education</b>	\$11.8	Has supported existing program allowing MPS students qualifying for FRPL to transfer to 56 schools in eight surrounding suburban districts, and suburban or MPS students to attend 12 schools in MPS (K-12) with VPSC funding Parent Information Centers, some transportation, and support services.
10. <b>Monadnock Regional School District, N.H.</b>	\$8.4	Has supported three cohorts of students making interdistrict transfers (9-12), attending new programs in their original schools (6-12), transferring to an alternative high school (MC2) and a virtual high school, or enrolling in college courses. Has added new choice programs at two high schools and two middle schools. Expansion to elementary school is in progress.
11. <b>New Haven Public Schools, Conn.</b>	\$9.5	Has supported three cohorts of students transferring from low-performing schools to identified higher-performing schools including Lighthouse Schools, magnets, charters, and suburban public schools. VPSC funds expanded programs at four Lighthouse Schools (K-6) in 2002-03, five Lighthouse Schools in 2003-04, and three in 2004-05.
12. <b>Portland Public Schools, Oreg.</b>	\$6.5	Has supported two cohorts of transfer students through the augmentation of a districtwide, previously available choice program (K-12). VPSC funds help support new enrollment and transfer policies; selection, lottery, and transition services; and collaborative curricula planning.
13. <b>Rockford School District #205, Ill.</b>	\$10.1	Has supported three cohorts of transfer students from low-performing schools (K-8) to identified receiving schools, as part of an existing districtwide choice plan. VPSC funds provide support to receiving schools; parent and transportation services; and three tutoring programs run by community or faith-based organizations.

Sources: Analysis of site visit data and Grant Performance Reports by COSMOS Corp., 2005.

## Exhibit 5

### Four Types of Choice Arrangements Implemented by VPSC Sites

Type of choice arrangement	No. of VPSC sites	No. of participating schools
Predesignated sending or receiving schools	5	*60
Same schools are both sending and receiving schools	5	502
Within-school options only	1	6
Mixture of the first three groups	2	**6
<b>Total</b>	13	574

\*Represents the schools at only three of the five sites. The fourth site only started its VPSC-funded enrollment in 2005–2006, and the fifth site was enrolling students at predesignated off-campus sites (residential or community facilities), but had no predesignated sending schools.

\*\*Represents the schools at only one of the two sites, because the second site started enrollment in 2004–05 but did not identify its participating schools.

Sources: Survey of Schools, Grant Performance Reports, and analysis of site visit data.

Exhibit Reads: Five VPSC sites have 60 predesignated sending or receiving schools.

identifying “higher-performing” schools, the program and its sites have defined the receiving schools simply as those that are not “low-performing” schools. At one of the four sites, initially eligible receiving schools later became identified for improvement during the second year of its VPSC initiative. At that point, the site then ruled those schools to be ineligible as receiving schools.

The fifth site in this first type of arrangement had predesignated sending and receiving schools but did not attempt to limit either group according to any low- to high-performing criteria. All schools in the system could be a sending school, and the receiving “schools” were pre-designated off-campus sites.

***Second, five initiatives defined the same schools as both “sending” and “receiving.”*** Under a second type of arrangement, five sites permit transfers between all public schools either districtwide or within prespecified zones. In the latter case, students can choose only among the public schools located within their assigned zone. Whether delineated by zone or district, students can attend any school within that area, regardless of a school’s prior performance. This type of choice arrangement gives sites little or no ability to direct the flow of students from low- to higher-performing schools.

An additional observation is noteworthy. At least one site deliberately defined its geographic zones to include both schools identified for improvement and higher-performing schools. Thus, in a large countywide district, “pie-shaped” zones may have

suburban-like, higher-performing schools at their perimeter and urban-like, low-performing schools at their center. While the site may limit transfers to within-zone choices, the initiative nevertheless gives students the opportunity to transfer from schools identified for improvement to higher-performing schools (and from an urban to a more suburban environment).

For both of these first two types of arrangements, the majority of the student bodies in all three types of schools (sending-only, receiving-only, or both sending and receiving) were nonwhite students and were eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program (see exhibit 6.) However, in comparing the two types of arrangements, those with the non-designated (both sending and receiving) schools had lower proportions of low-income and minority students than the sending-only schools in the first type of arrangement; in turn, the receiving-only schools tended to have the lowest proportion of low-income students and Title I schools.

### Exhibit 6

#### Characteristics of Schools Participating in the VPSC Program, 2004–05\*

Characteristics of Schools	Sending schools only (n=27)	Receiving schools only (n=32)	Schools that are both sending and receiving (n=288)
	Average percent, per VPSC site:		
<b>Race/ethnicity: nonwhite</b>	70.6	58.2	52.7
<b>Eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program</b>	68.5	51.1	55.4
	Percent of schools that are Title I:		
<b>Title I schools</b>	63.0	31.3	57.3

\*Total number of schools within the VPSC sites is approximately 574. Of those, data for 347 schools were available for this analysis.

Source: NCES, Common Core of Data, 2005.

Exhibit Reads: On average, 70.6 percent of students in sending schools are nonwhite.

*Third, one site established a within-school initiative, in which students choose from education programs within the same school.* In this third type, all students remain at the original schools. At the single VPSC site that implemented this third type of arrangement, students at their high school could choose between two different academic programs that had been put into place with VPSC funds. Middle school students had a similar choice. At the elementary level, students could choose between two forms of assessment when

enrolling in a new International Baccalaureate (IB) option: being graded on the basis of either completing a project or taking a test.<sup>13</sup>

*Fourth, two initiatives have involved a mixture of the first three types.* One VPSC initiative encompasses multiple school districts in the same state, with each district defining its own choice options. Because the initiative involves 26 districts, the choice options cover nearly every variety of arrangement. The second site under this last arrangement had a mix of choices, including education programs within the same school as well as transfers in which schools could be both sending and receiving. During the site's initial implementation, it also had a designated sending school, which was a high school that had been low-performing. The high school was then closed the following year as planned.

*Every VPSC site has other, non-VPSC-funded public school choice initiatives operating at the site.* These other options include magnet programs and charter schools, Title I public school choice, and a variety of other choice options offered by the district or state. For instance, several of the VPSC sites are located in states that offer open enrollment to all students to attend any public school in the entire state. Overall, even when sites supported public school choice initiatives using VPSC funds exclusively, they had other unrelated choice programs operating at the same time (see earlier exhibit 2, chapter 2).

## **Core Activities**

Regardless of the arrangement, all of the sites carried out two core activities.

### **Engaging, Notifying, and Reaching Parents and Community Members**

*Parents and community representatives have played an important role in the development and implementation of the choice initiatives.* From the beginning, VPSC sites invested in outreach to parents and communities to ensure that public school choice initiatives met local needs. Sites notified parents and community members of their plans, giving them the opportunity to express preferences for educational content, student selection criteria, and the design of parent information centers. Among these topics, the VPSC sites report focusing on engaging parents and community members in selecting the type of educational programming that would best attract students to receiving schools (see exhibit 7).

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<sup>13</sup> Although this type of choice deviated somewhat from the more traditional public school choice options, the VPSC Program granted the site a special waiver to implement this arrangement.

Several VPSC-funded sites also used parent and community input as a way to generate public approval for their choice initiatives. At one site, partnership agreements between the district and several community agencies were instrumental in developing a new environmental studies curriculum. By engaging these groups in the planning and implementation of choice initiatives, the sites worked to garner support for their VPSC-funded initiatives.

### Exhibit 7

#### **Efforts to Involve Parents and the Community in the VPSC Program’s Choice Initiatives (Fall 2002 to Summer 2005)**

Type of involvement	Sites’ activities
<b>Establishing the initiative</b>	Market research, surveys of parents, community and parent advisors, community focus groups and forums
<b>Planning the initiative</b>	Parent advisory committees, principal and teacher input, parent representation on lottery and parent information center committees
<b>Implementing the initiative</b>	Parent participation in daily instruction, community support for curriculum and materials, parent and student surveys, specialists or counselors, workshops on parenting skills, technical assistance to schools on parental involvement

Sources: Analysis of site visit data and Grant Performance Reports.

Exhibit Reads: Sites engaged parents and the community in establishing the choice initiatives through varied site activities, including: market research; surveys; advisory teams; and focus groups.

As the VPSC sites transitioned from the planning stage to implementation, several created ways to keep parents and community members actively engaged. Choice information centers have sponsored workshops on parenting skills, health and nutrition, computer literacy, and other topics in addition to providing information about public school choice.

*VPSC sites invested in a variety of outreach, marketing, and communication efforts targeted at students and families eligible to participate in choice options. With public awareness growing, though, many sites have begun to scale back intensive marketing campaigns more recently.* During the first three years of implementation, the VPSC sites used a wide variety of community outlets, including billboards, movie “trailers,” e-mail announcements, and Web advertisements (see exhibit 8). An especially ambitious site mailed over 100,000 brochures to parents of public school eligible students. In addition, sites have invested in training school staff to assist in the communication process. Recognizing the importance of raising public awareness, a few sites have entered into formal subcontracts with public relations or marketing consultants to increase their effectiveness.

## Exhibit 8

### Parent and Community Outreach Activities (Fall 2002 to Summer 2005)

Notification activity	No. of sites*	Activities
<b>Face-to-face parent and community outreach</b>	12	Districtwide and school fairs and open houses, community meetings, door-to-door marketing
<b>Media campaigns</b>	12	Advertisements, TV appearances, handouts, Web sites, printed resources
<b>Direct mailing</b>	10	Postcards, brochures, newsletters, catalog choice options, Applications
<b>Parent information centers</b>	10	Centralized and neighborhood centers, temporary booths at area mall or events
<b>Staff education</b>	6	Centralized and school-based training, videos and brochures to staff
Total for all 13 sites	50	(On average, each of the 13 sites conducted three or more types of notification activities.)

\*Individual VPSC Program sites can appear under more than one type of activity.

Sources: Analysis of site visit data and Grant Performance Reports, COSMOS Corp., 2005.

Exhibit Reads: Of the 13 sites engaging in community outreach activities, 12 sites conducted face-to-face outreach activities that included districtwide or school fairs and open houses, community meetings, and door-to-door marketing.

Many of the sites that initially engaged in large-scale public education campaigns reported scaling back these efforts as parents, students, and teachers have become aware of their choice options. One site decided to eliminate an intensive advertising campaign conducted during the first two years of implementation. Sites also have shifted strategies over the past two years, concentrating funds previously devoted to districtwide marketing campaigns to increasing awareness among the parents of preschool age children. Other sites now use communication funds on efforts to increase the capacity of receiving schools to accommodate more transferring students.

A common outreach mechanism has been the development and staffing of parent information centers. By 2004–05, ten of the VPSC sites supported at least one parent information center to provide parents with information about their choices and to assist them in the student application and enrollment process. At one site, several thousand visitors were reported during the main enrollment period. However, most sites reported a few hundred to several hundred visitors. All the sites reported a significant drop in visitors to the parent information centers after the enrollment period was over.

Many of the VPSC information centers offer counseling and other services in addition to information about VPSC choice initiatives. Some centers market other choice options available to students, or serve as the central enrollment offices for their districts. In 2004–05, the VPSC sites continued to conduct workshops and educational activities for parents primarily through the parent information centers. These activities included GED and computer classes, health education workshops, and classes on supporting students' homework activities.

The district staff at the sites identified the following as desirable characteristics for parent information centers:

- Locations accessible to parents and families;
- Sufficient and safe parking;
- Nearby public transportation; and
- Operating hours that include days and evenings.

VPSC sites have made ongoing adjustments to the operation of the parent information centers as the choice initiatives have continued. At least two sites added parent information centers between the 2003–04 and the 2004–05 school years. Another site with several parent information centers within the same district reduced the number of centers based on use by the community. Yet another site restructured its parent information center, reassigning staff to specialty areas dealing with different aspects of the choice initiatives. As the sites refine the role of the parent information centers, further analysis is needed to determine whether particular models for parent information centers might influence participation in choice initiatives.

VPSC sites made materials available in a variety of languages to communicate with families. Over half of the sites had brochures and applications available in English and Spanish, and several sites reported using local Spanish-language media outlets (newspapers, radio, and television). One site reported that advertising on a local Spanish-language radio station was among its most successful outreach efforts. In addition to Spanish, other sites reported printing materials in Chinese, Hmong, Lao, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Somali, and Vietnamese. Some sites partnered with other local agencies to assist in fielding phone calls from non-English speakers.

All VPSC sites had ongoing year-round information outlets such as Web sites, newsletters, and advertising. The sites worked to implement their public information campaigns well in advance of the application deadlines for their choice initiatives. For the most part, the push took place over one to two months before the application period. However, sites also shared information about VPSC-funded choice initiatives as much as one year prior to the application period.



In some cases, sites delayed notifying parents of their choice options until the state had published the names of schools identified as low-performing, which at best occurs the summer before the start of the school year. As a consequence, parents and students at these sites were notified of their eligibility only a few weeks before they had to make a decision on whether to apply to transfer to another school. Similar problems exist with implementing Title I public school choice. During 2004–05, one site obtained a final list of schools identified for improvement from the state in December 2004, resulting in students not being able to transfer until January 2005.<sup>14</sup> The site estimates that the delay decreased the number of students participating in the choice initiative by as much as 80 percent.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, participating schools believe that parents are aware of their choice options (see exhibit 9). Of all schools surveyed, a large proportion indicated their belief that most or all parents and families had a good understanding of choice options. This response differed, depending on the type of school. At the average site, 63 percent of sending schools reported that all or most of parents and families have a good understanding of their choice options, as compared to 74 percent of receiving schools and 69 percent of schools that are both sending and receiving. However, the results are solely based on the school survey and may not represent the views of parents and families.

*Sending schools reported fewer parent notification activities than either receiving schools or non-designated schools* (see exhibit 10). Among all the schools, the most frequent mode of communication reported was through letters to parents and families.

High percentages of receiving schools and undesignated schools also reported making face-to-face contacts with students and their families, through individual or group meetings, enrollment fairs, or open houses. In contrast, sending schools reported little such direct contact with parents and families. Overall, receiving schools, as compared to sending schools, may have been more motivated to provide choice information to parents in order to attract students to their programs. Further research is needed to determine whether this lack of effort impacted student participation levels.

## **Capacity-Enhancing Activities**

*The schools participating in the VPSC initiatives have undergone a variety of capacity-enhancing activities, including: starting new academic programs or subjects; purchasing supplies and equipment; and providing professional development to staff.* Capacity-

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<sup>14</sup> The state had made preliminary lists of schools “identified for improvement” available earlier in the year, but the site decided to wait for the final list, not released until December; it has decided to work with the preliminary lists in future years.

<sup>15</sup> However, a district may know early in the year that some schools will have to offer choice the next school year because the schools are already in improvement status (and would have to make AYP for two years in a row to exit). The Department encourages districts to begin notification for choice early when they have schools in this situation.

## Exhibit 9

### Schools Surveyed on Parents' and Families' Understanding of Choice Options at VPSC Sites, 2004–05\*

School-reported proportion of parents and families having a good understanding of their choice options	Average percent per VPSC site		
	Sending schools only	Receiving schools only	Schools that are both sending and receiving
All	31	24	19
Most, over 50 percent	31	50	51
Some, 20–50 percent	29	34	28
Few, less than 20 percent	32	0	20

\*N=514 schools for 12 sites enrolling students in the VPSC-funded initiatives in 2004–05.

Source: Survey of Schools, 2004–05.

Exhibit Reads: On average, 31 percent of sending schools (per site) reported that all parents and families have a good understanding of their choice options.

enhancing activities included efforts to both accommodate and attract transferring students at receiving schools (see exhibit 10). In addition to improvements to existing schools, sites have increased capacity within the system by opening new schools, including charter schools. For the most part, the new schools were planned in advance of the VPSC initiative, and they should not be considered a product of the initiative itself. One site, however, planned the development of several charter schools as a key component of its VPSC design.

Capacity-enhancement activities included investments in new educational programs, including orientation assistance, as well as supplemental services that included tutoring, after-school programming, and summer school. VPSC funds have helped to support counselors and outside organizations to provide these services, which sometimes work in conjunction with Title I school improvement efforts. At some sites, schools modified the length of the school day or calendar year and rearranged school schedules to accommodate additional educational opportunities implemented as part of the VPSC initiative.

***Existing academic programs, as well as other conditions at receiving schools, have been important in encouraging enrollment.*** These VPSC-funded activities notwithstanding, schools responding to the school survey indicated their belief that existing academic programs were a major factor in students' decisions to transfer. Similarly, principals, teachers, and parents interviewed during site visits to receiving schools overwhelmingly responded that the main reason students had decided to transfer to these schools was their preexisting reputations for high performance, not necessarily because of any specific capacity-enhancing activities completed in connection with the VPSC Program.

## Exhibit 10

### Efforts to Notify Parents of Their Choice Options, 2004–05\*

Response category	Average percent per VPSC site**		
	Sending schools only	Receiving schools only	Schools that are both sending and receiving
Individual, face-to-face meetings with school officials	25	51	69
Group meetings with school officials	18	51	62
Enrollment fairs or similar events	32	54	69
Open houses at receiving schools	18	75	61
Letter mailed to parents and families	55	62	68
Letter sent home with students	14	64	61
Announcements in community newspapers and other media	32	62	59
Contacts made by district's parent information center(s)	37	51	40

\*N=555 schools for 12 sites enrolling students in the VPSC-funded initiatives in 2004–05.

\*\*Individual program sites can appear under more than one category. Average percent calculated based on number of sites engaging in the type of activity.

Source: Survey of Schools, 2004–05.

Exhibit Reads: On average, 25 percent of sending schools (per site) reported having individual, face-to-face meetings between parents and school officials related to choice options.

Students also may have been attracted by schools' physical facilities or perceived safety. The VPSC legislation expressly prohibits the use of program funds for construction, but sites could use funds from other sources to make physical improvements. At one VPSC site, the main receiving school had a combination of new academic activities supported by VPSC funds and a new building and classrooms put into place by the school district. At another site, the planned receiving schools are charter schools with a similar combination of features.

*Capacity-enhancing services reach both transferring and existing students at receiving schools.* The new funds have produced improvements that benefit all students at receiving schools, including professional development for teachers, science and computer equipment, supplies, and additional school staff. In one case, however, the site targeted services directly to transferring students by supporting school-based specialists to work with them in addition to implementing a new schoolwide curriculum.

## Exhibit 11

### Schools Involved in Capacity-Enhancing Activities at VPSC Sites\*

Type of Capacity-Enhancement	Average percent per VPSC site		
	Sending schools only	Receiving schools only	Schools that are both sending and receiving
Becoming a charter school	NA	17	7
Starting new magnet programs, academies, or small learning communities	21	83	23
Starting other new academic programs or subjects	24	60	23
Making other changes in school administration (e.g., changing school hours)	26	22	13

\*N=555 schools for 12 sites enrolling students in the VPSC-funded initiatives in 2004–05. Individual program sites can appear under more than one type of activity.

Source: Survey of Schools, 2004–05.

Exhibit Reads: Among the schools participating in the VPSC Program's initiatives, on average, 17 percent of the receiving schools (per site) reported becoming a charter school.

Though sites focused capacity-enhancing activities at receiving schools, school survey respondents also reported new educational programs at sending schools (see also exhibit 11). Frequently, these schools were identified as “low-performing” and initiated new educational programs to comply with their Title I school improvement plan. The initiation of these programs may in some instances have encouraged students to remain at their original schools rather than transferring to receiving schools.

*Additional differences were found among sending schools, receiving schools, and undesignated schools in the degree of professional development provided to teachers as part of the VPSC-funded initiative.*<sup>16</sup> The schools surveyed reported that teachers at the sending-only schools were less likely to receive professional development about the transfer process than other participating schools (see exhibit 12). While only 24 percent of the sending-only schools reported receiving such professional development, more than 33 percent of the receiving-only schools and 30 percent of undesignated schools benefited from training specifically related to the school choice transfer process.

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<sup>16</sup> Undesignated schools are eligible to receive and send transferring students.

## Exhibit 12

### Teacher Professional Development\*

Survey response category	Average percent per VPSC site		
	Sending schools only	Receiving schools only	Schools that are both sending and receiving
Teachers received extra staff or professional development in relation to the transfer process	24	33	30

\*N=428 schools for 11 of the 12 sites actually enrolling students in the VPSC-funded initiatives in 2004–05.

Source: Survey of Schools, 2004–05.

Exhibit Reads: On average, 24 percent of sending schools (per site) reported that their teachers received extra professional development related to the transfer process.

***The capacity-enhancing activities were not necessarily accompanied by an increase in the number of seats or classrooms at these schools.*** None of the sites reported hiring more staff or taking other steps simply to expand the number of seats and to accommodate higher enrollments at a school. Chapter 4 of this report will show that the number of applicants exceeded the number of students who were eventually able to enroll in the VPSC choice initiatives. Why all applicants could not be served, and whether a lack of available seats at receiving schools constrained enrollment, are topics of continuing investigation in the present evaluation.

***Only some of the new education programs may be scientifically based.*** In their capacity-enhancing activities, sites did not examine or rely on scientifically based evidence to guide their selection or design of education programs. Some of the new programs have included nationally recognized educational programs with a record of improving student performance (e.g., *International Baccalaureate* and *Breakthrough to Literacy*). Moreover, at least one site had developed a curriculum that subsequently received external recognition as an exemplary educational model: After only two years of implementation, the site’s environmental studies program was nominated by the state for an environmental protection agency award. However, evidence about the scientific basis of sites’ other adoptions was unavailable, and collecting new data was beyond the scope of this evaluation.

## 4. EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

Over the first three years of implementation, student participation and the rate of enrollment have increased across sites, and there are signs that the VPSC Program will continue to accommodate even more students in upcoming years. Sites have made less progress, however, on specific program priorities.

### Enrollment Trends

The VPSC sites have expanded considerably during the first three years of implementation, to serve an ever-increasing number of students. The exact number of participants, however, varies according to the definition of “participation.” The evaluation tracks the following three possible definitions to measure participation:

- 1) **Eligible Students:** All students who may participate in a VPSC initiative;
- 2) **Applicants:** The set of eligible students who apply to attend a public school other than their assigned school through a VPSC initiative; and
- 3) **Enrollees:** Those students who successfully apply and enroll at a school or program of their choice as a result of a VPSC initiative.

All of these students can be considered participants in the VPSC Program, depending on how broadly participation is defined. The most generous definition would count all *eligible* students as participants.<sup>17</sup> Narrower definitions would limit participants to include only *applicants*, or even further, to include only *enrollees*. The national evaluation tracks and reports all three groups of students.

***The numbers of eligible students, applicants, and enrollees in the VPSC Program all have increased during the first three years of the program, but overall enrollment rates continue to remain low.*** Both the number of VPSC sites enrolling students each year (5, 10, and 12 sites respectively for the first three years), and the capacity within sites to accommodate greater transfers have increased over time. In this sense, the VPSC Program continued to scale-up during its first three years. The total number of students enrolled in

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<sup>17</sup> The logic favoring a count of *eligible* students as participants, even if not applying to transfer to another school, is that these students indeed exercised a choice by deciding to stay at their original school. Advocates of school choice sometimes use this argument. The inherent assumption is that students who did not transfer knowingly made a choice to stay at their original schools. However, no serious attempts have been made to verify if students in fact knew they had a choice.

the VPSC Program rose from 1,087 students in 2002–03 to 7,445 students<sup>18</sup> in 2003–04, and to 16,163 students in 2004–05 (see exhibit 13).

### Exhibit 13

#### Eligible, Applying, and Enrolling Students During the First Three Years of the VPSC Program (Fall 2002 to Summer 2005)

Enrollment School Year	No. of sites enrolling students	Eligible		Applying		Enrolling	
		No. of sites reporting	No. of students	No. of sites reporting	No. of students*	No. of sites reporting	No. of students
2002–03	5	4	219,690	5	1,391	5	**1,087
2003–04	10	10	**755,387	10	**15,721	10	**7,445
2004–05	12	11	862,396	11	28,388	11	16,163

\*Applicant count is based on the number of applications received by the sites.

\*\*Estimates of participant numbers differ from earlier reports. Adjustments to the earlier estimates are based on new information from the sites, as of August 2005.

Exhibit Reads: Four VPSC sites reported a total of 219,690 eligible students during 2002–03.

At the same time, this rise in enrollment represents a conservative estimate, because the twelfth VPSC site did not report enrollment data, and the thirteenth site (needing more time to get new charter schools approved and started) implemented its initiative in 2005–06, after data collection for this report ended.

*Despite consistent growth as a whole, the rate of participation varied greatly from one VPSC site to the next.* As discussed previously, some VPSC sites defined eligibility loosely, to encompass a much larger population of students than their initiative could reasonably accommodate, while others chose a more narrow definition. The number of eligible students at each site ranged from 1,842 to 318,231 students (see exhibit 14). The variability resulted not only from the size of the site’s VPSC award, but also from the degree to which the site’s VPSC-funded activities were embedded within a larger choice initiative. In the latter case, the site defined eligibility in terms of its larger public school choice program, which substantially increased the number of eligible students.

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<sup>18</sup> The 2003–04 figure was originally reported as 3,981 students in last year’s national evaluation report. The new figure represents an updating and adjustment mainly because, at the time of that report, one of the sites had reported its eligible and applicant but not its enrollment figures. The site has since provided the enrollment figure for 2003–04.

## Exhibit 14

### Site-by-Site Variations in the Numbers of Students Participating in the VPSC Program's Choice Initiatives, 2004–05

VPSC Program sites	Number of students			Percent		
	Eligible	Applying	Enrolling	Enrolling of eligible	Enrolling of applying	Applying of eligible
<b>A</b>	108,845	3,884	2,755	2.5	70.9	3.6
<b>B</b>	29,531	1,037*	1,037	3.5	100.0	3.5
<b>C</b>	1,842	1,842	1,842	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>D</b>	318,231	198*	198	0.1	100.0	0.1
<b>E</b>	4,849	741*	741	15.3	100.0	15.3
<b>F</b>	300,000	4,831	878	0.3	18.2	1.6
<b>G</b>	5,224	149	34	0.7	22.8	2.9
<b>H</b>	4,073	167	48	1.2	28.7	4.1
<b>I</b>	10,452	608	111	1.1	18.4	5.8
<b>J</b>	51,000	5,007	4,249	8.3	84.9	9.8
<b>K</b>	28,349	9,924	4,270	15.1	43.0	35.0
<b>L</b>	Site is unable to estimate VPSC-specific enrollment at this time**					
<b>M</b>	No participating students in 2004–05					
<b>Total number of students</b>	862,396	28,388	16,163			
<b>Number of sites reporting</b>	11	11	11			

\*Site had enrollment in 2004–05 but did not report the number of applicants. The present analyses assumed the number was at least equal to the number of enrollees.

\*\*The site has enrollment in a number of different choice options and is developing databases to track all choice students. The site is currently unable to provide data specific to participation in the VPSC Program's choice.

Exhibit Reads: VPSC site A reported having 108,845 eligible students in 2004–05.

*The number of eligible students in the VPSC Program is more than 30 times the number of applicants and 50 times the number of enrollees, making eligibility the high end estimate of the range of participation in the program.* As of 2004–05, 862,396 students were eligible to participate in public school choice through the VPSC Program. In some cases, individual sites defined a large pool of students as eligible, even though the initiative could only accommodate much smaller numbers of enrollees. For instance, at one VPSC site, even though only a few schools were able to receive transferring students, the initiative defined all students in the entire district as eligible to apply to attend these schools. Similarly, another site



developed a statewide initiative to serve no more than 450 students, though in principle all of the state's students in kindergarten through eighth grade were eligible to apply.

***From the pool of eligible students, 28,388 applied to schools of choice in 2004–05, and less than 60 percent eventually enrolled at these schools.*** The total number of applicants in 2004–05 rose 80.6 percent over the previous year, due to the expansion of preexisting VPSC initiatives, as well as the increase in the number of sites operating these initiatives.

Although four of the 11 sites enrolled 100 percent of all their applicants (exhibit 14), the other seven sites had to develop selection procedures for handling student applications. Five sites used a lottery system to select students from the pool of applicants. Two sites used another method to prioritize applicants. In this method, the sites prioritized all applying students according to their eligibility for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program and in reverse order of their state achievement test scores (lowest scoring receive highest priority). The sites then selected students in this priority order until all openings were filled.

On the surface, both selection procedures may present promising opportunities for comparing choice and non-choice enrollees. The enrollees either had been designated randomly (the lotteries) or through a regression discontinuity design (the priority order procedure). Therefore, the evaluation team is continuing to investigate the selection procedures at the seven sites and plans to report on this and any analyses conducted of these sites in the evaluation's final report.

Of particular relevance, thus far, is the finding that lotteries have not usually represented true random draws. Priorities built into many of the selection procedures had a non-randomizing effect. Furthermore, the lotteries have differed, to suit local needs. Important variations include: 1) whether students can only apply to a single school or can list several schools as options on their application; and 2) whether the district or individual schools retain records of the lottery and enrollees.

***The VPSC Program had 16,163 students enrolled at schools of choice in 2004–05, a 117 percent increase over the previous year.*** The estimate includes only students transferring for the first time in 2004–05, and does not count students who transferred in earlier years and who may continue to be enrolled at schools of their choice. Calculating the cumulative total depends in part on how many enrollees from a prior year decided to return to their original school or enrolled at yet a different school. Due to such attrition, the cumulative enrollment lies somewhere between 16,163 and 24,695 students (the first-time enrollees in 2004–05 compared to the total number for all years added together).

As partial clues, two sites have estimated attrition or “dropout” rates over the full three-year period of the VPSC Program (from 2002–03 to 2004–05), reporting rates that range between 30 and 50 percent. Several other sites have estimated their repeat enrollments from 2003–04 to 2004–05, and report continuation rates from 50 to 95 percent. However, it is difficult to determine how to count students that leave schools of choice.

Some students may have decided to enroll at new schools through the choice initiative, while others returned to their assigned school and may be considered true “drop-outs.” Yet, many students may have left the district entirely, not necessarily having anything to do with their choice experiences. An accurate estimate for cumulative enrollment would need to distinguish among these alternatives while also tracking those students that continue to attend schools of choice through the VPSC Program.

*Over the VPSC Program’s first three years, there were increases in the rates of participation, measured by three ratios, the number of: 1) enrolling-to-applying students; 2) applying-to-eligible students; and 3) enrolling-to-eligible students (see exhibit 15).* The proportion of applying students who enrolled increased from 47.4 percent in 2003–04 to 56.9 percent in 2004–05. Similarly, the proportion of eligible students who applied increased from 2.1 percent to 3.3 percent during the same period. However, the enrollment-to-eligible ratio showed the greatest rate of increase from 0.5 percent in 2002–03 and one percent in 2003–04, to 1.9 percent in 2004–05.

### Exhibit 15

#### Participation Rates in the VPSC Program (Fall 2002 to Summer 2005)

Year of implementation	Proportion of participation (percent)		
	Enrolling to applying	Applying to eligible	Enrolling to eligible
2002–03	N.A.*	N.A.*	0.5
2003–04	47.4	2.1	1.0
2004–05	56.9	3.3	1.9

\*In 2002–03, because sites were anxious to implement quickly, they did not provide sufficient information on the number of applicants.

Exhibit Reads: The proportion of applying students who enroll in the VPSC Program’s choice initiatives increased from 47.4 percent in 2003–04 to 56.9 percent in 2004–05.

This last rate is similar to those experienced at the outset of other public school choice initiatives, including those implemented under the Title I accountability provisions in the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. For instance, one study estimated that one percent of the eligible students transferred in 2002–03 and two percent in 2003–04 under the public school choice provisions of *NCLB* (Center on Education Policy, 2004). Similarly, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2004) estimated that 1 percent of eligible students transferred in 2003–04 nationwide. Kim and Sunderman (2004) offer one possible explanation for the low rates. They found that many students whose applications were

granted decided to stay in the neighborhood school because receiving schools might have been only marginally better than the failing schools. In some situations, the receiving schools were already on the state list for poor performance, although, not yet officially listed as low-performing.

*The VPSC Program’s three-year progress shows signs that the program will continue to scale-up in its remaining years (see exhibit 16).* First, the number of sites enrolling students has increased every year (from five sites in the first year, to ten in the second, to 12 in the third, and with the 13th site having initiated public school choice in 2005–06). Second, the amount of VPSC funds spent during the first three years fell short of the annual average available for the five-year period (calculated by dividing the total program funds by the five-year period). Finally, the rate of expenditures per enrolled student has declined in each of the first three years as start-up costs diminished, allowing sites to redirect the remaining funds toward site expansion (e.g., increasing the number of schools in the initiative).

### Exhibit 16

#### Continuing Scale-Up of the VPSC Program, Based on the Program’s Existing and Anticipated Expenditure Rate

Total VPSC Program (all sites)	Program year				
	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05*	2005–06	2006–07
Total expenditures (\$m)	11.5	24.1	27.6	28.2	28.2 (Estimated Remaining)
No. of enrolling students**	1,087	7,445	16,163		
Expenditures per student (\$000)	10.6	3.2	1.7		

\*Total expenditures for 2004–05 contains some projections of expenditures by the sites, because the reports were submitted in June 2005 for a fiscal year ending in October 2005.

\*\* Estimates of participant number differ from earlier reports. Adjustments to the earlier estimates are based on new information from the sites, as of August 2004.

Source: VPSC Program Sites’ *Grant Performance Reports*, “Cover Sheet (ED 524B)” and “Section B: Budget information (OMB No. 1890-007),” July 2005.

Exhibit Reads: During 2002–03, VPSC sites expended a total of \$11.5 million in grant funds, an estimated \$10,600 per student.

Annual shifts in the identity of low-performing schools also may create fresh groups of eligible students. Demand for public school choice could thus remain constant, if not increase, for the life of the initiative. Hence, sites that have linked choice options to school performance may experience an increase in the number of participants in their VPSC initiative over the next two years, as these sites continue to scale-up.

## Progress on Program Priorities

Though sites have successfully expanded the variety of choices available to students over the last three years, they have made less progress in other key priorities, discussed in the remainder of this section. Three of the priorities derive from the VPSC Program's authorizing legislation:

- Providing the widest variety of choices to all students in participating schools;
- Promoting the transfer of students in low-performing schools to higher-performing schools; and
- Developing partnerships seeking to implement interdistrict approaches.

A fourth priority, discussed elsewhere in the legislation, *required* that the sites use VPSC funds to support student transportation services or costs. This requirement reflected the assumption that students would be more willing to travel farther from home and consider schools from a larger area than if the students had to pay the cost of transportation themselves.

***The VPSC Program has been associated with a wide variety of choices among educational programs.*** Progress has been substantial in the first of the four priorities. Except for adding new seats, sites have engaged in considerable “capacity-enhancing activities,” especially at receiving schools (see earlier exhibit 11, chapter 3). These activities have led to the implementation of new educational programs at those schools. In addition, sites already were supporting a wide variety of choices before the introduction of their VPSC-funded initiatives (see earlier exhibit 2, chapter 2). Together, the variety of educational programs within the VPSC-funded initiatives and among other non-VPSC initiatives has meant that students can choose from a large and diverse number of academic programs.

The outreach materials describing these choices at most of the sites reveal a wide variety of program options. At one urban site, students can choose to participate in any of five different choice initiatives, only one of which is the VPSC-funded choice initiative. Each initiative involves schools in different neighborhoods, including schools in the surrounding suburban neighborhoods.

***Transfers from low- to higher-performing schools are likely to have comprised only a portion of the students enrolled in the VPSC initiatives.*** First, fewer than half of the VPSC sites have created choice arrangements with predesignated sending and receiving schools, and of these, only four have limited their enrollment to transfers from low- to

higher-performing schools. However, only three of the four reported enrollment in 2004–05. The fourth site began enrolling students in 2005–06 (see row A, exhibit 17).

**Exhibit 17**

**Student Transfers from Low- to Higher-Performing Schools, 2004–05**

Sites' choice implementation	No. of sites*	Total enrollment	Transfers from low- to higher-performing schools	
			No.	Percent
A. Only targeted students transferring from low- to higher-performing schools	3	886	886	100%
B. Supported various enrollments, and tracked the students transferring from low- to higher-performing schools	3	8,717	444	5%
C. Supported various enrollments, but did not track students transferring from low- to higher-performing schools	5	6,560	sites did not track transfers from low- to higher-performing schools	
<b>Total</b>	11	16,163	1,330 (minimum)	unknown

\*Of the 13 VPSC sites, 11 reported enrollment in 2004–05. One site with enrollment was unable to estimate VPSC-specific participants at this time and the remaining site was not yet enrolling students

Exhibit reads: The choice implementation at three sites targeted students transferring from low- to higher-performing schools. The sites had a total enrollment of 886 students, all of whom were transfers from low- to higher-performing schools.

Second, the other eight sites permitted a wider variety of transfers or had VPSC enrollments that involved no transfers. However, only some of these latter sites tracked the transfers from low- to higher-performing schools (see row B, exhibit 17), while others did not do such tracking (see row C, exhibit 17). (In one case, a site received a waiver from the Department to omit such tracking because all of the site's enrollees were low-performing students, but they were not necessarily transferring from low- to higher-performing schools.) As a result, the known transfers from low- to higher-performing schools are small, but the actual proportion is likely to be greater.

The sites (in row B) that did track transfers reported only 5 percent of their students transferring from low- to higher-performing schools. Overall, the confirmed transfers (from rows A and B) represent only 1,330 of 9,603 or 13.8 percent of the total transfers. However, the final portion could be larger or smaller, depending on the nature of the transfers at the (row C) sites that did not track or document the pattern of their transfers.

One possible explanation for this overall pattern might be illustrated by the nature of the VPSC-funded initiative at two sites. Both sites used their VPSC funds together with funds from other sources to support broader, districtwide public school choice initiatives. By creating a broader approach, the sites extended the coverage of their initiatives to the full array of their schools and hence provided a wider variety of choices than a VPSC-funded initiative alone might have provided.

At the same time, these districts had proportionately few low-performing schools, districtwide. With students able to choose among any school in the system, the bulk of the enrollees were highly likely to come from schools *not* identified for improvement. As a result, these large districtwide initiatives reported low percentages of students transferring from low-performing to higher-performing schools. Comprising over 50 percent of the total VPSC choice enrollment in 2004–05, these two sites dominated the VPSC Program and brought the overall rate for such transfers downward.<sup>19</sup>

***Only four of the 13 sites have used VPSC funds to provide interdistrict options, which allow students to transfer to schools outside their home district.*** Regarding this third program priority, most of the VPSC sites have limited their choice initiatives to within-district options. Moreover, three of the four sites that have interdistrict options put them into place before the VPSC Program started. Another VPSC site that originally intended to develop interdistrict arrangements did not do so after finding that parents and students had minimal interest in such opportunities.

The VPSC Program gave priority to interdistrict arrangements under the assumption that they provide students in low-performing schools with greater opportunities to attend higher-performing schools. However, the VPSC Program’s experiences have shown that such options can exist in the absence of interdistrict arrangements. In particular, seven of the VPSC-funded sites are large urban districts that have diversely performing schools within their own district boundaries. One of these districts deliberately divided the district into pie-shaped sub-zones. Each zone tended to have higher-performing schools at its periphery and lower-performing schools at its center. The district’s choice arrangement promoted transfers within (but not between) zones.

***Relative to enrollment, transportation costs did not increase proportionately as might have been expected.*** As stated previously, the legislation required all sites to allocate a portion of VPSC funds to support transportation services or costs, to increase the number of choices available to students. While nine sites reported using funds for transportation, overall these costs did not necessarily increase. A possible explanation is

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<sup>19</sup> As an additional comparison, another choice initiative, existing contemporaneously with the VPSC Program, has been taking place in the D.C. Public Schools. Although this other initiative emphasizes the use of vouchers for students to attend private schools and does not involve public school choice, the D.C. initiative is nevertheless districtwide and takes place in a district with many schools reputed to be poorly performing. Nevertheless, this initiative reported that only 5.8 percent of the students awarded scholarships in the spring of 2004 (for enrollment in 2004–05) came from low-performing schools (see Wolf et al., 2005).

that many students already were attending distant schools, and choice now allowed these students to select schools closer to home. Under such circumstances, sites experienced *minimal or reduced* transportation costs.

For example, one VPSC site identified schools in which enrollment had declined in part because some neighborhood children were attending more distant schools due to the perception of the poor quality of the neighborhood schools. The site designated these under-enrolled schools as “receiving schools” and improved their education programs, to encourage children to attend their neighborhood school. As another example, two of the VPSC sites had recently emerged from court-ordered school busing, from which students had been assigned to more distant schools as part of the original desegregation order. The VPSC-funded initiative gave affected students the choice of enrolling at neighborhood schools.

In cases in which sites did not require additional funds for transportation, the sites received waivers from the Department that exempted them from the original requirement. The lesson from these and other examples in the VPSC Program is that transportation costs need not increase and may even decrease with the implementation of public school choice, depending upon preexisting enrollment patterns and the design of the choice initiative itself (see exhibit 18).

### **Progress in Collecting Data to Examine Student Achievement Trends**

As a major evaluation activity, the VPSC Program’s authorizing legislation calls for the national evaluation to determine “the effect of the [choice] programs on the academic achievement” of participating *students*, especially those who transfer from Title I AYP schools to higher-performing schools—as well as “on the overall quality of participating *schools* and *districts*.”<sup>20</sup>

Fulfilling this requirement calls for data at *two* levels: individual student records (an *individual* level) and aggregate grade and school-level performance (a *systems* level). The two levels reflect the dual policy aspirations of the legislation and of public school choice initiatives. Such initiatives not only benefit individual students but also improve whole systems, because of expected marketplace forces whereby schools either improve their performance, to compete for student enrollment, or risk undesirable sanctions—such as reconstruction and eventual closure.

Even with the availability of the data at both levels, a critical caveat remains: The design of the VPSC Program does not permit the determination of the actual “effect” of the program. Many other conditions influencing student achievement coexist with the VPSC-

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<sup>20</sup> See *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, P.L. 107-110, Title V, Part B, Sec. 5246(b)(3).

## Exhibit 18

### Changes in Transportation Costs at VPSC Sites

Changes in transportation costs	Illustrative conditions in VPSC initiatives
<p><b>Costs <i>INCREASE</i> (and are part of the VPSC Program's expenditures)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiative designates receiving schools that are farther away from students' homes than the sending schools;</li> <li>• Initiative gives students opportunity to transfer to schools in other districts; or</li> <li>• Initiative creates increased interest and capacity to attend non-neighborhood schools.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Sites may experience <i>NO CHANGE</i> in costs</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiative is districtwide, and students traveling greater distances may be offset by those traveling lesser distances; or</li> <li>• Initiative involves within-school choices only, so students remain enrolled at original site.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Costs <i>DECREASE</i> (relieving the VPSC Program from having such expenditures)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiative involves a portion of the district, and students previously attending more distant schools may return to schools in this portion;</li> <li>• Initiative permits students previously bused under desegregation to return to closer schools; or</li> <li>• Initiative permits students to transfer from a school to an educational environment closer to home.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Effect on transportation costs is yet <i>UNKNOWN</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiative has not yet been fully designed or implemented.</li> </ul>

Source: Site visit databases and Grant Performance Reports, COSMOS Corp., 2005.

funded initiative. At best, the analysis of student achievement data represents an analysis of “preprogram” and then “concurrent” trends. The preprogram trends reflect student achievement during a multi-year period prior to the start of the VPSC Program’s initiatives. The preprogram trends can later be compared with concurrent trends, which reflect student achievement during the multiyear period of the VPSC-funded initiatives.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Throughout the analysis, observations pertain to changes in *scores*. Such a focus is not synonymous with a focus on changes in actual *achievement*. For instance, improvements in state assessment scores can reflect either improving student achievement or weakened criteria in the scoring of criterion-referenced assessments. Many state assessments are based on criterion-referenced tests. Despite this shortcoming, no other ways of assessing student achievement are as readily available, for schools and districts across the country, as the state assessment tests.



## Individual-Level Student Achievement Data

*At the individual level, the VPSC sites have collected individual records of students enrolled in the choice initiatives, but additional clarifications are needed before analysis can occur.* Every VPSC Program site is contributing to this effort. The ultimate goal is for all of the sites to collect individual-level data covering students enrolled in the VPSC-funded initiative as well as a comparable group of students who did not enroll. For instance, if the choice initiative was oversubscribed, demographically matched students who applied but who were not selected for enrollment at a school of choice would be the most comparable group of non-transfers. Alternatively, students eligible to apply but not submitting an application, matched for demographic characteristics, also could serve as a comparison group.

At the same time, choice initiatives are complicated, leading to the need for additional clarification in the student records. The needed clarifications at this time are as follows.

*Sites' student records submitted to the national evaluation team do not directly coincide with the number of enrollees reported elsewhere by the sites.* Every VPSC site active in enrolling students in a VPSC-supported initiative by 2004–05 has submitted individual student records to the national evaluation team. These submissions indicate that sites are making serious efforts to assess the performance of the students in their initiatives. As of September 2005, the submitted records did not cover the most recent school year (2004–05). However, they did cover one or more of the prior years. Since September 2005, three of the sites have submitted updates, and others should be forthcoming on a regular basis.

The sites' submissions employ, not unexpectedly, different electronic and database formats, also containing different types of information about each student. Reviewing these different formats and preparing them for cross-site analysis has required extensive efforts on the part of the national evaluation team. A basic check was used to confirm that the headcount of records matched the number of students presumed to be enrolled in the site's choice initiative.

The headcounts thus far indicate that, for most of the VPSC sites, the total number of submitted records does not coincide with the total number of enrollees reported elsewhere by the sites (see exhibit 19)—e.g., either in their annual grant performance reports submitted to the Department or in their reports at the national evaluation's site visits.<sup>22</sup> In some cases, the discrepancies are small, but in most cases the differences are substantially greater than 5 percent. The headcounts also do not appear to include the records of any

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<sup>22</sup> These other reports have formed the basis for all of the three-year estimates reported earlier. Because the grant performance reports in particular are official documents submitted to the Department in relation to a site's accountability for its grant award, the information in these reports has been assumed to be more accurate than any tallies from the individual records submitted to the national evaluation team.

**Exhibit 19**

**Number of Student Records Submitted by the Sites,  
Compared to Enrollment Officially Reported By the Sites**

VPSC Program site	Year	Officially reported enrollment	No. of records sent by site
<b>A</b>	2002-03	450	115
	2003-04	450	270
	2004-05	198	a
<b>B</b>	2002-03	0	258
	2003-04	720	177
	2004-05	1,842	a
<b>C</b>	Student transfers will not start until 2005-06		
<b>D</b>	2002-03	0	0
	2003-04	1,076	b
	2004-05	878	b
<b>E</b>	2002-03	501	a
	2003-04	191	a
	2004-05	741	a
<b>F</b>	2001-02	0	3,989
	2002-03	37	36
	2003-04	55	55
	2004-05	111	a
<b>G</b>	Site cannot yet identify participating students		
<b>H</b>	2002-03	0	0
	2003-04	0	b
	2004-05	4,270	b

VPSC Program site	Year	Officially reported enrollment	No. of records sent by site
<b>I</b>	2002-03	0	0
	2003-04	162	162
	2004-05	2,755	a
<b>J</b>	2002-03	19	12
	2003-04	31	62
	2004-05	48	b
<b>K</b>	2002-03	0	0
	2003-04	3,844	3,844
	2004-05	4,249	a
<b>L</b>	2001-02	0	23,198
	2002-03	0	67,091
	2003-04	759	a
	2004-05	1,037	a
<b>M</b>	2002-03	80	67
	2003-04	157	149
	2004-05	34	a

<sup>a</sup> Data are being compiled by the site.

<sup>b</sup> Datasets received from the sites in September 2005; records not yet analyzed.

Exhibit Reads: VPSC Program Site A reported an enrollment of 450 students in 2002-03, and submitted 115 records.

comparison group of students—e.g., students who might have applied to enroll but who remained at their original school and therefore were not enrollees in a VPSC-funded initiative.

***The existing records need additional details to be used to analyze student achievement scores.*** Inspection of the individual data items within each record also reveals the need for additional details. Especially absent has been the identity of the student's school, along with the year of such matriculation. Because sites have kept track of the schools participating in their VPSC initiatives, the identification of the school as part of each student's record would in part confirm the student's enrollment in the VPSC initiative.

Though not identifying the school, the records from most sites do include information about a student's grade level.

Similarly, the information in the students' records does not include the actual calendar year for such data as the student's grade level or, if present in the record, the state achievement scores associated with the record. Having the year of testing is especially important in those situations where students may only be tested in alternate years, to distinguish scores for the preprogram year (the year just before the student enrolled in a VPSC initiative) from scores that might be a year older.

As a further complication, for many of the initiatives in the VPSC Program, students may have started to enroll in the initiative while still in their prekindergarten, kindergarten, or first grades. For these students, no preenrollment test scores are available because no testing on state achievement tests occurred.

Until sites have clarified the headcounts and these additional details as part of the submitted records, further analysis of the student records seems premature.

***To tighten future reporting, the VPSC Program sites might consider expanding and improving their databases for tracking their enrollees.*** The most desired remedy would be for sites to strengthen their own, VPSC-specific databases, using information downloaded from district files but not relying entirely on such files.

The core element in these databases would be an individual record for every student enrolled in the VPSC initiative for a given academic year—information not necessarily present in existing district records and that the VPSC Program sites therefore need to track on their own. The sites would verify such enrollment by confirming—a short time after the start of the academic year—that the student was indeed attending an eligible VPSC-supported receiving school or a school located in a geographic zone associated with the

VPSC initiative.<sup>23</sup> Ideally, sites also would have collected application data from these students before they were able to enroll at the VPSC-supported school, and the site would have had this prior information as part of the individual student's record.

Sites would then augment this individual record further, downloading data from existing district files, showing, if possible: a) that the same student had enrolled at a different school in the prior academic year; and b) the student's pertinent demographic and academic data for as many years as was available in the district records.<sup>24</sup> Using a reliable and accurate ID system, the site would then track the same student's enrollment at the same or different schools in subsequent years, continuing to download the relevant test and academic data.

The ongoing database could then help sites to establish an annual headcount of all students enrolled in the VPSC initiative. The headcount would now go beyond tallies of the first-year enrollees, calculating continuation and dropout rates as well as trends in students' academic performance.

All of this record-keeping would pertain to a single annual cohort of VPSC enrollees. The site would repeat the entire procedure each year, creating a new batch of individual records for every new cohort of students applying to and then becoming enrolled in the VPSC initiative. Within the same cohort, over time, the site would calculate changes in academic achievement. The sites could then calculate the cumulative headcount and other characteristics of all of the VPSC enrollees, across all cohorts, by combining its records from all of the cohorts.

Interpreting the achievement levels or trends over time requires some type of comparison group—i.e., students in the same grades that did not enroll in the choice initiatives at any of the VPSC sites. Sites could define comparison students in a number of ways.

The grossest comparison would be to district or even statewide averages. A more telling comparison would be with other students from the same original schools as those of the VPSC-supported enrollees but who themselves chose to stay at the same school and not to enroll in the VPSC initiative. An even closer comparison might be with the students at the same original school who also had applied to enroll in the VPSC initiative but who could not enroll because of oversubscription.

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<sup>23</sup> To avoid threats to maintaining the anonymity of the students, a site would need to establish "school codes," so that only a central source would vouch for the participation of the school in the VPSC initiative, but the identity of the school would remain otherwise unknown.

<sup>24</sup> The academic data could include students' grades and not just scores on standardized achievement tests. The availability of the grades would help overcome a problem with the test data—that they may not be available for the year before enrollment in a VPSC initiative because many school systems only test students every other year and because first-grade participants might not have any prior testing record.

Whichever the comparison group, the sites would create another group of individual student records, in much the same fashion as for those enrolled in the VPSC-funded initiative. The comparison group also would consist of cohorts, with each cohort of students tracked over time and with their academic and demographic information downloaded from the routine district records.

### **Systems-Level Student Achievement Data**

*At the systems level, the national evaluation is comparing student achievement at the VPSC sites with state performance and with performance by matched comparison sites.* The systems level tracking of student achievement relies on aggregate grade- and school-level records, not on individual student records. The data consist of scores on state assessment tests, for all grades and academic subjects that have been tested. Although the data cover every academic subject tested, the national evaluation has focused only on the achievement scores in reading and in mathematics.

Because VPSC Program implementation started in 2002–03, the preprogram trends tentatively cover 1998–99 to 2001–02, with 2001–02 serving as the preprogram year.<sup>25</sup> The planned analyses will cover two levels—the VPSC sites’ entire *district* or set of districts, and the sites’ targeted *schools*, if any (e.g., sending and receiving schools).

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<sup>25</sup> Later analyses will delineate more precisely the preprogram years for the various VPSC Program sites. For instance, although preprogram years were 1998–99 to 2001–02 for the VPSC sites that started their student enrollment in 2002–03, the years were 2000–01 to 2002–03 for those starting in 2003–04, and the years will be staggered even further with the sites starting in later years. Refining the definition of the preprogram years will occur once all sites have started their actual implementation.

## **5. INTERIM CONCLUSIONS**

The current report covers the first three years of implementation, focusing primarily on identifying the characteristics of the VPSC Program and the extent to which the program has made progress in expanding choice opportunities for students. After three years of implementation, there is evidence that the VPSC Program has been contributing to an increase in the number of schools and students participating in public school choice initiatives. Less progress, however, has been made on the legislative priority of encouraging transfers from low- to higher-performing schools and in providing out-of-district choice options for students. At this mid-program stage, “conclusions” about the program also are tentative.

### **Preliminary Findings**

#### **What are the characteristics of the VPSC Program’s grantees?**

The VPSC Program awarded a total of 13 grants in 2002 to three types of organizations: nine school districts, three state education agencies, and one nonprofit (charter school) organization. The initiatives differed widely from each other in design and scope, though all focused on two core activities: 1) reaching out to parents and the community; and 2) building capacity at schools to attract and accommodate choice transfers. Both activities appear more prevalent in schools slotted to receive transferring students than in schools that were designated as sending-only. The majority of the students in all of the participating schools were nonwhite and eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program. However, the sending-only schools had the largest of these majorities (71 percent nonwhite and 69 percent Free and Reduced-Price Lunch program participants) as well as the highest proportion of Title I schools (63 percent).

Sites also varied by how they defined choice zones and managed the flow of students among participating schools. These plans can be categorized into four types of choice arrangements: predesignated specific sending and receiving schools; geographic areas where students can choose any school, and schools may thus be sending and receiving simultaneously; within-school options, in which no transfers occur; and a mixture of the first three types. Sites have more or less control over the movement of students between schools depending on the type of arrangement they adopt. Because choice zones allow students to transfer to any school within a select area, they limit sites’ ability to direct the flow of students from low- to higher-performing schools.

The VPSC-funded initiatives have largely existed independent of the Title I choice initiatives at the same sites, except for two sites where the initiatives have been synonymous. Overall, even when sites support public school choice initiatives using VPSC

funds exclusively, they have other unrelated choice programs operating at the same time. These options include magnet programs, charter schools, and a variety of other choice options offered by the district or state.

### **How and to what extent does the VPSC Program promote educational equity and excellence?**

The legislation gives priority to programs that provide the greatest choice to students, by allowing students to transfer to a wide variety of schools and increasing the capacity of those schools to accommodate new students. At the same time, the program has the priority of encouraging transfers of students from low- to higher-performing schools and providing opportunities for students to transfer to another school outside of their assigned district. In some respects, these goals may be contradictory. Arrangements that permit students to select any school within a geographic zone may provide a greater number of choices but have fewer percentages of students moving from low- to higher-performing schools or attending schools in neighboring districts. In contrast, districts can better promote transfers from low-performing to higher-performing schools by limiting choice options and designating specific sending and receiving schools.

There is evidence that the VPSC Program has made progress on the first priority to provide the widest variety of choice. Over the first three years of implementation, sites have expanded the assortment of choice options in participating schools and offer a large and diverse number of academic programs to transferring students. Total enrollment in the VPSC Program rose from 1,087 students in 2002–03 and 7,445 students in 2003–04, to 16,163 students in 2004–05. Similarly, the enrollment-to-eligible rate increased from 0.5 percent in 2002–03 and 1.0 percent in 2003–04, to 1.9 percent in 2004–05. Despite consistent growth as a whole, the rate of participation varied greatly from one VPSC site to the next, ranging from less than 1 to 100 percent. This variability is explained in part by how sites defined eligibility and whether the VPSC-funded initiative was embedded within a much larger choice program.

Less evidence is available regarding progress on the second program priority—increasing the number of students transferring from low- to higher-performing schools. Only a small number of sites specifically targeted such transfers. Other sites had a wider array of transfers and did not necessarily document the proportion moving from low- to higher-performing schools.

Regarding the third program priority—promoting interdistrict transfers—only four of the 13 VPSC sites provided interdistrict options, allowing students to transfer to schools outside their home district. One site that intended to develop interdistrict agreements abandoned this plan after finding a lack of interest in such opportunities among parents and students.

The legislation also required grantees to reserve a portion of the VPSC funds to cover the cost of transporting students to their new school. The evaluation, however, did not find evidence that these costs always increased relative to enrollment, as the VPSC initiatives permitted many students, already attending distant schools, to select schools closer to home.

## **Useful Choice Practices**

A major motive underlying the creation of the VPSC Program was the hope that the sites' experiences might develop useful choice practices to help states and districts across the country wanting to initiate or strengthen their own public school choice options and procedures. Even at this early stage, several potentially useful practices have emerged from the program.

***The breadth of VPSC Program's experiences will potentially be useful to other districts in the future.*** The program covers a variety of choice arrangements. Although the program has only 13 sites, they cover a full range of communities and educational situations (e.g., large urban districts compared to small rural districts compared to districts with heterogeneous groups of schools compared to statewide initiatives). The breadth of the VPSC Program's experiences is likely to serve the diverse conditions found in districts across the country.

As one of the most helpful experiences, the program is showing how four different choice arrangements can work. The experiences with these varied arrangements, along with eventual data about their experiences, will create a solid body of knowledge. Other districts can draw from these experiences in the future.

To make knowledge about the four arrangements as useful as possible, the present evaluation's final report will update the experiences with each type of arrangement, along with the VPSC Program's other experiences, at the end of the 2006–07 school year.

The examination will cover the enrollment and other participation associated with each type of arrangement, as well as how each type addresses the important priorities of choice initiatives (providing the widest variety of choices to all students in participating schools; promoting the transfer of students in low-performing schools to higher-performing schools; developing interdistrict partnerships; and making funds available to support transportation services). As a related inquiry, the analysis also will study the possible relationships among these priorities, and in particular, any potential complementarity or conflict among them.

***The various sites also are initiating and further refining specific choice-related practices potentially useful for other districts.*** These potentially useful practices cover: the design of choice initiatives; parent involvement in choice arrangements; and capacity-



enhancing activities to augment or strengthen schools' educational programs (see exhibit 20).

## Exhibit 20

### Potentially Useful Choice Practices from the VPSC Program

#### Designing Choice Initiatives

**Working Outside the System:** Creating a "community movement" and mobilizing families to be aware of the performance of their schools, leading to the promotion of new choices—e.g., the creation of charter schools.

**Maximizing Choice Options Within Small Geographic Areas:** Defining subdistrict "zones" to include the most heterogeneous group of schools possible, so students can have wide choice but minimize transportation costs.

**Empowering Schools to "Own" a Choice Initiative:** Developing a formal process for soliciting schools' participation, to encourage them to take greater ownership over a choice initiative.

#### Parent Involvement

**Gaining "Input" from Families:** Using large-scale surveys, media campaigns, and public forums to raise public awareness and participation in the choice initiative.

**Operating Parent Information Centers:** Designing and staffing *multiple* parent information centers to serve a large community.

**Designing User-Friendly Communication about Choice Options:** Creating easily searchable electronic or hardcopy materials, presenting students and their families with different kinds of choice options.

#### Capacity-Enhancing Activities

**Defining an Array of Educational Programs to Promote Student Diversity:** Attending to the offerings at different schools to assure that the programs attract diverse student populations.

**Developing Formal Community Partnerships:** Forming agreements with over 30 local institutions including local universities, businesses, and nonprofit agencies, to provide support for new educational programs at schools in the choice initiative.

**Expanding Distant Learning at "Off-Campus" Locations:** Developing a K–8 curriculum for off-campus, online learning that is aligned with state standards and state assessments.

As an example of a potentially useful strategy for increasing parent notification, one VPSC site has developed a user-friendly, online database. Parents and students can tap this database and electronically search for information about their choice options. Because many districts have a large variety of choice options, the amount of information available

to parents and students may be overwhelming. By organizing this information online, the site has made it easier for parents and students to quickly learn about their choice options.

Rather than providing information electronically, another VPSC site has distributed hardcopies of materials to notify parents of the variety of choice options available. Over the course of implementation, the site converted its materials from a program-specific format (e.g., separate brochures covering magnet schools, charter schools, the VPSC-funded initiative, and other choice initiatives at the site) to a school-specific format (e.g., separate brochures for each school, describing all of the choice options available at the school), after they found that parents usually had an idea about the schools they might consider. The latter format has allowed parents to quickly collect information about the programs offered at these schools, rather than have to search through materials about all programs, some of which were not relevant to their interests.

As one example of a promising approach to enhance school capacity, another of the VPSC sites has developed a broad-based set of partnerships with local businesses, community groups, and institutions of higher education (IHE). These partners all have contributed to the capacity-enhancement process, helping the district to strengthen new educational programs. Moreover, the partnership, developed as a result of the VPSC Program, has successfully garnered additional funds to expand educational programs even further.

Part of the national evaluation's work will be to document and disseminate these and other useful strategies and practices. In this manner, the VPSC Program's experiences can ultimately help to strengthen public school choice initiatives across the country.



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## APPENDIX



**COVER SHEET**

**QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INDIVIDUAL SCHOOLS**  
**National Evaluation of the Voluntary Public School Choice Program**

<b>Date:</b>	_____
<b>Respondent:</b>	_____
<b>Title:</b>	_____
<b>Phone:</b>	_____
<b>School Name:</b>	_____
<b>District:</b>	_____
<b>State:</b>	_____

**FOR NATIONAL EVALUATION USE**

ID Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Received: \_\_\_\_\_

## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INDIVIDUAL SCHOOLS

1. School's Name, Address, and Grade Levels:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade Levels (*circle lowest and highest*): pre-K K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

2. The following data were calculated based on student enrollment from which school semester?

(*check ONE only*):

\_\_\_ for Spring 2006  
\_\_\_ for Fall 2006  
\_\_\_ for Spring 2007  
\_\_\_ Other date (specify the date)

Total No. of Students: \_\_\_\_\_ (*no.*)

American Indian or Alaska Native: \_\_\_\_\_ (%)  
Asian: \_\_\_\_\_ (%)  
Black or African American: \_\_\_\_\_ (%)  
Hispanic: \_\_\_\_\_ (%)  
Native Hawaiian or other Pac. Isld.: \_\_\_\_\_ (%)  
White: \_\_\_\_\_ (%)  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_ (%)

Eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch: \_\_\_\_\_ (%)  
With IEP: \_\_\_\_\_ (%)  
With Limited English Proficiency: \_\_\_\_\_ (%)  
Migrant: \_\_\_\_\_ (%)

3. Does this School receive Title I assistance? \_\_\_Yes (*schoolwide*) \_\_\_Yes (*targeted*) \_\_\_No

If yes, has the school been identified as failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress, based on student achievement scores for the:

\_\_\_ for the 2006-2007 school year  
\_\_\_ for the 2005-2006 school year  
\_\_\_ for the 2004-2005 school year  
\_\_\_ none of the above

4. School Choice Options for Students at this School:

(check ALL that apply):

- a. \_\_\_ students **within** the district may **transfer to** this school
- b. \_\_\_ students **outside** the district may **transfer to** this school
- c. \_\_\_ students may **transfer from** this school to other schools **within** the district
- d. \_\_\_ students may **transfer from** this school to other schools **outside** the district
- e. \_\_\_ **Other** – e.g., open enrollment (*please explain*):

- f. \_\_\_ there are **no school choice options** (*If you answered “f”, please stop; do not respond to the remaining survey items.*)

(if you checked items a, b, c, or d):

For 2006-07, about how many students have transferred ?

- g. (number of students transferring **to** this school)
- h. (number of students transferring **from** this school)
- i. Did teachers receive any extra staff or professional development, in relation to the transfer process? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No
- j. If yes, what were the main topics of the staff or professional development?  
(topic 1) \_\_\_\_\_  
(topic 2) \_\_\_\_\_

5. Notifying Parents about School Choice Options:

What actions did the school take to notify parents/families of their choice options?

(check ALL that apply)

- a. \_\_\_ individual, face-to-face meetings with school officials
- b. \_\_\_ group meetings with school officials
- c. \_\_\_ enrollment fairs or similar events for parents to learn about choice options
- d. \_\_\_ open houses at receiving schools
- e. \_\_\_ letter mailed to parents/families
- f. \_\_\_ letter sent home with students
- g. \_\_\_ announcements in community newspapers or other media
- h. \_\_\_ contacts made by the district’s parent information center(s)
- i. \_\_\_ other (*please explain*):
- \_\_\_
- j. \_\_\_ How many languages, other than English, have been used in these notification procedures?  
\_\_\_ (no.)

6. In your opinion, what proportion of the parents/families had a good understanding of their choice options last year? (*check ONE only*)

- a.  all parents/families
- b.  most parents/families (e.g., over 50 percent)
- c.  some parents/families (e.g., between 20-50 percent)
- d.  few parents/families (e.g., less than 20 percent)

If you checked 6b, 6c, or 6d, what is the most important thing you can recommend, to improve parents/families' understanding of their choice options?

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7. Has your school started new programs (e.g., magnets, academies, small learning communities, new academic subjects) to be more attractive, either to reduce the number of students transferring out or to increase the number transferring in? (*check ALL that apply*)

- a.  becoming a charter school
- b.  starting new magnets, academies, or small learning communities
- c.  starting other new academic programs or subjects
- d.  making other changes in school administration (e.g., changing school
- e.  hours)
- f.  other
- f.  no new programs

Briefly describe the new programs and the main changes in school operation and administration.

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