



Study of the Voluntary Public School Choice Program
FINAL REPORT



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

For

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

Prepared by

Robert K. Yin
Pirkko S. Ahonen
COSMOS Corporation
Bethesda, Md.

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Frank Brown, professor of education, University of North Carolina
Peter Cookson, dean of graduate school, Lewis and Clark College
David Heistad, executive director, Testing, Evaluation, and Student Information,
Minneapolis Public Schools
Valerie Lee, professor of education, University of Michigan
Janelle T. Scott, assistant professor of education, New York University
Paul Teske, dean, Graduate School of Public Affairs, University of
Colorado at Denver
Patrick Wolf, professor and endowed chair in school choice, University of
Arkansas
Todd Ziebarth, senior policy analyst, National Alliance for Public Charter
Schools

Patrick McKnight of George Mason University's Department of Psychology conducted the analyses described in section 3 of appendix A. These analyses support the findings in chapter 5. In addition, Clive Belfield of the Teachers College at Columbia University served as an independent consultant throughout the entire project, reviewing drafts of reports, including this final report. The final report also benefited from reviews of earlier versions by David Goodwin, Daphne Kaplan, and Reeba Daniel at the U.S. Department of Education (the Department), along with comments by two anonymous reviewers.

The bulk of the data came from the 13 sites, with Iris Lane and John Fiegel of the Department's VPSC Program Office graciously facilitating the process. Without the cooperation of all these parties, the evaluation could not have been conducted.

All this assistance notwithstanding, the authors are responsible for this final report and any errors it may contain.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Voluntary Public School Choice (VPSC) Program And Its Evaluation

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*¹ expanded public school choice opportunities for students. First, the new accountability requirements in Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* (Title I, Section 1116(b)) required 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 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).²

Second, the law created the VPSC Program (Title V, Subpart 3, Section 5241 of the *ESEA*), which is the subject of the current report. The program supports the emergence and growth of choice initiatives across the country, by assisting states and local school districts in developing innovative strategies to expand choice options for students.

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 competitive grants to 13 applicants. Awards ranged in size from \$2.8 million to \$17.8 million for an average award of \$9.2 million for five years, or approximately \$1.8 million per year. The VPSC-funded locations 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 contains the final assessment of the first five years of the VPSC Program (2002–07). The evaluation was charged with assessing the VPSC Program’s progress in meeting the goals and fulfilling the intent of the original legislation. The evaluation addressed three central questions:

- 1) What are the characteristics of the VPSC Program’s sites?
- 2) How and to what extent does the VPSC Program promote educational equity and excellence?
- 3) What academic achievement is associated with the VPSC Program?

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

² If all schools in a district have not made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for two or more consecutive years, the district must, “to the extent practicable,” establish a cooperative agreement for a transfer with other districts in the surrounding area. 34 C.F.R. 200.44(h)(1).

To address the third question, only a few of the VPSC sites provided the needed data. As a result, the evaluation's findings for this third question may come from too small a sample of sites or of VPSC choice enrollees to cover the VPSC Program's experience adequately.

In addition to the three central questions, the analysis also focused on four priorities in the original VPSC legislation: a) providing the widest possible choice to students in participating schools; b) promoting transfers of students from low- to higher-performing schools; c) forming interdistrict partnerships to allow students to transfer to a school in another district from that of their original school; and d) requiring sites to use funds to support transportation services for students (on the assumption that this would allow students to attend more attractive but also more distant schools).

The evaluation covers choice initiatives at 13 sites that received VPSC grant awards from the U.S. Department of Education in the fall of 2002. The 2002 grantees were nine districts, three state education agencies, and one nonprofit organization.³ However, the findings of this report draw conclusions about the VPSC Program as a whole, not the activities at any given VPSC site. At the same time, the evaluation does not cover a second round of 14 five-year grants made by the VPSC Program in the summer of 2007.

The relevant evaluation data came from several sources: multiple site visits to the VPSC sites; three rounds of surveys covering an average of 50 participating schools at each VPSC site; reviews of grantees' annual reports; and the collection of archival data about student performance. The archival data tracked individual student achievement trends, covering one or more academic years prior to the start of a VPSC initiative and as many academic years as possible during the implementation of the initiative. The trends were then compared to those for a group of students not enrolled in a VPSC choice initiative.

Brief Summary of Key Findings

Briefly summarized, at the end of five years, the VPSC Program, though limited to grant awards at only 13 sites, showed a variety of different public school choice arrangements working in a diverse array of communities across the country. Among the four legislative priorities,

- The VPSC Program made progress on the first priority in providing the widest variety of choice.
- Transfers from low- to higher-performing schools comprised only a portion of the students enrolled in the VPSC initiatives, with only three

³ The nonprofit organization operated charter schools and qualified as a school district, to be eligible for a VPSC award.

of the 13 sites limiting their enrollment to transfers from low- to higher-performing schools.

- Most of the VPSC sites limited their choice initiatives to within-district options, rather than developing interdistrict options.
- Relative to enrollment, transportation costs did not increase proportionately as might have been expected, because the VPSC initiatives permitted many students who were already attending distant schools to select schools closer to home.

Regarding student achievement trends, data from a highly limited set of VPSC sites and students enrolling in their choice initiatives showed improved trends in math and reading, compared to matched groups of non-enrolling students.

The gains were statistically significant, but the findings need to be tempered by several cautions:

- the voluntary nature of choosing to enroll in a VPSC initiative and the possibility that the VPSC enrollees were more highly motivated students than non-enrollees, thereby accounting for some or all of the differences in student achievement;
- the procedure for selecting the matched groups of non-enrolling students;
- the length of time covered by the trends (more annual data points came from the years before rather than after enrollment); and
- the fact that the data came from only four of the 13 VPSC sites and only six of 38 cohorts of annual enrollees across all of the VPSC sites.

Given all the cautions, the findings in this analysis of six cohorts from four VPSC sites offer early promise regarding the potential benefits of the VPSC Program.

Overview of the VPSC's Sites

The 13 VPSC sites were located across the country. Ten were located in predominantly urban communities, two in areas that cover both urban and rural regions, and one in an entirely rural area.

Participating schools covered all grade levels: 64 percent spanned the elementary grades, 15 percent the middle school grades, 11 percent the high school grades, and 10 percent were classified as “other” or had missing data. As a comparison, approximately 58

percent of schools nationwide are elementary schools, 17 percent are middle schools, 19 percent are high schools, and 6 percent are “other.”

The VPSC's choice initiatives varied in the timing of their implementation. Some of the sites started enrolling choice students as early as January 2003, while other sites started enrollment the following year or even later. Because all sites began some type of planning if not enrollment activity in 2002–03, the school year 2001–02 is considered the base year prior to the implementation of VPSC initiatives. The evaluation traced the sites’ activities for the duration of their five-year awards through 2006–07, although the majority of sites received no-cost extensions to support their operations for another year.

Once they started enrollment, the VPSC sites offered choice options to a new set of students every year. Therefore, for each cohort of “first-time enrollees,” the “intervention period” varied. At the student level, this variation was taken into account by defining different base years for each cohort of students. A consequence of this staggered pattern is that more years of annual data were available for the older cohorts than for the younger ones.

As with many other school districts in the country, nearly all of the 13 sites already had a broad variety of public school options prior to the VPSC Program. The program permitted sites to enhance or expand existing options, and sites did not need to start entirely new initiatives. Sites tried to make their entire array of choice options work well, but they did not necessarily track students’ participation on an option-by-option basis. Acknowledging this complication also is necessary for interpreting the findings in this report. For some of the sites, the VPSC funds were only part of the support for the identified initiative. As a result, the contribution of the VPSC Program may have been overestimated. At other sites, the VPSC funds not only supported the identified initiative but also partially supported other choice options at the same site. As a result, the contribution of the VPSC funds may have been underestimated. Unfortunately, the analysis was not able to distinguish the extent of these over- or underestimations.

The VPSC Program also started in the same year that federal legislation expanded support for Title I choice options. The legislation allowed spending up to 20 percent of Title I funds to support transportation costs for students transferring away from schools designated under Title I as “identified for improvement.” Three of the 13 sites defined their VPSC initiatives to coincide or overlap closely with their Title I choice options. However, most VPSC sites defined schools participating in their VPSC initiatives as a broader set of schools than simply those designated under Title I as identified for improvement.

Four Types of Choice Arrangements at the VPSC Sites

The sites varied greatly in the design of their choice initiatives, differing in the number of students served, the number of participating public schools, and the capacity to accommodate transfers. In addition, the sites differed by how they defined choice zones and managed the flow of students among participating schools. Despite this variation, sites also pursued some common paths.

First, although unique, the VPSC's choice initiatives tended to fall under four major categories, based on how sites 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 chose from education programs within the same school and did not transfer between schools.
- Two sites had initiatives involving 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.

Parent and community activities included a rich array of outreach, marketing, and communication efforts. Sites also engaged parents and community representatives in developing and implementing choice initiatives.

Capacity-enhancing activities included starting new academic programs or subjects, purchasing supplies and equipment for schools, and providing professional development to teaching staff. However, the sites' capacity-enhancing activities were not necessarily accompanied by an expansion of seats or classrooms at many of the receiving schools. For instance, none of the sites reported hiring more teaching staff or taking other steps simply to expand the number of seats to accommodate higher enrollments at the existing schools.

Student Participation at the VPSC Sites

In 2005–06, across 12 of the 13 VPSC sites, 24,921 students enrolled in choice initiatives, reflecting an overall participation rate of 2.8 percent of the students eligible to

enroll. This number of students represented those who had enrolled for the first time that year (“first-time enrollees”). The cumulative first-time enrollees, starting from the inception of the VPSC Program in 2002–03 until 2005–06, included 49,616 students. Thus, the most accurate estimate of participation falls somewhere between 24,921 and 49,616. (However, the cumulative enrollment overestimates the total enrollment because of an attrition factor that was not tracked by the sites.)

Overall, the number of enrolling students in the VPSC Program increased during the earlier years of the program but declined in the program’s fifth year. Of the VPSC sites’ enrolling students, ten provided eligibility and enrollment data for four consecutive years (2003–04 to 2006–07). These data permitted the estimation of trends through the fifth VPSC year (2006–07). The yearly data captured the number of first-time (i.e., new) enrollees each year, not the total number across all years. For these “first-time enrollees,” the trends showed that the VPSC Program at first averaged 696 enrollees per site in 2003–04, then reached a peak of 2,459 per site in 2005–06, and then declined to 2,167 per site in 2006–07.

The decline may have reflected the actual saturation of the VPSC initiatives because a good (but unmeasured) portion of the earlier years’ enrollees still remained enrolled in the later years, possibly limiting the seats available for first-time enrollees in the final year.

Participation rates also showed the same pattern, increasing from 2003–04 to 2005–06, and then declining in 2006–07. For the same ten sites reporting data from 2003–04 to 2006–07, the participation rates by first-time enrollees also increased from 1.5 percent to 4.1 percent, from 2003–04 to 2005–06, and then dropped to 3.0 percent in 2006–07.

Progress on Program Priorities

The VPSC legislation had four program priorities. Three priorities were: to provide the widest variety of choices; to encourage transfers from low- to higher-performing schools; and to provide opportunities for students to transfer to schools outside of their home districts. The fourth priority directed sites to use some of their VPSC funds to support transportation services and costs. Findings on these four priorities are discussed next.

The VPSC Program made progress on the first priority of providing the widest variety of choice. Sites expanded the assortment of choice options in participating schools and offered a diverse number of academic programs to transferring students. The VPSC initiatives also made efforts, through media campaigns and related activities, to increase parents’ awareness of the variety of education options available to them.

Transfers from low- to higher-performing schools comprised only a portion of the students enrolled in VPSC initiatives. Only three VPSC sites limited their enrollment to

transfers from low- to higher-performing schools. Another five sites permitted transfers within an entire district or zone, but only two of the sites tracked the portion of the transfers from low- to higher-performing schools. Aside from the five sites that either limited or tracked their transfers from low- to higher-performing schools, none of the other eight sites could provide such information. At the five sites, the confirmed transfers from low- to higher-performing schools represented 1,295 of 5,927, or 21.8 percent, of their total transfers from 2005–06.

The other eight VPSC sites either permitted a wider variety of transfers or had VPSC enrollments involving no transfers. Among the sites not tracking the low- to higher-performing transfers, one received a waiver from the Department to omit such tracking because all of the site’s enrollees were low-performing students (scoring “below proficient” on the state assessment), but they were not necessarily transferring from low- to higher-performing schools. Thus, across the entire VPSC Program, the actual portion of low- to higher-performing transfers could be larger or smaller, depending on the number of transfers at the eight sites that did not track or document the pattern of their transfers.

Most of the VPSC sites limited their choice initiatives to within-district options, rather than developing interdistrict partnerships. Although the implementation of formal interdistrict choice options might have expanded the variety of choices available to students even further, only five of the 13 VPSC sites created formal interdistrict options. At the eight remaining sites, many had existing transfer agreements with neighboring districts. However, these transfer options were separate from VPSC initiatives and were generally reviewed on a case-by-case basis. The majority of the VPSC initiatives did not directly promote student transfers to other school districts, and VPSC funds were not used to support interdistrict transfers at these sites.

Relative to enrollment, transportation costs did not increase proportionately as might have been expected. This is partly because the VPSC initiatives permitted many students who were already attending distant schools to select schools closer to home. As an 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. Under these circumstances, sites experienced minimal or reduced transportation costs.

Findings on Student Achievement Trends

The final student achievement trends came from six cohorts of VPSC enrollees and six corresponding groups of non-VPSC enrollees, across four of the 13 VPSC sites. The cross-site analysis first estimated the student achievement trends for these two groups separately and then compared the trends between the two groups.

These two analyses served two different purposes. The first, estimating trends separately, was needed to establish whether either the enrollee or matched comparison group was alone moving in a positive or negative direction. The goal was to determine whether the enrollee group might have been performing worse, regardless of any relative difference between it and the comparison students. The second, estimating trends relative to each other, then captured the comparison between the two groups. (The two analyses involved two different units of analysis, students and cohorts, and the values should not be compared across these two analyses.)

When the VPSC and non-VPSC trends were examined separately, the VPSC enrollees' trends were neutral in math and positive in reading, but not statistically significant. More important, the enrollee group's scores were not found to be declining in any way. In contrast, the non-enrollee group showed a declining trend in math proficiency that was statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level.⁴ The non-enrollees' trends for reading were positive but not significant.

When the VPSC and non-VPSC trends were compared, students enrolling in the VPSC initiatives had better student achievement trends than those not enrolling. The enrollees surpassed the non-enrollees in the trends for both mathematics and reading, with the differences in mathematics being statistically significant at the 99.9 percent confidence level and in reading at the 99 percent level. The comparison was based on a meta-analysis of effect sizes across all six of the cohorts, with the individual effect sizes for each cohort having already accounted for the demographic and baseline differences between the VPSC and non-VPSC groups. Because the units of measure were standardized scores, the trends cannot easily be translated into everyday educational units, but the effect sizes (.020 and .028 for mathematics and reading respectively) appear to be modest.

These findings need to be accompanied by several cautions about interpreting the differences in achievement trends between the enrolling and non-enrolling groups. The main cautions are as follows.

First, in all of the choice initiatives, students can choose to enroll or not. As a result, an enrollee group may represent more highly motivated students or differ in other unobserved ways from a non-enrollee group, accounting for some or all of any subsequent differences in student achievement.⁵

⁴ Confidence levels represent the probability that observed differences do not differ by chance alone but represent actual differences between two groups. Statistically, the analyses were based on the use of random-effects models, which maximize the appropriate use of all of the sites' data submitted for each of the six cohorts. Unlike fixed-effects models, the random-effects models assume that the available data come from but a sample of a fuller universe of students and that the sample therefore is likely to contain additional variance due to sampling errors (Bryk and Raudenbush, 1992).

⁵ To overcome self-selection and other biases, one frequently raised possibility has been to use data from sites' lotteries as if they were "natural experiments" (sites often use lotteries to select participants when the number of students exceeds the available choice opportunities). However, the lottery losers may not actually serve as the needed counterfactuals for lottery winners (see fuller discussion in appendix A).

Second, the trends in the present analysis leaned in the direction of having more of the data points precede rather than follow enrollment in the VPSC initiative. Confidence about the trends concurrent with a VPSC initiative, much less inferences about any effects, would be increased if analyses were based on a larger number of data points *following* enrollment.

Third, the data only came from a small sample of sites (four of 13) and from only a small sample of the enrolling students (six of 38 cohorts of annual enrollees across all of the VPSC sites by 2005-06). Data from more sites and cohorts would produce a firmer set of findings about the program as a whole. The ongoing VPSC Program can put renewed emphasis on obtaining such data, given the new round of five-year awards made in 2007. The possibilities of such additional data are especially strong, given that seven of the newly awarded sites were continuations from the first round of awards.

Given the cautions, the findings in this analysis of six cohorts from four VPSC sites offer early promise regarding the potential benefits of the VPSC Program.

Recommendations for improving future evaluations as the VPSC Program progresses with its 2007 cohort of grantees are detailed at the end of the full report. Aside from taking steps to overcome the earlier cautions about interpreting student achievement findings, two specific procedures could improve the robustness of future analyses:

- *Careful recordkeeping and tracking of all participants.* Sites should keep accurate and aggregate counts of all three types of choice participants (eligibles, applicants, and enrollees) and also should compile individual student-level data for choice enrollees' demographic characteristics and student achievement scores.
- *A modified procedure for defining comparison students.* Sites should not try to match any particular group of non-enrolling students, as the sites did in the current evaluation. Rather, the more desirable procedure would be for sites to provide data from a larger but nonselected set of non-enrolling students, such as those students remaining in the sending schools or even a districtwide set of students. Analytic procedures such as propensity score matching or some similar procedure conducted by the evaluation team could then provide a fairer selection of matched comparison group than the sites' procedures in the current evaluation.

1. THE VOLUNTARY PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE (VPSC) PROGRAM AND ITS EVALUATION

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*⁶ expanded public school choice opportunities for students. First, the new accountability requirements in Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* (Title I, Section 1116(b)) required 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 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).⁷

Second, and the subject of the present report, Congress created the VPSC Program (Title V, Subpart 3, Section 5241 of the *ESEA*) 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.

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. The program has made two rounds of awards, only the first of which is the subject of the present evaluation. The first round occurred in the fall of 2002, when the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) awarded five-year grants to 13 applicants (see exhibit 1-1). The second round occurred in the summer of 2007, when the Department made another set of five-year grants to 14 applicants, seven of which had received awards in the first round.

The VPSC Program was designed and initiated against a backdrop of increasing interest in public school choice. Such initiatives give students the option of enrolling at a public school other than the one to which they are assigned as a result of their residential location. Their choices can include: all the other public schools in a system; some of the schools (e.g., schools in a geographic region within the system); or specific schools (e.g., magnet schools, charter schools, or schools identified under Title I choice). Despite the variation in options, all choice is limited to public schools only.

The evaluation of the VPSC Program, focusing on the first round of awards only, addressed three questions to assess the VPSC Program's progress in meeting the goals and fulfilling the intent of the original legislation. The three central questions Congress asked were:

⁶ The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (P.L. 107-110) amended the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*.

⁷ If all schools in a district have not made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for two or more consecutive years, the district must, "to the extent practicable," establish a cooperative agreement for a transfer with other districts in the surrounding area. 34 C.F.R. 200.44(h)(1).

Exhibit 1-1

Location of the VPSC Grantees (2002 Awards)

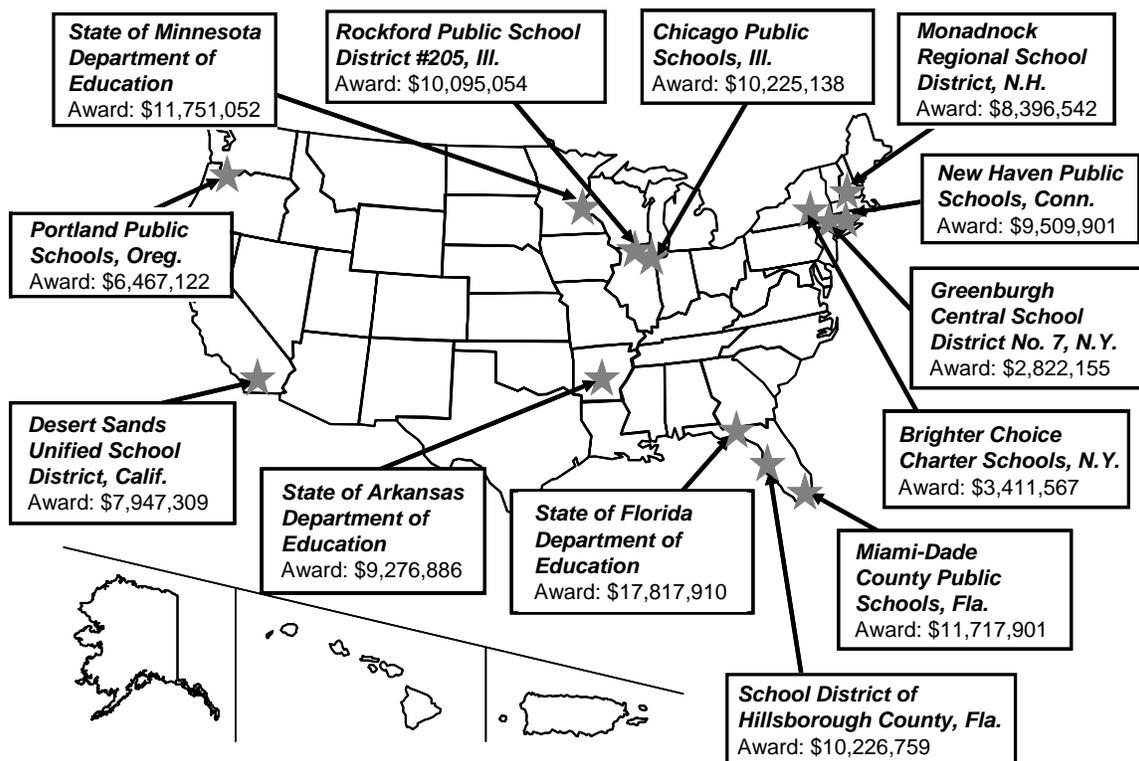


Exhibit Reads: One of the 13 VPSC grantees, Portland Public Schools in Oregon, received a five-year VPSC award of \$6,467,122.

- 1) What are the characteristics of the VPSC Program's sites?
- 2) How and to what extent does the VPSC Program promote educational equity and excellence?
- 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 extent and nature of student participation in the choice initiatives funded by the program, as well as sites' pursuit of the stated goals of the VPSC legislation. The legislation 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 that of their original school; and
- d) Require sites to use funds to support transportation services for students (on the assumption that this would allow students to attend more attractive but also more distant schools).

Question three pertains to Congress's interest in having the evaluation investigate the achievement outcomes associated with the VPSC Program. It asks whether students who participated in the VPSC Program had greater academic outcomes in reading and math compared to similar students that had not participated in the program.

This report covers the three evaluation questions and related topics. After a brief description of the methodology in chapter 2, the report is organized as follows:

Chapter 3 addresses the first evaluation question by providing a detailed analysis of the characteristics of the VPSC Program's grantees. This chapter also categorizes the sites by type of choice arrangement, documents important program practices, and describes other choice initiatives at the VPSC sites.

Chapter 4 addresses the second evaluation question and discusses how and to what extent the program has promoted educational equity and excellence. The chapter presents trends in eligibility, applicants, and enrollees at the sites. This chapter also examines the degree to which the program has provided students with: a wide variety of choice; opportunities to transfer from low- to higher-performing schools; interdistrict choice options; and transportation support.

Chapter 5 addresses the third evaluation question by presenting and discussing student achievement trends concurrent with the VPSC Program.

Finally, Chapter 6 of the report identifies useful choice practices emerging from the VPSC Program and discusses implications for the program and future research.

2. SUMMARY OF EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the national evaluation was to assess the experience of the VPSC Program. The evaluation followed a mixed quantitative and qualitative methods research design, with data coming from a variety of original and archival sources (for a full description of the evaluation methodology, see appendix A: *Detailed Evaluation Methodology*).

2.1 Evaluation Design for a Program Evaluation

The evaluation covered the 13 sites that received VPSC awards from the Department in the fall of 2002. However, the analysis and findings in this report aimed at drawing conclusions about the VPSC Program as a whole, not the activities at any given VPSC site.⁸

Because choice initiatives can involve schools and students in a variety of roles, the evaluation defined the schools' roles in the following manner:

- (a) *Sending* schools: schools from which students transfer;
- (b) *Receiving* schools: schools to which students transfer;
- (c) *Both sending and receiving*: schools that have students both transferring in and out as part of the same choice initiative; and
- (d) *Within-school* initiatives: initiatives with no inter-school transfers, because students choose among different education programs within the same school.

Similarly, the evaluation defined the students' roles in the following manner:

- (a) *Eligible students*: all students who could potentially participate in a VPSC initiative;
- (b) *Applicants*: the set of eligible students who applied either to attend another public school or to participate in an academic program within their original school; and
- (c) *Enrollees*: those students who successfully applied and enrolled in a school or program as a result of a VPSC initiative.

⁸ Each site engaged a "local" evaluator to assess the specific site's progress and accomplishments.

The evaluation accounted for the varied timing of the VPSC's choice initiatives in the following manner. After receiving their five-year awards in the fall of 2002, some of the sites started enrolling choice students as early as January 2003. Other sites carried out planning activities first and then started enrollments the following year or later. Because all sites began some type of activity in 2002–03, the school year 2001–02 is considered the base year prior to the implementation of the VPSC initiatives. The evaluation traced the sites' activities for the duration of their five-year awards, through 2006–07.

Sites also offered choice options to a new set of students every year. Therefore, for each cohort of students, the “intervention period” varied. At the student level, this variation was taken into account by defining different base years for each cohort of students. A consequence of this staggered pattern is that more years of annual data were available for the older cohorts than for the younger ones.

Finally, the evaluation design called for the collection of data from comparison groups for every VPSC site. The groups mainly consisted of students who were not enrolled in the VPSC initiatives but who had similar demographic and academic characteristics as the enrolling students. The VPSC sites provided data about these comparison groups. (See chapter 5 for additional details.)

From a design standpoint, two complications diminished the evaluation's ability to assess the VPSC Program. First, all of the sites already had one or more choice options 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. Overall, even when sites used VPSC funds exclusively to support a new VPSC Program initiative, the sites had other unrelated choice options operating at the same time (see exhibit 2-1).

Second, the VPSC Program permitted sites to expand existing arrangements rather than to establish new ones. The majority of the sites chose to expand existing initiatives. Separating the VPSC-funded portion of a choice initiative from other aspects of the initiative has not been easily delineated.

2.2 Data Collection

The data used in this evaluation came from a variety of sources. These included: multiple site visits to the VPSC sites; surveys covering an average of 50 participating schools at each VPSC site; and the collection of archival data about student achievement as well as reviews of the grantees' reports to the Department.

The team conducted three rounds of site visits to every grantee site. 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

Exhibit 2-1

Other Public School Choice Options at the VPSC Sites

Other choice options	Number of sites with other public school choice options in addition to the VPSC-funded initiative*
Magnet schools	13
Charter schools	11
Title I choice	11
Interdistrict options	9
Other district options	9
Other state options	5
Total for all 13 sites	58
Average for each site	4 or more**

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

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

**Each of the 13 sites had an average of four or more public school choice options in addition to the VPSC-funded initiative.

Sources: Analysis of site visit data and Grant Performance Reports, by COSMOS Corporation, 2007.

schools). The sites chose two schools that had a lot of choice activity (i.e., many transferring students), so that the site visit team could observe the VPSC initiative in action at the school level.

A two-person team conducted all three rounds of field visits. The team's data collection activities were guided by field protocols (see appendix B). These protocols included interviews with the VPSC site's project director, staff, and other key participants in the choice initiative. The protocols also called for the collection of documents and archival data related to the interviews.

The team also conducted three rounds of surveys with participating schools at VPSC sites. The surveys were brief, mainly gathering data to corroborate the schools' participation in initiatives but not to investigate the schools' other conditions in any depth.⁹

⁹ The survey covered 12 of the 13 sites in the VPSC Program because the 13th site focused mainly on technical assistance to districts statewide.

The surveys were based on a closed-ended questionnaire (see appendix B) sent to school principals. The questionnaire requested 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 was being shared with parents; and whether staff members were receiving professional development related to school choice.

The survey included all of the schools that were eligible to participate in the choice initiative. One statewide initiative was an exception: no schools were surveyed in this initiative; instead, the districts with five or more students participating in the choice initiative were asked to complete the survey at the district level.¹⁰

In the survey's third and final round, the evaluation team distributed questionnaires to 689 schools. Respondents at 630 schools completed and returned the questionnaire, resulting in an overall response rate of 91 percent. The response rates for the earlier two rounds were 75 and 91 percent, respectively (see appendix A, exhibit A-2).

The data collection also included archival data. The data covered individual student achievement scores for one or more academic years prior to the start of a VPSC initiative through as many academic years as possible during the implementation of the initiative. The data covered both the students enrolled in the VPSC choice initiatives and matched comparison groups of students.

The archival data also came from reviews of annual performance reports (2003–06) submitted by the VPSC grantees to the VPSC Program Office at the Department. Each year, the office issues reporting requirements, based in part on the data collection suggestions by the national evaluation team. However, the review did not include the grantees' final performance reports, which were to be submitted after the conclusion of the national evaluation.

2.3 Analytic Priorities

2.3.1 Cross-site Analysis

The general analytic strategy in dealing with evaluation data was to examine the extent of any relationship between a VPSC initiative and concurrent educational outcomes, including equity, excellence, and student achievement.

The analysis began by focusing on within-site conditions. A separate database, consisting of narrative and numeric material, brought together all of the data about a single

¹⁰ At this site, the district was the appropriate respondent because many of the participating students were not assigned to specific schools, either prior to or as part of the VPSC initiative.

VPSC initiative and addressed such issues as: (1) distinguishing ongoing choice options from the VPSC initiative at each site; and (2) calling attention to contextual conditions potentially related to the VPSC initiative. The creation of this database was itself a qualitative task and aimed at strengthening the possible association between VPSC-supported actions at a site and later outcomes. An important part of this procedure was 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 outcomes.

The primary focus of the national evaluation was then to conduct a cross-site analysis to arrive at findings for the VPSC Program as a whole, rather than to assess the accomplishments at any given site. The cross-site analysis identified patterns across the VPSC sites. For instance, findings and lessons from the VPSC Program revealed different types of choice initiatives, with the 13 sites arrayed into subgroups based on the design of their VPSC-funded choice arrangement (see chapter 3). The subgroups helped provide greater insight into the associated outcomes from choice initiatives and also served as practical examples to be considered for implementation by other districts in the future.

The practical examples were part of an effort that came 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: 1) districts implementing the choice provisions of Title I, and 2) districts wanting to start or strengthen their own public school choice initiatives independent of the Title I requirements.

2.3.2 Student-level Analysis

The evaluation collected and analyzed student achievement trends at the VPSC sites. The evaluation invested extensive efforts in getting sites to collect the needed student achievement data. Data cleaning and clarification of the data files submitted by the sites also consumed time and resources. Chapter 5 describes the methodological techniques and the findings (also see section 3, “Methods for Analyzing Student Achievement Data” in appendix A for the detailed analysis plan).

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VPSC PROGRAM'S SITES

The Department awarded grants to three types of organizations in the fall of 2002: 1) nine local or regional school districts; 2) three state education agencies; and 3) one nonprofit, charter school organization.¹¹ Each type of organization engaged in a unique choice initiative. Despite this variation, sites pursued some common paths. First, the school choice initiatives tended to fall under four major categories based on how sites defined choice arrangements and directed the flow of enrolling 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 enrollment.

3.1 Overview of VPSC Sites

3.1.1 Sites' Characteristics

The 13 VPSC sites were located across the country. Ten were located in predominantly urban communities, two in areas that cover both urban and rural regions, and one in an entirely rural area (see exhibit 3-1). Ten of the locales represented a total population of over 100,000 people each. The public school student populations were mostly diverse and of low-income backgrounds. Nonwhite students comprised over 60 percent of the student population at seven school systems represented by the sites. Similarly, over 60 percent of the students were eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program¹² at seven sites.

3.1.2 Brief Descriptions of Sites' Choice Initiatives

The VPSC sites varied greatly in the design of their choice initiatives. The sites differed widely in the number of students served, the number of participating public schools, and the capacity to accommodate transfers (see exhibit 3-2 for brief descriptions). They differed by how they defined choice zones and managed the flow of students among participating schools. Furthermore, four sites used VPSC funds to support a preexisting

¹¹ The nonprofit organization operated charter schools and qualified as a school district, to be eligible for a VPSC award.

¹² 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 3-1

Community Characteristics

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

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

Source: NCES, Common Core of Data, 2004–05.

or preplanned expansion of districtwide choice. Nearly all of the others used the funds to support a specific function within an environment that already had other existing choice options. Only two sites had minimal choice options prior to VPSC because they had no Title I schools and only a preexisting magnet program.

Exhibit 3-2

Brief Descriptions of the VPSC Sites' Choice Initiatives

VPSC grantee	Award Amt. (\$m)	Description of initiative, from 2002–03 to 2005–06
A. PREEXISTING OR PREPLANNED DISTRICTWIDE INITIATIVES		
Chicago Public Schools, Ill.	\$10.2	Has augmented preexisting districtwide choice by using VPSC funds to support schools in neighborhood learning clusters (NLCs) of four-to-six K–8 schools each. Four clusters started in 2003–04, three started in 2004–05, and three 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.
School District of Hillsborough County, Fla.	\$10.2	Has supported two cohorts of students (K–12) starting in 2004–05, enrolling in a districtwide controlled choice initiative, involving seven regions (and an urban “zone” within each region) and the creation or expansion of “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.
Minnesota Department of Education	\$11.8	Has supported three cohorts of transfer students in a preexisting program allowing MPS students qualifying for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program to transfer to nearly 60 schools in eight surrounding suburban districts, and suburban or MPS students to attend 12 schools in MPS (K–12). VPSC funds partially support Parent Information Centers, some transportation, and related support services.
Portland Public Schools, Oreg.	\$6.5	Has supported three 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.
B. INITIATIVES ENHANCING OTHER EXISTING OPTIONS		
Brighter Choice Charter Schools, N.Y.	\$3.4	Has supported the first cohort of students by opening three new charter middle schools in Albany in 2005–06. The site has continued to support charter school development and to coordinate supplemental educational services.
Desert Sands Unified School District, Calif.	\$7.9	Has supported four 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.
Florida Department of Education	\$17.8	Has provided technical assistance to school districts as they develop and implement their choice plans. Funds assist a subset of mentor districts (already successful at choice options) and mentee districts (needing to expand options), and postsecondary institutions (to support school choice information and technical assistance centers).
Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Fla.	\$11.7	Has supported three cohorts of students (K–12) in two of eight transportation zones in the district. Provides funds to create choice programs at under-enrolled schools. The site has created or enhanced choice programs, starting in 2003–04 with one new “commuter” school in Zone 1; in 2004–05, expanded to a total of nine schools in Zone 1, and four schools in Zone 2; and in 2005–06 added one additional choice program in each of the two zones.
New Haven Public Schools, Conn.	\$9.5	Has supported four 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 and 2005–06.
Rockford Public School District #205, Ill.	\$10.1	Has supported four cohorts of students transferring from low-performing schools (K–8) to identified receiving schools. VPSC funds provide support to receiving schools; the Parent Resource Center; parent and transportation services; and tutoring programs run by community or faith-based organizations.

(Exhibit 3-2, Section C begins on the next page)

(Exhibit 3-2, continued)

VPSC grantee	Award Amt. (\$m)	Description of initiative, from 2002–03 to 2005–06
C. INITIATIVES CREATING A NEW CHOICE OPTION		
Arkansas Department of Education	\$9.3	Has supported four 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.
Greenburgh Central School District No. 7, N.Y.	\$2.8	Has supported three cohorts of middle and high school students (7–12) attending new academies of choice within middle and high school. Has also supported two cohorts of elementary students having expanded to the elementary level in 2004–05 with the implementation of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (IB) to offer enhanced programming to all K–6 students.
Monadnock Regional School District, N.H.	\$8.4	Has supported four 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. In 2005–06, expanded interdistrict choice to the elementary level and has added new choice programs at two high schools and two middle schools.

Exhibit Reads: Chicago Public Schools received an award of \$10.2 million to augment a preexisting districtwide choice program.

Sources: Analysis of site visit data and Grant Performance Reports, by COSMOS Corporation, 2007.

3.1.3 Participating Schools

The majority of participating schools were elementary schools. Participating schools covered all grade levels: 64 percent spanned the elementary grades, 15 percent the middle school grades, 11 percent the high school grades, and 10 percent were classified as “other” or had missing data (see exhibit 3-3). As a comparison, approximately 58 percent of schools nationwide are elementary schools, 17 percent are middle schools, 19 percent are high schools, and 6 percent are “other.” Although most of the sites focused their choice initiatives broadly across all grade levels, four VPSC sites only targeted grades K–8, which may account for the slightly higher prevalence of participating elementary schools.

3.2 Four Types of Choice Arrangements at the VPSC Sites

The VPSC Program allowed grantees to design choice initiatives to meet their own needs. Nevertheless, going beyond the unique circumstances at each site, the initiatives fell into a four-fold typology of choice arrangements (see exhibit 3-4).

Exhibit 3-3

Grade Span Distribution of Participating Schools*

School level	Number	Percent
Elementary school	439	63.7
Middle school	105	15.2
High school	73	10.6
Other**	19	2.8
Not applicable/missing***	53	7.7
TOTAL	689	100.0

Exhibit Reads: 439 (or 63.7 percent) of the schools were elementary schools.

*Includes 12 of the 13 sites in the VPSC Program because the 13th site focused mainly on technical assistance to districts.

**“Other” is defined by NCES as any grade span configuration, including ungraded, not falling within the three categories of elementary, middle, and high.

***“Not applicable/missing” contains those that either did not have school-level CCD data available or did not have data available for the grade span variable.

Source: NCES, Common Core of Data, 2004–05.

Exhibit 3-4

Four Types of Choice Arrangements

Type of choice arrangement	No. of VPSC sites	No. of schools*
Predesignated sending or receiving schools	5	95
Same schools are both sending and receiving schools	5	524
Within-school options only	1	5
Mixture of the first three groups	2	6
TOTAL	13	630

Exhibit Reads: Five VPSC sites implemented choice arrangements with predesignated sending or receiving schools.

*Based on the 630 School Survey respondents. The survey covered 12 of the 13 sites in the VPSC Program because the thirteenth site focused mainly on technical assistance.

Source: Survey of Schools, COSMOS Corporation, 2006–07.

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

Under this first arrangement, three of the five sites defined their sending schools as “low-performing” according to the *NCLB* criteria regarding schools identified for improvement. However, because the VPSC legislation did not prescribe a standard for identifying “higher-performing” schools, the program and its sites defined the receiving schools simply as those that were not “low-performing” schools. During the second year of its VPSC initiative at one of these sites, initially eligible receiving schools later became identified for improvement. At that point, the site decided these schools would be ineligible to serve as receiving schools.

The fourth and fifth sites in this first type of arrangement predesignated sending and receiving schools but did not attempt to limit either group according to any low- to high-performing criteria. One of these sites started several new receiving (charter) schools whose performance could not, by definition, be known at the time when transfers began. The last of these sites defined all schools in the system as possible sending schools, and the receiving “schools” were predesignated off-campus sites.

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

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 could have suburban-like, higher-performing schools at their perimeter and urban-like, low-performing schools at their center. While the site limited transfers to within-zone choices, the initiative nevertheless gave students the opportunity to transfer from schools identified for improvement to higher-performing schools (and from an urban to a more suburban environment). At the same time, students also could transfer in the reverse direction.

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. However, in comparing the two types of arrangements, those with the nondesignated (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.

Third, one site established a within-school initiative, in which students chose from education programs within the same school. In this third type, all students remained at their original schools. At the single VPSC site that implemented this third type of arrangement, students at their high school chose 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, all students had the same academic program, but the students chose between two forms of assessment: being graded on a project or taking a test.

Fourth, two initiatives involved a mixture of the first three types. One VPSC initiative had a mix of choices, including education programs within the same school, designated receiving schools, and schools that could be both sending and receiving. The second site under this last arrangement encompassed 26 school districts in the same state, with each district defining its own choice options. VPSC activities provided technical assistance to these districts in implementing public school choice.

3.3 Core Activities in the VPSC Choice Initiatives

Despite the unique circumstances of each of the VPSC initiatives, 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 enrollees.

3.3.1 Engaging, Notifying, and Reaching Parents and Community Members

Sites undertook large-scale efforts to engage, notify, and reach parents and community members. From the beginning, the VPSC sites invested in outreach to parents and communities to ensure that public school choice initiatives met local needs. Sites started the outreach at an early stage. Sites even notified parents and community members of the plans for the choice initiatives to provide an opportunity for everyone to express preferences for the educational content, student selection criteria, and design of parent information centers (see exhibit 3-5).

As the sites transitioned from the planning to implementation stage, several sites created ways to keep parents and community members actively engaged. For example, sites implemented information centers that sponsored workshops on parenting skills, health and nutrition, and computer literacy, as well as public school choice.

Exhibit 3-5

Parent Involvement Activities Reported by School Officials in School Survey

Type of involvement	Sites' activities
Establishing the initiative	Market research, surveys of parents, community and parent advisors, community focus groups and forums
Planning the initiative	Parent advisory committees, principal and teacher input, parent representation on lottery and parent information center committees
Implementing the initiative	Parent participation in daily instruction, community support for curriculum and materials, parent and student surveys, specialists or counselors, workshops on parenting skills, and technical assistance to schools on parental involvement
Community outreach activities	Face-to-face parent and community outreach, media campaigns, direct mailing, and parent information centers

Exhibit Reads: Sites engaged parents in establishing the choice initiatives through market research, surveys, advisory teams, and focus groups.

Sources: Analysis of site visit data and Grant Performance Reports, by COSMOS Corporation, 2007.

To notify parents of their choice options and the details of the enrollment process, VPSC sites used a variety of outreach activities. Community outreach activities included face-to-face meetings, enrollment fairs, open houses at the receiving schools, media announcements, and letters to parents (see exhibit 3-6). Some sites communicated with parents and community members in multiple languages. Over half of the VPSC Program's sites had brochures and applications available in both English and Spanish, and several reported advertising in local Spanish-language media outlets. One site reported that running an advertisement on a local Spanish-language radio station was among its most successful outreach efforts. Other sites reported printing materials in Chinese, Hmong, Lao, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Somali, and Vietnamese. Public agencies also helped the sites to field phone calls from non-English speakers.

During 2006–07, a large portion of school administrators at the VPSC sites indicated their belief that most or all parents and families were aware of choice options available to them (see exhibit 3-7). At the average VPSC site, 70 percent of the administrators reported that all or most of parents and families had a good understanding of their choice options.¹³

¹³ Conducting a formal survey of parents' perspectives was beyond the scope of the evaluation. However, parents were informally interviewed during the site visits. On those occasions, parents voiced no complaints about the choice options.

Exhibit 3-6

Schools' Reported Efforts to Notify Parents of Their Choice Options, 2006–07*

Response category	Average percent of schools per VPSC site**
Individual, face-to-face meetings with school officials	63.7
Group meetings with school officials	59.4
Enrollment fairs or similar events	60.5
Open houses at receiving schools	57.5
Letter mailed to parents and families	68.1
Letter sent home with students	57.0
Announcements in community newspapers and other media	63.6
Contacts made by district's parent information center(s)	43.0

Exhibit Reads: On average, for any VPSC site, 63.7 percent of schools reported having individual, face-to-face meetings between parents and school officials related to choice options.

*The School Survey covered 12 of the 13 sites in the VPSC Program because the 13th site focused mainly on technical assistance.

**The averages represent the number of schools, not the number of parents, involved in these activities (the number of parents could not be determined); schools could appear under more than one category.

Source: Survey of Schools, COSMOS Corporation, 2006–07.

Exhibit 3-7

Parents' and Families' Understanding of Choice Reported by School Officials, 2006–07*

School-reported proportion of parents and families having a good understanding of their choice options	Average percent of schools per VPSC site
All	25.7
Most, over 50 percent	44.6
Some, 20–50 percent	21.6
Few, less than 20 percent	8.0

Exhibit Reads: On average, for any VPSC site, 25.7 percent of schools reported that all parents and families have a good understanding of their choice options.

*The School Survey covered 12 of the 13 sites in the VPSC Program because the 13th site mainly focused on technical assistance.

Source: Survey of Schools, COSMOS Corporation, 2006–07.

In some cases, sites delayed notifying parents of their choice options until their states published the names of schools identified as low-performing. 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. However, states' deadlines for issuing this information have varied over the VPSC years, so the delayed notification was episodic rather than chronic at any given site.

Over the course of their grants, sites shifted their outreach strategies and resources. One site reduced its districtwide marketing efforts but increased the schools' involvement in the choice notification process. The same site also phased down its parent resource centers, previously VPSC-supported. Instead, the site upgraded its Web site to include more comprehensive choice information directly accessible to parents. It also encouraged schools to provide information directly to parents.

3.3.2 Capacity-Enhancing Activities

Sites used VPSC funds to enhance the capacity of schools. The sites participating in the VPSC initiatives supported a variety of capacity-enhancing activities, including: starting new academic programs; purchasing supplies and equipment; and providing professional development to staff. Capacity-enhancing activities included efforts to both accommodate and attract transferring students at receiving schools (see exhibit 3-8). In addition to improvements to existing schools, sites increased capacity within the system by opening new schools. For the most part, the new schools were planned in advance of the VPSC initiative, although VPSC funds later helped to start new academic programs at these schools.

Activities to enhance school-level programming included focusing on professional development programs and education programs at all levels. The programs at one site included a foreign language program at the elementary level; an arts and academics program at the middle school level; and law, geographic information systems, and arts or design programs at the high school level. Across the sites, curricular topics covered by the capacity-enhancing activities covered academic subjects, such as language arts, science, and mathematics as well as research-based comprehensive programs such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) program (see exhibit 3-9).

Although some of the new and enhanced education programs were nationally recognized with a record of improving student performance, in general, VPSC sites did not rely on scientifically based evidence to guide their selection of education programs. To date, the VPSC sites lack systematic documentation of such research for many of their capacity-enhancing education programs.

Despite this approach, educational programming options implemented at the VPSC sites have received outside recognition. For example, an innovative science curriculum at one VPSC site resulted in new collaboration within a school district. The district utilized

Exhibit 3-8

Capacity-Enhancing Activities

Type of activity*	Examples of programs supported
Starting new schools or reopening older schools (4)	Distance learning; charter schools; commuter schools; schools with thematic curricula
Starting new or enhancing existing programs at schools (9)	Literacy curriculum; mathematics and science themes; foreign language programs; environmental science enhancements for all academic subjects; International Baccalaureate
Implementing tutorial and other support programs (6)	During and after-school tutoring at school or by community-based organizations; assistance to supplemental service providers; hiring of support specialists
Providing professional development to school staffs (12)	Professional development workshops and summer institutes, covering choice, the transfer process, or new or enhanced curricula

Exhibit Reads: Four VPSC sites have started new schools or reopened older schools, including a distance learning school; charter schools; commuter schools; and schools with thematic curricula.

*The number in parentheses represents the number of sites conducting each type of activity.

Sources: Analysis of site visit data and Grant Performance Reports, COSMOS Corporation, 2007.

the Web-based science curriculum in its entire set of K–3 classrooms. The VPSC initiative provided training and technical assistance in installing equipment and setting up the classrooms, as well as ongoing training and assistance to teachers. At another site, a strong environmental studies program—developed to attract children from low-performing schools to higher-performing schools—received a number of honors. For example, the VPSC initiative received the Governor’s Environmental and Economic Leadership Award, the state’s highest environmental recognition.

Other conditions at the schools were important in encouraging enrollment in the choice initiatives. Existing academic programs, as well as other conditions at receiving schools, were important in encouraging enrollment. Other than VPSC-funded activities, administrators indicated that the preexisting academic programs were a major factor in students’ decisions to transfer. Similarly, interviewed principals, teachers, and parents overwhelmingly responded that the main reason students had decided to transfer to specific schools was their preexisting reputations for high performance. One VPSC site’s own parent survey confirmed the administrators’ conclusion that parents tended to choose schools according to the perceived rigor of academic programs.

Exhibit 3-9

Illustrative Curriculum Topics at the VPSC Sites

VPSC Site	Capacity-enhancing activity	Illustrative curriculum topics
A	Individualized, self-paced instruction using <i>Arkansas Virtual School (ARVS)</i> curriculum, derived from <i>K-12, Inc.</i> -developed curriculum, using technology and distance learning for virtual learning environment.	Research-based curriculum: Language Arts/English, Math, Science, History, Arts, Music, Physical Education/Health Innovative K-3 Elementary Science
B	New charter schools.	<i>International Baccalaureate (IB)</i> <i>Junior Great Books</i> (Language Arts), <i>Connected Mathematics</i> ; FOSS (<i>Full Option Science System</i>), and the <i>A History of U.S.</i> series
C	Cluster schools implementing themes such as science and mathematics, fine and performing arts, international scholars, literature and writing, and world languages.	Enhancements to curricula Lab improvements Clubs After-school educational programs
D	Receiving schools augmenting curricula, giving greater emphasis to grade-appropriate and technology-rich environmental education programs.	K-12 interdisciplinary Environmental Studies Curriculum (enhanced by hands-on, inquiry based learning opportunities that integrate technology)
E	Site's focus is on technical assistance to districts	
F	Within-school academies with 250-300 students per academy and the <i>International Baccalaureate</i> (including <i>IB Primary Years Programme</i>).	Humanities and International Studies (HAIS) Math, Arts, Science, and Technology (MAST) Excelsior Humanities Academy Woodland Inventors, Technicians, and Scientists (WITS)
G	Attractor programs at schools, designed to encourage urban students to select suburban schools.	Themes offered are fine arts, computer technology, math and communication technology, aquatics, sign language, culinary arts, and environmental science
H	Schools are selecting academic themes with proven track records.	Themes include pre- <i>IB</i> , literacy through the arts, pre-medicine, <i>Waterford</i> early reading (literacy through media use), and college prep
I	Schools are offering supplemental programs to students.	<i>GEMS (Girls in Engineering, Math, and Science)</i> , <i>ACE</i> girls and boys programs, the <i>National Youth Sports Program</i> , and the <i>Learning Works</i> program
J	Schools are opening unique programs of study available to any student in the area.	The Academy of Arts and Design HS program The Law, Public Safety, and Security (LPSS) HS program The GIS (Geographic Information Systems) HS program Arts and Academics MS program World Language elementary program
K	Schools are developing and implementing themes and magnet programs.	Focus on Literacy programs
L	Expanding higher-performing educational options and opening small learning communities.	Arts and Technology Science and Technology Young Women's Academy Young Men's Academy Elementary language immersion program
M	Schools are implementing enhanced programming for all students.	Three faith-based after-school programs for tutoring and educational experiences

Exhibit Reads: Site A used the ARVS curriculum as its capacity-enhancing activity.

Sources: Analysis of site visit data and Grant Performance Reports, COSMOS Corporation, 2007.

Students also may have been attracted by schools' physical facilities or perceived safety. The VPSC legislation prohibits the use of program funds for construction, but sites could use funds from other sources to make physical improvements. At one VPSC site, a newly reopened 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 were new charter schools with a similar mix of funding sources.

Other participating districts were already in the process of reconfiguring existing schools, opening new schools, and renovating schools. These actions did not cover all of the receiving schools. Nevertheless, the VPSC sites frequently cited these district activities as reasons for not undertaking specific steps to expand seat capacity at the schools. Many participating schools were also under-enrolled and could accommodate all transfer applicants. Furthermore, seat capacity was generally determined at the school-level, providing flexibility to allow for reconfigurations within classrooms to accommodate more students.

Some of the sites actively examined potential options to expand available seats, but few implemented any specific changes. Some of the options the sites explored included: hiring more teachers, opening satellite learning centers, expanding online classes, adding new wings to existing schools, and building new facilities. One site modified the method principals used to assess their schools' available seat capacity, which resulted in more accurate counts, but not necessarily more seats. Another site expanded its VPSC initiative to include additional schools, in this manner increasing the total number of seats available each year.

Overall, however, the sites' capacity-enhancing activities were not necessarily accompanied by an expansion of seats or classrooms at many of the receiving schools. For instance, none of the sites reported hiring more teaching staff or taking other steps simply to expand the number of seats to accommodate higher enrollments at the existing schools.

3.4 Initial Implications for Federal Education Policy and Local Education Practice

The discussion thus far has treated the VPSC Program like many other federal discretionary programs—tracing VPSC-funded activities at each site as if the sites were supporting discrete, federally funded projects. However, from the perspective of the VPSC Program's role in informing federal education policymaking and local education practice, the reality at each site requires closer attention. First, as with many other school districts in the country, nearly all of the 13 sites already had a broad variety of public school options prior to the VPSC Program. Second, the VPSC Program permitted sites to enhance existing options, and sites did not need to start entirely new initiatives.

3.4.1 A Variety of Other Choice Initiatives

New choice initiatives, such as those funded by the VPSC Program, did not occur on a blank slate. Public school choice has been available in many school districts for decades. Some of the most common choice options have been: magnet schools, opportunities to transfer to different schools in a district, state-initiated choice options, options for students with at-risk conditions, and, most recently, charter schools. Likewise, districts with Title I schools have offered choice options since 1994. Overall, most districts by now have a wide selection of choice options.

The experiences at the 13 VPSC sites did not differ. All of the 13 sites had existing choice options prior to the VPSC Program. Some of the sites had a wide array of such options, with some students eligible to participate in two or more options. Although sites tried to make their entire array of choice options work well, they did not necessarily track students' participation on an option-by-option basis. For federal policy, the implications are clear. The benefits of investing in a particular public school choice initiative may not be easily isolated, given the existing array of choices available to students.

Choice contexts in different states also can vary markedly. Going one step further, any expanded federal support for public school choice might more likely be administered on a formula basis through state departments of education rather than as direct, discretionary awards to local school districts or other local entities. The VPSC Program's experience, with three awards going to state departments of education, potentially preview some of the features of such a scenario. In particular, the VPSC experience showed that marked differences existed among states' ongoing choice priorities. They varied from using federal funds to: provide technical assistance; meet the settlement terms of significant court rulings; or support an innovative, off-campus choice option (see appendix C, exhibit C-1, for more detail).

The variations among these three states did not just reflect differences in choice preferences. The variations reflected considerably different conditions among states. Thus, any expansion of federal funding through state allocations may have to anticipate the diversity of contexts among states.

3.4.2 Implications of the VPSC Program's Main Condition of Award: Sites Could *Either* Support New Initiatives *or* Enhance or Expand Existing Ones

Rather than specifying any particular choice model, the VPSC Program gave sites the flexibility to define their own procedures. Furthermore, the program permitted sites either to start a new choice initiative or to "enhance or expand" an existing one. The flexibility was important because sites could craft a new initiative but also work within their existing tapestry of options.

Acknowledging this complication is necessary for interpreting the findings in the remainder of this report. For some of the sites, the VPSC funds were only part of the support for the identified initiative. As a result, the contribution of the VPSC Program may have been overestimated. At other sites, the VPSC funds not only supported the identified initiative but also partially supported other choice options at the same site. As a result, the contribution of VPSC funds may have been underestimated. Unfortunately, the current analysis was not able to distinguish the extent of these over- or underestimations.

Sites could use VPSC funds to partially fund preexisting initiatives. Most of the VPSC-funded initiatives enhanced existing choice arrangements, complicating any attempts to distinguish “new” from “old.” Enhancements meant that these same arrangements already had other sources of funding support and technical expertise. For example, four of the 13 sites used their VPSC funds to support existing, districtwide choice options (see appendix C, exhibit C-2, for more detail).

Sites used VPSC funds to support different portions of choice initiatives. Most sites had a wide array of choice initiatives as part of their choice environment. For instance, some sites directed VPSC funds to services specifically supporting choice enrollment under a VPSC choice initiative, but the same sites also used VPSC funds to support other services related to all of the choice initiatives at the site (see appendix C, exhibit C-3, for more detail).

This overall pattern—from sites that used VPSC funds as only a partial source of support for ongoing districtwide options, to sites that used their funds to support more than a single choice initiative—meant that the VPSC Program supported parts of an initiative at some sites and more than a single initiative at other sites (see exhibit 3-10). Because neither option can be disentangled, the analysis in the remainder of this report assumes that the VPSC Program was associated with a single initiative at each site, ignoring the situations where additional options were partially funded or subject to overlap [see variations (2) and (3) in exhibit 3-10].

The VPSC initiatives overlapped with Title I choice options. The VPSC Program started in the same year that federal legislation expanded support for Title I choice options. The legislation allowed spending up to 20 percent of Title I funds to support transportation costs when students wanted to transfer out of a Title I school identified for improvement. Three of the 13 sites defined their VPSC initiatives to coincide or overlap closely with their Title I choice options (see appendix C, exhibit C-4, for more detail). However, most VPSC sites defined schools participating in their VPSC initiatives as a broader set of schools than simply those designated under Title I as “identified for improvement.” The VPSC funds also could be used to cover the students’ transportation costs or services regardless of a schools’ performance status—i.e., whether identified for improvement, low-performing, or neither.

Exhibit 3-10

Variations in Sites' Uses of VPSC Funds to Support Choice Options

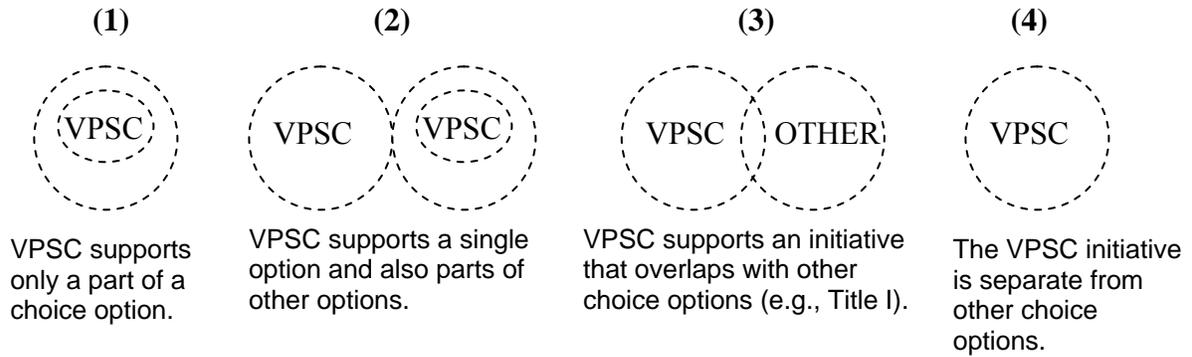


Exhibit Reads: Under Variation (1), VPSC supports only a part of a choice option.

Source: National evaluation team.

4. PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

Over the five years from 2002 to 2007, the VPSC sites enrolled many students in their choice initiatives. However, sites made less progress on other program priorities which also were relevant for assessing educational equity and excellence.

4.1 Student Participation at the VPSC Sites, 2002–07: Eligibles, Applicants, and Enrollees

The exact number of participants in a choice initiative varied according to the definition of “participation.” The evaluation tracked the following three possible definitions to measure participation:

- 1) *Eligible students*: all students who could potentially participate in a VPSC initiative;
- 2) *Applicants*: the set of eligible students who applied either to attend *another* public school or to participate in an academic program within their original school; and
- 3) *Enrollees*: those students who successfully applied and enrolled in a school or program as a result of a VPSC initiative.

The VPSC sites reported data in each category annually. Their reports for 2005–06 illustrated the wide variations among the categories for each VPSC site (see exhibit 4-1).¹⁴

All three categories of students can be considered participants in the VPSC Program, depending on the desired logic. For instance, 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.¹⁵ Narrower definitions would limit participants to include only *applicants*, or even further, to include only *enrollees*. To permit readers to use their preferred logic, the national evaluation tracked and reported all three groups of students. The data also permit an estimate of participation rates, usually defined as the proportion of enrolling to eligible students.

In 2005–06 and across 12 of the 13 VPSC sites, 24,921 students enrolled in the choice initiatives, reflecting an overall participation rate of 2.8 percent of the students eligible to enroll. The amount and rate of participation also appeared to reflect the type of

¹⁴ See appendix C, exhibit C-5, for data covering all five years, 2002–07.

¹⁵ In 2005–06, the number of eligible students in the VPSC Program was more than 35 times the number of enrollees, making eligibility the high end estimate of participation in the program. In some cases (see rows A, F, and H in exhibit 4-1), individual sites defined a large pool of students as eligible, even though the initiative could only accommodate much smaller numbers of enrollees.

Exhibit 4-1

Student Participation in the VPSC’s Initiatives, 2005-06

VPSC Program sites	Number of students		
	Eligible	Applying	Enrolling
A	290,142	214	214
B	10,452	170	170
C	4,970	446	446
D	4,993	114	34
E	670	NA*	196
F	320,331	NA*	13,068
G	46,838	1,620	1,494
H	134,878	NA*	3,039
I	27,266	674	674
J	45,727	5,249	3,783
K	1,682	1,682	1,682
L	8,235	NA*	121
M	Site focused mainly on technical assistance to districts across the state.		
Total number of students	896,184	10,169	24,921
Number of sites reporting	12	8	12

Exhibit Reads: VPSC site A reported a total of 290,142 eligible students.

*Site did not track all applicants.

Sources: Analysis of site visit data and Grant Performance Reports, by COSMOS Corporation, 2007.

choice arrangement that each site implemented. The five sites that designated specific sending and receiving schools showed a lower proportion of enrolling-to-eligible students than other arrangement types. In 2005–06, the percent of eligible students who enrolled in these initiatives was 0.3 percent. In contrast, at the five sites with geography-based arrangements where the same schools were both sending and receiving schools, 3.8 percent of eligible students enrolled in 2005–06. (The 100 percent participation rate for the “within-school” option is an artifact of the absence of inter-school transfers.)

Sites did not track applicants as consistently as they tracked other participant groups. Of the 12 sites reporting eligible and enrolling students for 2005–06, only eight sites

tracked and reported the number of applicants for their choice initiatives. One site was unable to track applicants due to an error in coding VPSC applications in the district's enrollment database. In addition, in the last two years, several sites reported that 100 percent of their applicants became enrolled, even though they had reported lower participation rates in earlier years. The exact reason for the 100 percent rates is not known, but one possibility is that sites may have changed their reporting procedures in later years.

Calculating the number of enrollees also depends in part on whether the totals include enrollees from prior years. The typical VPSC site tracked and reported the number of students enrolling in their initiatives each year by counting only the number of students who started enrollment in that year. Such “first-time enrollees” serve as a conservative estimate of the overall enrollment in a choice initiative. Another way of counting enrollment involves including enrollees from prior years. Thus, the more accurate estimate of enrollment in the VPSC Program's initiatives, for the four years ending in 2005–06, fell somewhere between the 24,921 reported in exhibit 4-1 and a cumulative total of 49,616 first-time students enrolled in the initiatives since their inception in 2002–03 (see appendix C, exhibit C-5).

Unfortunately, totaling across all years overestimates the total enrollment, which may have declined due to attrition. A few sites made rough estimates of the attrition or “dropout” rates over the period of the VPSC Program, suggesting rates that ranged between 30 and 50 percent. Several other sites estimated their repeat enrollments and conjectured continuation rates from 50 to 95 percent.

The rough estimates mean that the enrollment is likely to be far lower than the cumulative total of 49,616 students. However, exactly how much lower is difficult to determine because, even if the attrition rates were known, it is extremely difficult to classify the students who leave or drop out. Some students may have decided to enroll at yet newer schools through the choice initiative, while others may have returned to their assigned school and may be considered true “drop-outs.” However, 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 continued to attend schools of choice through the VPSC Program.

Overall, the number of enrolling students in the VPSC Program increased during the earlier years of the program but declined in the program's fifth year. Of the 12 sites enrolling students, only ten provided eligibility and enrollment data for four consecutive years, 2003–04 to 2006–07 (see exhibit 4-2). These data permitted an estimation of trends through the fifth VPSC year, 2006–07. The yearly data captured the number of first-time (i.e., new) enrollees each year, not the total number that cumulated over all years. For these “first-time enrollees,” the trends showed that the VPSC Program at first averaged 696 enrollees per site in 2003–04, then reached a peak of 2,459 per site in 2005–06, and then declined to 2,167 per site in 2006–07.

Exhibit 4-2

Participation Rates, 2003–07*

Enrollment school year	Average number per site		Percent of eligible students enrolled at the ten sites with four years of enrollment data
	Eligible	Enrolling	
2003–04	47,165	696	1.5
2004–05	54,009	1,592	2.9
2005–06	59,781	2,459	4.1
2006–07**	72,393	2,167	3.0

Exhibit Reads: On average, VPSC Program's choice initiatives had 47,165 eligible participants per site in 2003–04.

*The averages were based on ten sites for which participant data were available for four consecutive years.

**2006–07 data are preliminary.

Sources: Analysis of site visit data and Grant Performance Reports, by COSMOS Corporation, 2007.

Participation rates also showed the same pattern over time, increasing and then declining from 2003–04 to 2006–07. For the same ten sites reporting data from 2003–04 to 2006–07, the participation rates by first-time enrollees also increased from 1.5 percent to 4.1 percent, from 2003–04 to 2005–06, and then dropped to 3.0 percent in 2006–07 (see exhibit 4-2).

The decline in total enrollment as well as in participation rates may reflect the actual saturation of the VPSC initiatives because a good (but unmeasured) portion of the earlier years' enrollees still remained enrolled in the later years. Their continuing enrollment may possibly have limited the seats available for first-time enrollees in the final year. For example, an initiative that retains the same receiving schools from year to year will likely encounter limited seat capacity after several years of annual first-time enrollees.

In addition, the supply and demand conditions in choice arrangements, from year to year, may be extremely dynamic, with the two conditions adjusting to each other in immeasurable ways. For example, one site discouraged applications in its last two reporting years, knowing that the available seats were limited. Shifts in eligibility pools also occurred over time. For instance, due to annual shifts in the identity and number of low-performing schools, the pools of eligible students shifted accordingly at three sites that linked

choice options to school performance. Four other sites expanded choice options to additional grade levels, and one site expanded its targeted geographic area and thus increased the number of schools covered. A fuller assessment of the participation in choice initiatives, over a multiyear period, may require stronger recordkeeping of all three kinds of participation (eligibles, applicants,¹⁶ and enrollees) than the VPSC sites appear to have implemented.

Regarding the demographic and academic characteristics of the enrollees, not all of the sites kept precise data, nor did they compare the enrollees' characteristics with those of non-enrollees—students who did not participate in the VPSC initiatives. However, four sites did submit individual-level student data that were used to analyze student achievement trends (see chapter 5). These data included demographic and academic characteristics for the year prior to any VPSC participation. The data also included similar information from selected groups of non-enrollees (the sites' selection processes also are described in chapter 5).

Compared to the non-enrollees, the VPSC enrollees tended to: be slightly more white than nonwhite, have slightly lower participation in the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program, and have slightly better achievement scores in mathematics and reading. However, the differences were not statistically significant. Chapter 5 contains all of the details about these data and their sources (see exhibit 5-3).¹⁷

4.2 Progress on Program Priorities

The VPSC legislation had four program priorities. Three priorities were: to provide the widest variety of choices; to encourage transfers from low- to higher-performing schools; and to provide opportunities for students to transfer to schools outside of their home districts. The fourth priority directed sites to use some of their VPSC funds to support transportation services and costs. These four priorities are discussed next.

4.2.1 Widest Variety of Choices

The VPSC Program made progress on the first priority of providing the widest variety of choice. Sites expanded the assortment of choice options in participating schools and offered a large and diverse number of academic programs to transferring students.

¹⁶ The enormity of the task should not be underestimated. At one site, applicants complete multiple applications, one for each school of interest. The site then makes selections among applications, not applicants, and the receiving schools act like colleges or universities who may have accepted applicants that have also been simultaneously accepted at another school. The desired recordkeeping would not only have to distinguish between the number of applicants and the number of applications but would also have to determine whether and where the student actually finally enrolled.

¹⁷ A similar pattern was found when the enrollees' characteristics were compared to districtwide averages at each of the four sites. The parallel finding was important because non-enrollees were chosen to match the enrollees (see chapter 5), whereas the districtwide averages represented all of the students at the four sites.

Some sites developed more school choice options than others, with as many as 12 different options available. The VPSC initiatives also made efforts, through media campaigns and related activities, to increase parents' awareness of the variety of education options available to them.

The sites augmented the quality of choice options by implementing enhanced education programming at receiving schools. Several VPSC initiatives broadened the choices available to students through the improvement and development of thematic programming at participating schools. The programs implemented as part of the sites' VPSC initiatives were new to the district (or a particular area of the district) and often distinct from other existing thematic programming.¹⁸ These programs focused on unique academic themes and were often integrated schoolwide, across all grades and subject areas, especially at the elementary and middle schools.¹⁹ Other programs, often implemented at the high school level, included courses focused on a particular theme that were separate from the required curricula.

Three sites focused on adding new choice options as part of their VPSC initiatives. One statewide initiative implemented a virtual school, offering a completely new type of choice option to students, thereby directly increasing the variety of choice options within the state. At another site, magnet schools were the only form of school choice prior to VPSC. The VPSC initiative, by developing new charter schools, established a second choice option for students in the district. Lastly, a third site implemented a new choice school type, *Lighthouse Schools*, through their VPSC initiative, as an addition to the district's other choice options.

Two sites extended choice options of urban area students to a wider array of suburban schools. Another site permitted rural area students to transfer to a large number of adjoining districts, thereby broadening the students' education options.

4.2.2 Transfers from Low- to Higher-Performing Schools

Sending schools tended to have higher proportions of minority and low-income students than receiving schools. Over 90 percent of the sending schools, on average per site, were Title I schools that served low-income students. Also on average per site, 72 percent of the students in sending schools were nonwhite, and 74 percent were eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program (see exhibit 4-3).

¹⁸ At sites where geographic areas were used to focus VPSC activities, thematic programming was new to that area although offered elsewhere in the district, and as a result, more accessible to students in that area.

¹⁹ Examples of themes and programs include: math and science; International Baccalaureate program; world languages; fine and performing arts; literature and writing; humanities and international studies; environmental studies; dual-language; Spanish; communications technology; culinary arts; medical skills; hospitality and tourism; Advanced Placement classes; and media industry.

Exhibit 4-3

Demographic Characteristics of Schools, 2006–07*

School characteristic	n	Average percent per VPSC site		
		Sending schools only	Receiving schools only	Schools that are both sending and receiving
Proportion of students:				
Race/ethnicity: nonwhite	499	71.7	56.9	72.6
Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program	592	74.2	59.0	57.8
Title I schools	565	93.1	47.3	75.3

Exhibit Reads: On average (per site), 71.7 percent of students in sending schools were nonwhite.

*The School Survey covered 12 of the 13 sites in the VPSC Program because the 13th site focused mainly on technical assistance.

Source: Survey of Schools, COSMOS Corporation, 2006–07.

The VPSC legislation favored initiatives that promoted the transfer of students from low-performing schools to higher-performing schools. The legislation used *ESEA* Title I provisions to define “low-performing” schools as schools not making academic yearly progress (AYP) two years in a row. Some of the sites had no Title I schools but used the accountability provisions within their states to define “low-performing” schools. In contrast, the sites did not specify explicit criteria for defining “higher-performing” schools, only that such schools could not be “low-performing” schools. Therefore, designated sending schools at these sites were schools identified for improvement and designated receiving schools generally had made AYP for two previous years (see exhibit 4-4).

Transfers from low- to higher-performing schools comprised only a portion of the students enrolled in the VPSC initiatives. Five of the VPSC sites created choice arrangements with predesignated sending and receiving schools. Of these, only three limited their enrollment to transfers from low- to higher-performing schools in 2005–06 (see exhibit 4-5, row A). Similarly, although another five sites permitted transfers throughout a district or a zone, only two tracked the portion of the transfers from low- to higher-performing schools (see exhibit 4-5, row B).

Thus, aside from the five sites that either limited their transfers or tracked the transfers from low- to higher-performing schools, none of the other eight sites could provide such information (see exhibit 4-5, row C). At the five sites, the confirmed

Exhibit 4-4

Reported AYP Status of Schools, 2004–05 through 2006–07*

AYP status in the past three years (2004–05 through 2006–07)	No. (and percent)				
	Sending schools only		Receiving schools only		Schools that are both sending and receiving**
Made AYP	9 (21.4)	21 (77.7)	114 (34.8)		144 (36.3)
Failed to make AYP 1 year	22 (52.4)	4 (14.8)	90 (27.4)		116 (29.2)
Failed to make AYP 2 consecutive years	9 (21.4)	2 (7.4)	86 (26.2)		97 (24.4)
Failed to make AYP all 3 years	2 (4.8)	0 (0.0)	38 (11.6)		40 (10.1)
TOTAL	42 (100.0)	27 (100.0)	328 (100.0)		397 (100.0)

Exhibit Reads: Nine (21.4 percent) sending schools made AYP for 2004–05 through 2006–07.

*The School Survey covered 12 of the 13 sites in the VPSC Program because the 13th site focused mainly on technical assistance.

**One VPSC site with a large, districtwide choice arrangement and many low-performing schools accounted for more than half of the schools that did not meet their AYP goals.

Source: Survey of Schools, COSMOS Corporation, 2006–07.

transfers from low- to higher-performing schools (from rows A and B) represented 1,295 of 5,927, or 21.8 percent, of their total transfers in 2005–06.

The other eight sites either permitted a wider variety of transfers or had VPSC enrollments that involved no transfers. Among the sites not tracking transfers, one received a waiver from the Department to omit such tracking because, to be eligible to apply for transfer, all the students had to be low-performing (scoring “below proficient” on the state assessment) as well as of low-income backgrounds (eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program). At the same time, the actual transfers at this site were not necessarily transferring from low- to higher-performing schools. Thus, across the entire VPSC Program, the actual portion of low- to higher-performing transfers could be larger or smaller, depending on the nature of the transfers at the seven sites that did not track or document the pattern of their transfers (row C).²⁰

²⁰ The total number can nevertheless be used to estimate a range within which the current estimate of 21.8 percent falls: Assuming all of the undocumented transfers were from low- to higher-performing schools, the proportion would rise from 21.8 to 81.4 percent; conversely, assuming that none of the undocumented were from low- to higher-performing schools, the proportion would dip to 5.2 percent. The range would therefore be 5.2 to 81.4 percent.

Exhibit 4-5

Student Transfers from Low- to Higher-Performing Schools, 2005–06

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	650	650	100
B. Supported various enrollments, and tracked the students transferring from low- to higher-performing schools	2	5,277	645	11
C. Supported various enrollments, but did not track students transferring from low- to higher-performing schools	7	18,994	Sites did not track transfers from low- to higher-performing schools	
TOTAL	12	24,921	1,295 (minimum)	unknown

Exhibit Reads: The choice implementation at three sites targeted students transferring from low- to higher-performing schools. The sites had a total enrollment of 650 students, all of whom were transfers from low- to higher-performing schools.

*Of the 13 VPSC sites, 12 reported enrollment in 2005–06. The 13th site has mainly focused on choice-related technical assistance.

Source: Survey of Schools, COSMOS Corporation, 2006–07.

In some cases, sites delayed notifying parents of their choice options until their states published the names of schools identified as low-performing. 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. However, states' deadlines for issuing this information have varied over the VPSC years, so the delayed notification was episodic rather than chronic at any given site.

4.2.3 Interdistrict Partnerships

Most of the VPSC sites limited their choice initiatives to within-district options, rather than developing interdistrict partnerships. Although the implementation of formal interdistrict choice options might have expanded the variety of choices available to students even further, only five of the 13 VPSC sites created interdistrict options. At the eight remaining sites, many had existing transfer understandings with neighboring districts. However, these transfer options were separate from the VPSC initiatives and were generally reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Even though the existing options did not

include support for students' transportation costs, the eight sites nevertheless did not use VPSC funds to promote or support interdistrict transfers at these sites.

Among the five sites that did offer interdistrict choice options, one site used VPSC funds to support the opening of a commuter school. The school provided an intra-district choice option to the district's students. In addition, the school accepted transfer students from other nearby districts, thereby providing an interdistrict choice option to students applying from other districts.

At the other sites with interdistrict choices, the options varied from interdistrict magnet schools²¹ to other formal transfer agreements with neighboring districts. Interdistrict initiatives at these sites included: 1) regional interdistrict magnet school programs, in which magnet schools accepted students from 26 school districts; and 2) an urban-suburban transfer plan, which allowed urban students to enroll in any suburban district school and vice versa. Another partnership included one urban school district and nine surrounding suburban districts. Students from the urban district applying to transfer to any of the suburban school districts were given priority in the application process. This interdistrict initiative also allowed suburban students to transfer to the magnet schools within the urban district.

4.2.4 Support for Transportation Services

The fourth VPSC priority required that 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 did not have to pay the cost of transportation themselves.

Relative to enrollment, transportation costs did not increase proportionately as might have been expected. This is partly because the VPSC initiatives permitted many students who were already attending distant schools to select schools closer to home. Although nine sites reported using funds for transportation, overall these costs did not necessarily increase. Many students already were attending distant schools, and the VPSC Program now allowed these students to select schools closer to home. Under these circumstances, sites experienced minimal or reduced transportation costs.

Moreover, some of the VPSC Program's choice options encouraged students, who otherwise might have been contemplating a transfer to a more distant school, to remain at a neighborhood school. For example, one VPSC site identified neighborhood schools in which enrollment had declined in part because of their perceived poor quality. The site designated these under-enrolled schools as "receiving schools" and improved their education programs to encourage children to attend. As another example, two of the VPSC sites had recently emerged from court-ordered school busing, from which students

²¹ In 2004–05, one site's interdistrict option ended with the closing of the magnet school.

had been assigned to more distant schools as part of the original desegregation order. The VPSC-funded initiative gave affected students the choice of returning to their neighborhood schools.

The sites generally used VPSC funds to supplement the district's transportation budget, with three sites also implementing services specifically related to the VPSC initiative. Overall, VPSC funds supported new technology and personnel to improve transportation services. These improved services included: a Global Positional System, mapping software for routing and dispatching school buses, transportation route coordinators, and support staff.

Two initiatives also supported additional transportation activities beyond transporting students to school. These activities included busing students to before- and after-school activities, transporting parents to visit choice schools, and driving parents and students to VPSC-funded resource centers (e.g., Parent Information Centers).

In cases in which sites did not require additional funds for transportation, the sites received waivers from the Department to exempt them from the original requirement. One of these sites established off-campus receiving schools, which made transportation unnecessary for daily attendance. Other sites found it unnecessary to allocate additional funding toward transportation as other district funds were sufficient.

In summary, the VPSC sites' experiences demonstrated 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.

4.3 Implications for Federal Education Policy and Local Education Practice: Further Issues of Educational Equity and Excellence

The findings in this chapter have directed attention to overall student participation in the VPSC Program and the sites' progress in addressing the VPSC Program's major priorities. However, an examination of "educational equity and excellence" can go beyond these issues.

One type of additional examination pertains to potential lessons learned about the *design* of the various choice arrangements at the 13 VPSC sites. This is discussed next.

To meet different equity objectives, different types of choice arrangements may be needed. Concerns over equity typically embrace a multi-faceted set of objectives:

- 1) Students, especially disadvantaged students (e.g., those of low-income status, or having low academic achievement), need to have greater opportunities to obtain quality education;
- 2) Students of all backgrounds should have choices that allow them to match their own interests and goals with the variety of settings present in school systems; and
- 3) Low-performing schools need to improve.

Any specific choice initiative or arrangement may not be able to pursue all of these objectives simultaneously. In fact, the VPSC Program's experience raises the possibility that most arrangements may only be able to focus on one or two of these objectives.

A two-by-two matrix can start to represent these three objectives (see exhibit 4-6). The matrix also provides a way of assigning ten of the 13 VPSC sites' initiatives (all but three sites could be categorized as having implemented "within-school options" or "mixtures" of different options).

The two dimensions of the matrix specify whether eligibility to participate in a choice arrangement should be broad or restricted, with regard to either the eligibility of the students or the eligibility of the schools. These two-by-two combinations result in the four cells labeled "(A)," "(B)," "(C)," and "(D)."

Cell (A) represents the broadest combination. It includes not only districtwide initiatives but also zonal initiatives. Although the designation of zones can have a potentially exclusionary effect, the two sites with designated zones did not exclude students who might have wanted to enroll within the zones but who came from sending schools outside of the zones (see appendix C, exhibit C-6, for more details). As a result, these initiatives had a "broad" representation of eligible schools despite their zonal character.

Cell (B) represents a more limited combination, with restricted sending schools but with all students at these schools eligible to participate. However, the eligible sending schools do not need to be low-performing (see appendix C, exhibit C-7, for more details).

Cell (C) also represents a limited combination. However, it differs from cell (B) because it limits the type of students eligible to participate, even though the students may be located at a broad array of eligible sending schools. Finally, cell (D) depicts the most limited combination: only a certain set of students, from a certain set of sending schools, are eligible to participate.

Exhibit 4-6

**Eligibility to Participate in VPSC’s Choice Arrangements:
An Equity Perspective***

		Eligible sending schools	
		Broad	Restricted
Eligible students	Broad	ALL STUDENTS AT ALL SCHOOLS: - districtwide initiatives (2) - multi-school zones with mostly zonal but also districtwide eligibility (2) (A)	ALL STUDENTS AT SELECTED SENDING SCHOOLS: - students from designated sending schools, but not necessarily low-performing schools (2) - students only from low-performing sending schools (3) (B)
	Restricted	SELECTED STUDENTS AT ALL SCHOOLS: - disadvantaged students coming from any school in the district (1) (C)	SELECTED STUDENTS AT SELECTED SCHOOLS: - none (0) (D)

Exhibit Reads: Two districtwide initiatives defined eligibility to participate in a choice arrangement broadly by focusing on all students at all schools.

*The number in parentheses in each cell represents the number of VPSC arrangements falling into a particular category. Not shown are the three arrangements that were either “within-school” arrangements or a mixture of arrangements.

Source: Analysis of site visit data, by COSMOS Corporation, 2007.

Within all four cells, the distribution of the ten VPSC initiatives shows the limited extent to which the initiatives ended up being restrictive, even in their design. Only one initiative confined eligibility to disadvantaged students, defined as students eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program and with lower academic achievement scores [see cell (C)]. Similarly, only three initiatives confined eligibility to low-performing sending schools, but within these schools the sites imposed no restrictions on the eligibility of participating students [see cell (B)]. The remaining sites all had unconstrained *eligibility* requirements, although the bulk of the students enrolling in these initiatives may still have been disadvantaged students.

The matrix and the VPSC Program’s experience suggest that, if future policymaking and practice are intent on promoting transfers from low- to higher-performing schools,

choice arrangements may need to be more restricted. For example, the VPSC Program might not just have encouraged transfers from low- to higher-performing schools but might have *limited* transfers to those situations. However, limiting choice to the most relevant condition—the simultaneous combination of a) low-performing sending schools, and b) disadvantaged students [see cell (D)]—may be infeasible from the standpoint of local school politics and community cohesiveness. Note that this most restrictive type of choice arrangement was not found in the VPSC Program.

To promote excellence, more guidance for capacity-enhancing activities may be needed. No matter what the choice arrangement, an implicit assumption is that choice students should enroll at a higher-performing school, if not a school of excellence. To boost the quality of educational programs at receiving schools, all of the VPSC sites took steps to enhance the capacity of their receiving schools. At some of the receiving schools, the capacity-building took place in the name of emulating educational programs already found to be successful at other schools in the same district. However, such new adoptions did not necessarily assure that the receiving school would become a high-performing school.

One issue raised here is why the receiving schools should have been changing their academic programs in the first place. Experience with voucher programs for public school students to attend private schools seems to suggest the opposite. Beyond potentially reinforcing the incoming students' orientation and academic support, the receiving private schools continue to adhere to their existing academic programs (e.g., see U.S. Department of Education, 2007, and the evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program). In fact, many private schools have had sufficient success with their academic programs that the schools are almost rigid in adhering to their programs, even in the face of external circumstances much more dramatic than participating in a voucher program.

For the receiving schools in the VPSC initiatives, one would assume that the greater challenge was to maximize the number of seats available in already higher-performing or excellent schools at the VPSC sites, not to modify in any way the schools' existing academic programs. Yet, in the VPSC Program, every site provided extensive support to change academic programs at the receiving schools, and these schools appear to have enthusiastically embraced such activity (see appendix C, exhibit C-8, for more details).

Under these circumstances, the VPSC Program might have offered more guidance on the nature of capacity-enhancing activities, including the presumed need to select programs supported by scientifically based research. Absent any guidance, some VPSC sites added to the academic programs of receiving schools that had already been identified as higher-performing. Other sites started entirely new receiving schools, charter schools, off-campus programs, or new magnet-like programs. Yet other sites strengthened programs at under-enrolled schools to appear more attractive as receiving schools.

5. STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT TRENDS CONCURRENT WITH THE VPSC INITIATIVES

To assess student achievement trends, the analysis in this report traced student performance from the period prior to VPSC enrollment through the following years afterwards. These trends were then compared to those of a similar group of students who had not enrolled in any VPSC choice initiatives.

Three cautionary notes must accompany the findings in this chapter. First, any observed student performance trends by the enrolling students cannot be readily attributed to VPSC initiatives. For example, more motivated students might have chosen to enroll in the VPSC initiatives than those who did not, and even though the analysis also includes data from comparison groups of non-enrolling students, the VPSC Program was not designed as an experiment that might have ruled out such a self-selection bias.²² Thus, the observed student performance trends should only be considered as “concurrent” trends. These trends have occurred during the period of any given VPSC site’s choice initiative, but they have an unknown relationship to the initiative.²³

The second cautionary note derives from the measures of student performance used throughout the analyses—scores on state achievement tests. The caveat in using these scores is that changed scores from year to year may reflect either changed student performance or changed procedures in scoring the states’ criterion-referenced tests. At the same time, the use of state assessment scores occupies a central role in major federal educational policies and especially the school accountability provisions under *NCLB*. Thus, the use of these scores in the following analysis appears justified, though with the appropriate caution.

The third caution is that because the usable data were only available from a few of the VPSC sites, the aggregate analysis may not represent the VPSC Program as a whole.

²² Without random assignment, any number of important but unobserved variables could account for differences between two groups. For instance, Cullen, Jacob, and Levitt (2005) studied school choice in the Chicago Public Schools from 1993 to 1995. The study found that “the leading explanation” for significant differences in graduation rates (students electing to transfer out of their neighborhood schools had higher rates) was that the transferring students were “superior along unobservable dimensions” (p. 755). High on the list of such dimensions was student motivation and the education background of students’ parents. The study concluded that, aside from transfers to career academies (emphasizing vocational skills and integrating school with work), “...systematic choice within a public school district does not seem to benefit those who participate” (p. 755).

²³ To overcome self-selection and other biases, one frequently raised possibility has been to use data from sites’ lotteries as if they were “natural experiments” (sites often use lotteries to select participants when the number of students exceeds the available choice opportunities). However, the lottery losers may not actually serve as the needed counterfactuals for lottery winners (see fuller discussion in appendix A).

5.1 Collection of Individual-Level Student Data

All of the 13 VPSC sites were charged, from the beginning of their awards, with collecting and reporting records containing individual-level student achievement data. In principle, every VPSC site should have submitted individual-level data, coded to protect the anonymity of the actual student, that followed a template provided by the national evaluation (see exhibit 5-1). The template asked sites to define a student's enrollment and demographic status, along with achievement scores over a multiple-year period. The ideal period would have started with the year prior to a student's enrollment in a VPSC site's initiative and then continued with annual scores for as many years as possible thereafter.

Exhibit 5-1

Desired Student Record

<u>Variables:</u>	<u>2001-02</u>	<u>2002-03</u>	<u>2003-04</u>	<u>Etc.</u>
1. Coded ID, but associated with the same student		<i>Consistent Across Years</i>		
2. Current Grade Level	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Current School	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. Current District	✓	✓	✓	✓
5. Race/Ethnicity	✓	✓	✓	✓
6. Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Status	✓	✓	✓	✓
7. Gender	✓	✓	✓	✓
8. Achievement Scores (Math and Reading)	✓	✓	✓	✓
9. Testing Grade	✓	✓	✓	✓
10. Name of Assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓

Exhibit Reads: A coded student ID consistent across years.

Source: National evaluation team.

The template also asked sites to provide similar data for a non-VPSC group of students.²⁴ The sites were asked to identify the comparison groups in either of two ways: a) a matched group of non-VPSC enrollees selected to mimic the demographic characteristics and baseline academic performance of the VPSC enrollees, or b) the entire set of students remaining at the sending schools from which the VPSC enrollees came. Regardless of the method chosen by a site, all subsequent analyses took into account any differences in the demographic and baseline characteristics of the VPSC and non-VPSC students before comparing their student achievement scores.

Even if sites did not submit the needed data, they had the discretion to analyze data on their own and to report the results in their annual or final reports to the Department. Only one of these site-based reports was sufficiently complete to be reviewed as part of the national evaluation. The site's findings are discussed later in this chapter.

The desired databases could contain one or more cohorts of first-time enrollees and multiple years of annual data for each cohort. Because choice enrollments occur every year, each site also could have submitted data about more than one cohort of students. For instance, a site that had started enrolling students in its VPSC initiative in 2003–04 should have provided a baseline score (2002–03) and three additional years of data for the cohort enrolling in 2003–04. The site also should have provided another baseline score (2003–04) and two additional years of data for the cohort enrolling in 2004–05. In addition, some sites submitted data covering more than a single year prior to the onset of a cohort's enrollment in the VPSC initiative.

In response to the template, and given the possibility of multiple cohorts, sites began submitting data in 2005. However, the absence of key information in these submissions precluded their use,²⁵ and the national evaluation recommended that the sites be given external technical assistance (by another contractor, not the national evaluation team) to collect and report the desired data. This assistance occurred during the sites' fourth and fifth award years.

Usable data came from four of the 13 VPSC sites, covering six of 38 potential cohorts of VPSC enrollees and comparison groups of students. By mid-2007, when the analysis for the current report needed to start, data from only four sites (and only covering six cohorts) contained the essential information. The sample of sites covered was therefore smaller than desired. Not only were the four sites a fraction of the 13 total sites, but the six

²⁴ However, whether the non-VPSC students later enrolled in a VPSC initiative, or otherwise transferred schools in subsequent years, is unknown. Ideally, had the template been followed, the variable "current school" would have provided information on a student's matriculation status in ensuing years.

²⁵ For example, one site only provided two years of achievement scores, which were insufficient to calculate the needed trends, as described later in the text; a second site submitted cross-sectional data, only providing one year's scores for each successive cohort of "first-time enrollees;" a third site's state changed its assessment tests in the middle of the trend period, also then limiting the comparable data to only two points in time.

cohorts (of first-time enrollees) were only a small fraction of the total number of 38 such cohorts enrolled by the sites collectively, by 2005–06.

Nevertheless, even though only six cohorts of data were available for the present analysis,²⁶ sites appear to have made progress in collecting data, and this effort should continue with the extension of the VPSC Program beyond its initial five-year period. In particular, the 14 new awards made by the program in 2007, also for a five-year period, include seven sites that had received the original awards in 2002 and that then subsequently received external technical assistance. For this reason, the potential for analyzing student achievement data has improved, and any continuing evaluation of the program can anticipate the availability of a larger and more representative set of data.

The six cohorts in the analysis came from four sites whose collective profile was similar to that of the rest of the VPSC sites, as follows. As with most of the VPSC sites (see exhibit 3-1 earlier), the four all were urban sites with populations in the middle range (100,000 to 1 million). Similarly, the four sites mimicked the distribution of all of the VPSC sites with regard to being spread across all three enrollment size categories, and being nearly evenly split between sites with higher and lower percentages of nonwhite students and students eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program. Finally, the four sites also evenly represented the two main types of choice arrangements (pre-designated sending and receiving schools; and schools that are both sending and receiving—see exhibit 3-4 earlier).

Across the six cohorts (see exhibit 5-2), the data coverage and the starting years for a cohort's first-year enrollment in a VPSC initiative varied (see exhibit 5-2, columns 2 and 3). This meant that only three cohorts had two or more annual data points after enrollment, but the other three cohorts only had one data point. Moreover, one of these latter three cohorts had four data points prior to VPSC enrollment. The desire to retain as much of the data submitted by the VPSC sites accounted for this uneven coverage, but with all of the trends re-centered around the same " t_1 " (the year of first enrollment), regardless of the chronological year.

All of the six cohorts had both enrollee and comparison (non-enrollee) groups. All of the sites chose to define their comparison groups by using some type of matching procedure. The sites reported these matches in the following manner.

For sites whose choice initiatives involved pre-designated sending and receiving schools, the comparisons were defined as: a) students remaining at the sending schools but enrolled there for three years or less, matched for gender, ethnicity, and English Language Learner (ELL) status; or b) students remaining at the sending schools, matched on grade

²⁶ A fifth site submitted data covering four cohorts, but the submission came well after the analysis was underway and could not be included in the analysis.

Exhibit 5-2

Individual-level Data Submitted by VPSC Sites

(1) Cohort*	(2) Years of annual data	(3) Year of first enrollment (and number of years of data after first enrollment)	(4) Total enrollees reported by sites (see appendix C-5)	(5) Subjects	(6) (7) Number of records used in analysis**	
					VPSC enrollees	Matched comparison students†
A-1	2001–02 to 2005–06	2005–06 (1)	170	Math Reading	170 170	161 161
B-2	2002–03 to 2005–06	2004–05 (2)	4,270	Math Reading	1,534 1,526	2,301 2,295
B-3	2003–04 to 2005–06	2005–06 (1)	1,494	Math Reading	950 938	914 913
C-4	1999–00 to 2005–06	2002–03 (2)***	501	Math Reading	89 90	722 696
D-5	2002–03 to 2005–06	2003–04 (3)	3,844	Math Reading	3,261 2,974	2,241 2,198
D-6	2003–04 to 2005–06	2005–06 (1)	3,783	Math Reading	2,922 2,351	1,000 634
		TOTAL	14,062	Math Reading	8,926 8,049	7,339 6,897

Exhibit Reads: The first cohort comes from VPSC site “A,” and student achievement test scores were available from 2001–02 to 2005–06.

*Sites enrolled new students in choice options each year, and each year’s enrollees were considered “first-time” enrollees, whose achievement scores were tracked prior to VPSC enrollment and annually thereafter. Thus, in theory, a site operating a VPSC initiative for three consecutive years could have had three cohorts of first-time enrollees, with each successive cohort having one less annual data point.

**Many of the enrollees originally reported by the sites had insufficient test data and could not be included in the final analysis. For instance, the enrollees included young elementary students who had not taken more than one year of tests at most. Other enrollees from higher grades might not have had three test scores because they were not tested each year.

***This site collected data every other year between 2002 and 2006, so only three years of data were collected.

†The matched comparison students were those not enrolled in the VPSC initiatives but who had similar demographic and academic characteristics as the VPSC enrollees (see text for discussion of sites’ matching procedures).

Sources: Student-level databases submitted to the national evaluation by the VPSC sites.

level, gender, ethnicity, and eligibility for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL). For sites whose choice initiatives involved districtwide initiatives involving schools that could be *both* sending and receiving, the comparisons were defined as: c) students from the same district, matched for gender, ethnicity, and eligibility for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) program; or d) subgroups of comparison students by grade level, each subgroup having aggregate characteristics matching as closely as possible the transfer groups in gender and ethnicity.

As a final note, the analytic preference for multiyear trends (as opposed to using a “pre-post” design requiring only two data points) reflected the nature of public school choice initiatives. Unlike the use of a new curriculum or classroom technology that might take place within a semester and whose “effects” might be anticipated immediately following exposure, choice options do not reflect discrete, time-limited “interventions.” Choice involves a change in educational pathways or school careers, and any likely impact on student achievement may only occur over a period of time. However, given the sites’ difficulties in reporting achievement data, three data points were considered the minimum number needed to calculate trends. The analysis therefore excluded sites that only submitted two years of data.²⁷ Similarly, the paucity of multiyear data (especially following the first year of enrollment) precluded any examination of more subtle issues, such as whether students might have suffered an initial disruption but then performed better, two to three years after changing schools.

5.2 Methodology for Analyzing Student Achievement Trends

The analysis²⁸ used a meta-analytic strategy to aggregate scores across sites and produce findings for the VPSC Program as a whole. The main purpose of the national evaluation has been to assess the VPSC Program as a whole. The challenge is to arrive at cross-site findings.

For the purpose of considering how to aggregate student achievement data across sites, one complicating issue is that the program did not specify how sites should implement their public school choice initiatives. Instead, sites were encouraged to define choice initiatives that suited their own local needs and circumstances. As a result, the 13 VPSC sites all implemented different public school choice initiatives. Furthermore, most of the sites are located in different states; these states use different achievement tests to assess student performance.

²⁷ The known volatility of achievement scores was an additional numeric reason for requiring three or more years of data. Statistically, trends based on two data points assume no measurement error, which is unrealistic.

²⁸ The full methodology is found in appendix A, section 3.

These conditions precluded any direct aggregation of individual-level student data *across* the VPSC sites, necessary to satisfy the national evaluation’s need to arrive at findings for the VPSC Program as a whole. Instead, the site-to-site variations were better suited to a *meta-analytic* strategy. This strategy called first for determining the nature of the student achievement trends *within* each VPSC site, and then using these separate findings as part of a meta-analysis to arrive at findings *across* the VPSC sites.²⁹

Although the data and other conditions differed from cohort to cohort (and site to site), the initial, within-cohort analysis followed the same procedure, ultimately estimating a “mean effect size”³⁰ for the changes among the students in each cohort. In other words, the analysis first estimated the achievement trends for each individual student. Then the analysis combined these into a group trend representing the entire within-site cohort of VPSC enrollees. Finally, the trends were compared to similarly derived trends for the matched comparison students.

The meta-analytic procedure then combined all of the cohort-specific, mean effect sizes to estimate a “grand mean” effect size (e.g., Cooper and Hedges, 1994; and Lipsey and Wilson, 2001). Such a grand mean effect size represents the aggregate “difference between differences” over time for all of the cohorts and sites, thus creating the needed program-wide benchmark for the VPSC Program as a whole.

The main achievement trends were calculated on the basis of “scale” scores and “standardized scale” scores. Because the key evaluation question was to determine the student achievement trends occurring concurrently with enrollment in a VPSC-funded choice initiative, the main measure of a student’s achievement was his or her score on the annual state assessments.

The specific assessment tests vary from state to state and therefore from VPSC site to site (except for those few VPSC sites that were located in the same state). Moreover, the assessments are usually *criterion-referenced* tests (CRTs) rather than *norm-referenced* tests (NRTs). Unlike national tests such as the Student Achievement Tests (SATs) administered by the College Board or the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), neither the state assessment tests nor their scoring metrics are comparable from state to state. Each state usually reports its students’ performance in two ways: 1) by giving a “scale” score—the specific numeric score attained on the test by a student; and 2) by indicating whether the student’s score exceeded the state’s desired level of proficiency, usually reflected by four or five categorical groupings of scores, such as “highly proficient,” “proficient,” “below proficient,” and “basic.”

²⁹ Investigators have used meta-analyses to examine many topics in education, including: gender differences in verbal ability (Hyde and Linn, 1988); the achievement benefits of summer school (Cooper et al., 2000); and comprehensive school reform (Borman et al., 2002).

³⁰ Effect sizes are a measure of the magnitude of differences between two conditions—for instance, the cross-sectional differences in performance between two groups, or the change over time for one group, or both.

Because the benchmark scores for achieving the four or five different proficiency categories may change from year-to-year in the same state, the present analysis only relied on the “scale” scores. However, the numerics of the scale scores (e.g., some being very large numbers versus others being small numbers, depending upon the test scoring procedure) also led to the need for “standardizing” these scores—converting them to a similar scale across tests and sites (see equation 1).

Equation 1

$$z\text{-score} = \frac{x_{ijk} - \bar{X}_{jk}}{s_{jk}}$$

- i = individual student achievement score
- j = year
- k = grade
- \bar{X} = mean of all students’ scale scores for same year and grade level
- s = standard deviation of all students’ scale scores for same year and grade level

Any potential biases from “standardizing” scores are not easily known. Therefore, preliminary analyses were conducted to examine both the “standardized” and “scale” scores, and the analyses determined that the results were consistent. The “standardized” scores were then used in the remainder of this report.³¹

The initial preparation of the data included taking into account the demographic characteristics of the students as well as their baseline performance. Baseline demographic and academic differences are well-known influences or at least important correlates of student achievement outcomes. Any analysis of such outcomes, especially efforts such as the present one to compare the performances of different student groups, must take these conditions into account in order to make fair comparisons. As previously discussed, the sites already had matched a group of non-enrolling students to each group of enrolling students. Nevertheless, to create as close statistical equivalence as possible, the demographic and pre-VPSC achievement data were used to adjust the standardized scores and later achievement trends in the following manner.

The VPSC sites provided only limited demographic data about the students. The data on the first condition covered different racial and ethnic groups, but because the definition of these groups varied from site to site, the information was condensed into two categories “white” or “nonwhite.” The sites’ data also covered a second condition—whether the student was eligible to participate in the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program (FRPL). Educational analysts commonly use FRPL eligibility as a proxy for a student coming from

³¹ The analysis avoided another potential complication that would have arisen if a state changed its assessment test during the multiyear period under study. No such changes occurred with the six cohorts under study.

a low-income or poverty-level background. The proxy measure is known to have inaccuracies and to mask other important differences in students' family backgrounds (e.g., the education level of the parents), but the measure has been used extensively in research on student achievement. Equation (2) shows how these conditions were taken into account in adjusting the standardized scale scores:

Equation 2

$$Z(SS) = b_{race} * race + b_{FRPL} * FRPL + \epsilon_{Z(SS)}$$

- $Z(SS)$ = standardized scale score
- $race$ = race and ethnicity (white v nonwhite)
- $FRPL$ = economic status indicator (eligibility for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch)
- ϵ = residual

Following the adjustment for the demographic conditions, the achievement trends for each student were then estimated using a simple linear or growth model. These models were then used to incorporate a final step, which was to account for differences in students' baseline achievement scores, as these also can affect later outcomes (see Appendix A). Thus, the final analyses were based on growth models of students' scores that had been standardized and that had incorporated both demographic and academic baseline conditions.

Profiles of these baseline demographic and achievement characteristics, comparing the VPSC enrollees with the non-enrolling students, showed differences between the groups. As previously discussed in chapter 4, the enrollees tended to have a higher percentage of white students, a lower percentage of students eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program, and better achievement scores, compared to the non-enrollees. However, none of the differences was statistically significant, either within or across the six cohorts (see exhibit 5-3). (For the purpose of comparing the baseline achievement levels, the “percent proficient and above” was used for descriptive purposes to give an idea of the level of student performance in the two groups, rather than the standardized scale scores that were later used in the actual trend analysis.)

5.3 Findings on Student Achievement Trends

The final student achievement trends came from six cohorts that included VPSC enrollees and matched comparison groups of students, across four VPSC sites. The cross-site analysis first estimated the student achievement trends for these two groups separately and then compared the trends between the two groups.

These two analyses served two different purposes. The first, estimating trends separately, was needed to establish whether either the enrollee or matched comparison

groups was alone moving in a positive or negative direction. The goal was to determine whether the enrollees might have been performing worse, regardless of any relative difference between it and the comparison students. The second, estimating trends relative to each other, then captured the comparison between the two groups. (The two analyses involved two different units of analysis, students in exhibit 5-4 and cohorts in exhibit 5-5, and the values should not be compared in these exhibits.)

Exhibit 5-3

Baseline* Characteristics of VPSC Enrollees and Matched Comparison Students

Baseline characteristics	Percent (across six cohorts)	
	VPSC enrollees	Matched comparison students**
A. Grade span:		
Elementary	45	54
Middle	35	31
High	20	15
B. Race:		
White	56	48
Nonwhite	44	52
C. Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	41	49
D. Proficient and above		
Reading	74	64
Mathematics	72	61

Exhibit Reads: Of the VPSC enrollees, 45 percent enrolled in the elementary grades in the baseline year.

*The baseline year is the year prior to a student’s enrollment in a VPSC initiative.

**Students who were not enrolled in the VPSC initiatives but who had similar demographic and academic characteristics as the enrolling students.

Sources: Student-level databases submitted to the national evaluation by the VPSC sites.

When the VPSC and non-VPSC trends were examined separately (see exhibit 5-4), the VPSC enrollees' trends were neutral in math and positive in reading but not statistically significant. More important, the enrollee group's scores were not found to be declining in any way. In contrast, the non-enrollee group showed a declining trend in math proficiency that was statistically significant at the 99 percent confidence level.³² The reasons for the decline are unclear. Too little is known about the type of instruction or educational opportunities offered to the non-enrollees, either at the sending schools or for those sites whose non-enrollees came from different schools throughout a district. Finally, the non-enrollees' trends for reading were positive but not statistically significant.

Exhibit 5-4

Performance of VPSC and Matched Comparison Students, Analyzed Separately

Category	Mean change per year in standardized scores*		Intercept in standardized scores	
	Standard deviation	Standard deviation	Standard deviation	Standard deviation
VPSC enrollees:				
-Math proficiency	0.00	0.35	0.04	1.31
-Reading proficiency	0.01	0.35	0.04	1.29
Matched comparison students:				
-Math proficiency	-0.02**	0.33	0.04	1.29
-Reading proficiency	0.01	0.32	-0.04	1.25

Exhibit Reads: VPSC enrollees' math proficiency changed an average of 0.00 of a standard score in one year.

*All data are *unweighted*. Some groups' data covered three years and others covered four or five. However, this small difference was not assumed to create undesirable artifacts as might occur if the groups varied, for instance, between three and twenty years.

**p<.01

Sources: Student-level databases submitted to the national evaluation by the VPSC sites.

³² Confidence levels represent the probability that observed differences do not differ by chance alone but represent actual differences between two groups. Statistically, the analyses were based on the use of random-effects models, which maximize the appropriate use of all of the sites' data submitted for each of the six cohorts. Unlike fixed-effects models, the random-effects models assume that the available data come from but a sample of a fuller universe of students and that the sample therefore is likely to contain additional variance due to sampling errors (Bryk and Raudenbush, 1992).

When the VPSC and non-VPSC trends were compared, students enrolling in the VPSC initiatives had better student achievement trends than those not enrolling. The enrollees surpassed the non-enrollees in the trends for both mathematics and reading, with the differences in mathematics being statistically significant at the 99.9 percent confidence level and in reading at the 99 percent confidence level (see exhibit 5-5). The comparison was based on the meta-analysis of effect sizes across all six of the cohorts, with the individual effect sizes for each cohort having already accounted for the demographic and baseline differences between the VPSC and non-VPSC groups. Because the units of measure were standardized scores, the trends cannot easily be translated into everyday educational units, but the effect sizes (.020 and .028 for mathematics and reading respectively) appear to be modest.³³

Exhibit 5-5

Aggregate Comparison of VPSC and Matched Comparison Groups, Across Cohorts (n=6)

VPSC and matched comparison cohorts compared:	Weighted mean gain for VPSC cohorts	95 percent confidence interval	z score
-Mathematics	0.020	0.0084 to 0.0311	3.41**
-Reading	0.028	0.0061 to 0.0388	2.70*

Exhibit Reads: The VPSC cohorts outgained the matched comparisons in mathematics by a standardized score of 0.020.

All data are *weighted* according to each site’s variability (more variability means less weight).

*p<.01; **p<.001

Sources: Student-level databases submitted to the national evaluation by the VPSC sites.

³³ The values for effect sizes can range from negative infinity (extremely negative difference) to positive infinity (extremely positive difference), with most values falling between -4 and 4. However, the values are difficult to interpret with respect to their importance. Cohen (1988) offers one interpretation: that values from 0 to .30 represent “small” effects, from .30 to .60 “medium” effects, and from .60 to 1.00 “large” effects. In education, a large effect may be considered a difference of a grade level in performance (e.g., fourth-graders performing at a fifth-grade level). Nevertheless, attempted interpretations of effect size values for any given analysis, as with standardized scores more generally, are heavily affected by the specific sample sizes, variances, and other parameters in the specific data set being analyzed (e.g., Cooper, 1981; and Rubin, 1992), and the present analysis was therefore unable to provide a precise interpretation of the effect sizes or standardized scores reported in this chapter.

The completion of this meta-analytic procedure required the data to be subjected to a *test of heterogeneity*, to determine whether excessive cross-cohort differences existed. If so, such heterogeneity would raise questions about the confidence or appropriateness of trying to use and interpret a single average or mean, to represent the collection of cohorts (the present analysis relied on a “grand mean” effect size to summarize the trends across cohorts). The results of the heterogeneity test show that the cohort-specific effect sizes were in fact too heterogeneous (or different) in reading, and nearly so in mathematics, to be adequately characterized by the grand mean as a summary statistic.³⁴ The results of the heterogeneity test therefore suggest caution in calling attention to the enrollee and non-enrollee contrast.

The heterogeneity results also raised a relevant substantive issue: The high variability among the individual effect sizes might have signaled some important differences among the actual choice interventions. As noted earlier, the four sites and six cohorts were evenly divided among the two main choice arrangements (pre-designated sending, and receiving schools and schools that are both sending and receiving). The possible heterogeneity could have been a split between these two types of arrangements—one arrangement having consistently larger effect sizes than the other. However, inspection of the data did not show such a split, neither type of arrangement showing an advantage over the other. Similarly, the data were inspected for an outlier effect—that one site or cohort might have been disproportionately influencing the grand mean. However, the data showed no such outlier effect or any other anomaly of note.

The caution stemming from the results of the heterogeneity test needs to be accompanied by several other cautions about interpreting the differences in achievement trends between the enrollee and non-enrollee groups. The other reasons for exercising caution are as follows.

First, and most important, in all of the choice initiatives, students can choose to enroll or not. As a result, an enrollee group may represent more highly motivated students or differ in other unobserved ways from a non-enrollee group, accounting for some or all of any subsequent differences in student achievement. In other words, without an experimental design, the designated non-enrollee group may not adequately represent the desired counterfactual condition for drawing a conclusion about the benefits of choice initiatives.

A possible clue regarding the differences between the enrollees and non-enrollees in the present analysis is provided by the demographic and academic contrasts between the two groups, presented earlier in exhibit 5-3. The contrasts showed that the enrollees

³⁴ The conventional test of heterogeneity is a *Q*-test. A significant *Q* statistic indicates that the individual effect sizes from each cohort are sufficiently different to be poorly characterized by a single summary statistic, such as the grand mean. In the present analysis, the results were nearly significant (hence possibly too heterogeneous) for mathematics ($Q = 10.2$, 5 df, $p < .10$) and significant (hence undesirably heterogeneous) for reading ($Q = 20.56$, 5 df, $p < .001$).

already were performing better than the non-enrollees and had a lower proportion of low-income and minority students, though none of these differences had been statistically significant. Nevertheless, without restrictions on those eligible to enroll, a choice initiative may permit higher qualified students to be among the enrollees. Such a possibility deserves careful examination in future research.

Second, the trends in the present analysis, while representing a minimum of three data points, leaned in the direction of having more of the data points precede rather than follow enrollment in the VPSC initiative (see exhibit 5-2, column 3). Confidence about the trends concurrent with a VPSC initiative, much less inferences about any effects, would be increased if analyses were based on a larger number of data points *following* enrollment. Again, future research should try to garner a larger number of post-enrollment data points to reduce the interpretive problems.

Third, and more generally, the data only came from a small sample of sites (four of 13) and from only a small sample of the enrolling cohorts (six of 38 cohorts of enrollees across all of the VPSC sites by 2005–06). Data from more sites and more cohorts would produce a firmer set of findings about the program as a whole. The ongoing VPSC Program should put renewed emphasis on obtaining data from additional sites and cohorts, given the new round of five-year awards made by the program in 2007. The possibilities of such additional data are especially strong, given that seven of the newly awarded sites were continuations from the first round of awards.

Finally, any continuing data collection and analysis effort should be accompanied by a modified procedure for defining the comparison groups, or non-enrollees. Sites should not try to match any particular group of non-enrolling students, as the sites did in the current evaluation. Rather, the more desirable procedure would be for sites to provide data from a larger but nonselected set of non-enrolling students, such as those students remaining in the sending schools or even a districtwide set of students. Analytic procedures such as propensity score matching or some similar procedure conducted by the evaluation team could then provide a fairer selection of matched comparison groups than the sites' procedures in the current evaluation.

Given all the cautions, the findings in this analysis of six cohorts from four VPSC sites offer early promise regarding the potential benefits of the VPSC Program. External to the present analysis, the local evaluator at a fifth site reported findings for two cohorts of enrollees in the fifth site's choice initiative. The evaluation relied on cross-section comparisons only, not a trend analysis. The results were mixed, with the older cohort significantly *outperforming* a matched sample of eligible but non-enrolling students one year after enrollment, but the later cohort significantly *underperforming* its matched sample one year after enrollment. These mixed results need to be interpreted with the same cautions as those discussed above.

6. USEFUL CHOICE PRACTICES AND OVERALL LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT VOLUNTARY PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE

6.1 Useful Choice Practices for Future Choice Initiatives

Key VPSC Program sponsors hoped sites could demonstrate useful choice practices for districts across the country, to help them implement the Title I choice requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act*.³⁵ The VPSC sites and the national evaluation have identified an array of such practices and procedures.

VPSC sites initiated choice-related practices potentially useful for other districts. The emerging practices covered a range of topics, including how to: design choice initiatives; involve parents and families; design capacity-enhancing activities at schools; and develop technical assistance procedures. Districts across the country can certainly learn from the program's experiences and adapt specific choice practices to implement in their own communities (see exhibit 6-1).

As an example of designing choice initiatives, one VPSC site demonstrated how intradistrict zones can be structured to include a heterogeneous group of schools. Students therefore have wide choice but minimize transportation time because they can stay within a zone.

Similarly, as an example of a useful strategy for increasing parent notification, one VPSC site developed a user-friendly online database. Parents and students logged into this database and electronically searched for information about their choice options. Because many districts across the country 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 made it easier for parents and students to quickly learn about their options.

Another VPSC site distributed hardcopies of materials to notify parents of their options. Over the course of implementation, the site converted its materials from a program-specific format (e.g., separate brochures for each choice option) to a school-specific format (e.g., separate brochures for each school, describing all of the choice options available at the school). The latter format allowed parents to collect information more easily about the programs offered at these schools, rather than having to search through materials about all programs, some of which were not relevant to the parents' interests.

³⁵ For instance, see the statement by Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), Congressional Record, 107th Congress, *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, Conference Report, U.S. Senate, Dec. 18, 2001, S13413–S13414.

Exhibit 6-1

Potentially Useful Choice Practices from the VPSC Program

Design of Choice Initiatives

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 still stay within a zone and therefore 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: 1) Designing and staffing *multiple* parent information centers to serve a large community; and 2) establishing a centralized, one-stop family resource center that handles all school- and choice-related procedures.

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.

Parent and Community Outreach Event: Organizing annual community event, showcasing all schools in the district, to publicize school choice options; successfully attracting families to attend by offering free transportation, free food, student performances, and translation services.

Offering Parents Transportation Details to Facilitate School Choice: Allowing parents to incorporate precise transportation information into their school selection process by providing parents current bus route and stop maps, locations of stops closest to home, and estimates of student’s waiting and bus ride time, for each school option.

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.

Capacity Enhancement

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 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.

Supporting Teacher Training Through a Master’s of Choice Program: Collaborating with a university to offer a M.Ed. degree program with a school choice concentration.

To further facilitate parents' decisions, one site provided parents with transportation details at the time parents were reviewing their school choices. The district's transportation director attended the district's magnet school fair and provided bus route maps to parents. She worked with the parents in searching the transportation database to locate the bus stops closest to their homes. A computerized district map then identified potential stops and estimated a student's bus ride time for each school option. For out-of-district students, the district also provided an "alternate stop" at daycare providers if the student planned to ride the bus five days a week. The transportation director interacted with parents and responded to their questions. As a result of all this, parents were able to incorporate accurate transportation information into their school selection process.

Sites also engaged in creative capacity-enhancement efforts. For example, one VPSC site developed a broad-based set of partnerships with local businesses, community groups, and institutions of higher education (IHEs). These partners helped the district to strengthen new education programs. Moreover, the partnership, developed as a result of the VPSC Program, successfully garnered additional funds to expand existing educational programs further.

One of the three state education agencies that received VPSC awards focused its initiative on providing technical assistance to districts as they developed and implemented their choice plans. This VPSC site established formal partnerships between mentor districts and mentee districts. All districts in the state were eligible to apply. The initiative organized 13 districts, which already had been implementing choice options, to serve as mentors. Each of the mentor districts adopted a mentee district that either had no choice plan or was at an early stage of developing a plan.

The mentor and mentee districts worked together to develop the mentees' choice plans and to share desired practices. Mentor districts also assisted mentee districts to develop effective parent involvement strategies and school choice Web sites. In addition to providing technical assistance, the mentor districts also used VPSC funds to expand their own choice initiatives.

The mentors and the mentees both reported having benefited from the program and plan to continue the collaborative relationship beyond the end of the VPSC initiative. One complicating factor has been the stability of the mentor-mentee partnerships. Of the 13 mentor districts, one mentor withdrew from the initiative after participating for the two initial years. Another mentor district, despite efforts to recruit a suitable mentee, has been without a mentee district for three of the four years of the choice initiative. As of 2006–07, 12 mentor districts and ten mentee districts were participating, with two mentor districts not having a mentee.

In addition, the same VPSC site established partnerships with two universities. The universities used VPSC funds to support choice centers that provided technical assistance

to districts statewide. Therefore, the initiative's activities targeted not only the participating mentor and mentee districts, but also all the school districts in the state.

Districts requested technical assistance by calling a choice center or by completing an online request form at the center's Web site. The centers' staff made site visits to all mentor and mentee districts to assess the districts' needs and provide assistance. The choice center maintained a variety of online resources, including an online parent survey available to any district to copy. The parent survey, as well as many other resources, were available in English, Spanish, and Creole. The Web site also provided information about choice-related parent resources, educator resources, best practices, online courses in family involvement, marketing materials, and professional marketing campaign tips.

Besides these useful practices, the VPSC Program produced important lessons about public school choice. The final two sections of this report discuss these lessons.

6.2 Overall Lessons Learned from the National Evaluation of the VPSC Program

The VPSC Program demonstrated a variety of public school choice options.

Though limited to awards at only 13 sites, the VPSC Program showed how four types of public school choice arrangements can work in a diverse array of communities across the country.

Among the legislative priorities, the arrangements added a wider variety of choice options, compared to what had previously existed at the sites. The VPSC sites' experiences, as traced throughout the earlier chapters of this report, also have produced important insights into the workings of voluntary public school choice. These insights include the following:

- Choice arrangements can range from: a) having predesignated sending and receiving schools, to b) more flexible arrangements whereby the same schools can both send and receive, and finally to c) choices among academic programs that take place entirely within the same school.
- Some sites can have any combination of these arrangements simultaneously, including options that meet Title I requirements. Sites can therefore have a "tapestry" of choice options, serving many students under many conditions.
- Measuring the extent of student participation in choice initiatives depends on whether the focus is on eligible, applying, or enrolling

students; participation rates will vary depending upon the chosen measures.

- Choice operations do not need to follow common stereotypes.
 - Large metropolitan school districts already may have diverse urban-like and suburban-like schools, mitigating the need for interdistrict arrangements or transfers;
 - Similarly, students may not need to travel greater distances to transfer to more attractive schools; instead, choice initiatives can try to make those schools closer to students' homes more attractive.
- The VPSC sites have developed a variety of procedures potentially useful for other local districts implementing choice options. The procedures include ways of gaining parent involvement and also ways of enhancing the capacity of receiving schools. One VPSC site also demonstrated an array of technical assistance practices for helping local districts.

With regard to assessing student outcomes, sites' efforts to collect the needed student achievement data improved over time, suggesting that the VPSC should continue examining student achievement trends as the program enters its second five-year phase. This last observation is especially pertinent because seven of the original awardees in 2002 also were among those receiving new awards in 2007. Although this final report covers the first five years of the VPSC Program, its continuation beyond 2007 will provide the opportunity for additional monitoring and lessons learned about public school choice.

The evaluation experience clarified desirable features to strengthen future program-level assessments of voluntary public school choice. The lessons learned from the VPSC's cross-site and aggregate program-level³⁶ experiences also help illustrate how future evaluations can potentially yield more conclusive findings about a choice program as a whole. Such evaluations would encompass the following critical features, also discussed throughout this report and in appendix A.

- ***Careful recordkeeping and tracking of all participants.*** Sites should keep accurate and aggregate counts of all three types of choice participants (eligibles, applicants, and enrollees) and also should

³⁶ The lessons pertain to multisite evaluations, like the present one, in which the goal is to evaluate a program as a whole, not the workings at individual sites (the latter would still be the responsibility of separate *project*-level evaluators).

compile individual student-level data for choice enrollees' demographic characteristics and student achievement scores.

- *More annual data points, covering a longer period after initial enrollment.* Analyses of student achievement trends should be based on a minimum number of data points covering the years following enrollment in a VPSC initiative. For instance, a minimum of three years' achievement data after enrollment would produce greater confidence that trends had been concurrent with the VPSC initiative rather than with conditions prior to the initiative.
- *Achievement data covering a larger proportion of sites and cohorts.* Achievement data from more sites and cohorts would produce a firmer set of findings about the program as a whole. The ongoing VPSC Program can put renewed emphasis on obtaining such data, given the new round of five-year awards made in 2007. The possibilities of such additional data are especially strong, given that seven of the newly awarded sites were continuations from the first round of awards.
- *A modified procedure for defining comparison students.* Sites should not try to match any particular group of non-enrolling students, as was done in the current evaluation. Rather, the more desirable procedure would be for sites to provide data from a larger but non-selected set of non-enrolling students, such as those students remaining in the sending schools or even a districtwide set of students. Analytic procedures such as propensity score matching or some similar procedure would then be used to select a matched comparison group from the non-enrollees.
- *Hypotheses about relationships to site profiles and activities.* Evaluations need to specify such hypotheses at the outset of a study. With sufficient data, such profiles and activities might include queries about the relationship between different types of choice arrangements and the nature and extent of choice outcomes.
- *Inclusion of all choice options at a site as part of the same evaluation.* Most sites have a collection or tapestry of options, serving slightly different goals. Together, all of the options represent a site's public school choice initiative, and evaluating any single option alone does not represent the site's underlying policy goals (nor do sites necessarily maintain records on an option-by-option basis). Evaluations should therefore embrace all of the options at a given site if possible.

6.3 Two Challenges for Improving Voluntary Public School Choice

Finally, the VPSC Program's first five years also suggest a number of challenges for future improvement. Two of these challenges especially deserve attention by federal policymakers and local districts because the challenges deal directly with the central themes of educational equity and excellence.

“Choice,” by its nature, may need to cater to a broad array of potential student and family preferences. However, the broader the array, the more difficult for a choice initiative to limit participation to a narrow set of (low-performing) students or schools.

The VPSC sites did not necessarily confront this potential dilemma. As previously highlighted in chapter 4 (see exhibit 4-7), some of the sites designed restricted choice arrangements (e.g., a small set of predesignated sending and receiving schools). However, the restrictions did not simultaneously cover “selected students at selected schools.” In contrast, other sites designed “broad” arrangements, either defining “all students at all schools” or “selected students at all schools” to be eligible to participate.

Recalling that providing choice for *all* students is an equity objective, the lesson may be to place importance on acknowledging the need for a *collection* of choice options at any given site (see appendix C, exhibit C-9, for more details). Rather than encouraging sites to focus their attention on specific types of choice initiatives, the aim would be to assist sites in considering the most appropriate collection—some options appealing to all students or schools and other options limited to selected students at selected schools. Only in this way might the entire set of equity objectives be served.

Similarly, future evaluations of public school choice might embrace all of the options at a given site, rather than focusing on a single initiative. Such a complete picture of the entire collection of options would be needed to provide a fair assessment of any equity outcomes. Moreover, the broader scope would complement those situations when sites do not themselves track participation in their options separately (i.e., option-by-option).

The education programs within choice arrangements, not the arrangements themselves, help set expectations for the desired educational outcomes for students. In a certain way, choice arrangements, such as those supported by the VPSC Program, represent administrative arrangements. They aim to give students the opportunity to enroll in different schools or in different academic programs within a school. However, with the call for the VPSC sites to emphasize transfers from low- to higher-performing schools, sites were expected to go beyond promoting efficient and fair student choice and mobility. The VPSC Program also aimed to improve student performance.

Although the VPSC initiatives devoted sufficient attention to needed administrative procedures (e.g., notifying parents, soliciting and reviewing applications, and making school assignments), a somewhat surprising but consistent pattern among the VPSC sites was that they also strengthened education programs at the receiving schools. These education programs went well beyond the expected orientation or transitional programs for newly incoming transfer students. The programs included thematic programs (e.g., environmental studies or the arts), computer laboratories, curriculum enhancements, and other programs of study available to any student at the receiving schools.

In principle, other than orientation and transitional programs for incoming students, the receiving schools in a VPSC choice arrangement should not have needed to install new or modified education programs. As with the private schools in the D.C. Scholarship Program discussed earlier, the preexisting programs at potential receiving schools already should have made them higher-performing schools, if not schools of excellence. Therefore, changes would not be expected, and although the original VPSC legislation permitted funds to be used for educational programming, the legislation offered no specific guidance about such programming. As one possible result, the newly implemented programs at the VPSC sites did not necessarily stem from any systematic inquiry into parents' desires (see appendix C, exhibit C-10, for more details), nor did the VPSC sites, as noted earlier, follow any externally driven selection process, such as relying on scientifically based research to select the programs.

More importantly, neither the VPSC Program nor any of the sites attempted to define a "higher-performing" school. Most of the sites defined such schools as those which were not "low-performing" schools. In other words, sites did not set any benchmarks for "higher" performance. Also absent in the VPSC Program has been any discussion of the standards for school excellence that should be maintained or monitored during the implementation of a choice initiative (see appendix C, exhibit C-11, for more details).

These remarks are not intended, in and of themselves, as criticisms of the VPSC Program. The point is that the conditions make it difficult to set expectations for the student performance outcomes in a choice initiative. Students may be more highly motivated and work harder if they have been able to select their school of enrollment, but their educational outcomes still will be heavily influenced by the substance of the education at the receiving schools and their classrooms. Thus, students' academic outcomes in choice arrangements may still be no better than the quality of the educational programs available to the students, regardless of the amount of choice that has occurred. A potential remedy is for choice arrangements to receive more guidance and clearer definitions and expectations for designating schools as "higher-performing" schools. These remedies would benefit future students in public school choice options.

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Appendix A:
Detailed Evaluation Methodology

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1. INTRODUCTION

The three evaluation questions were: 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; and 3) What academic achievement is associated with the VPSC Program? To address these questions, the national evaluation followed a mixed quantitative and qualitative methods research design, with data coming from a variety of original and archival sources.

The evaluation was therefore a multisite, multiyear program evaluation, aimed at evaluating the VPSC Program as a whole. The program covered 13 sites (nine districts, three state education agencies, and one nonprofit organization³⁷) that received VPSC awards from the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) in the fall of 2002.

Timing of the initiatives. Some of the sites started enrolling choice students as early as January 2003, but other sites carried out planning or other activities and started the following year or even later. Because all sites began some type of activity in 2002–03, the school year 2001–02 was considered the base year prior to the implementation of the VPSC initiatives. The evaluation then traced the sites' activities for the duration of their five-year awards, through 2006–07.

At the same time, once having started the actual enrollment of students, sites may have offered choice options to a new set of students every year. For each cohort of students, the “intervention period” therefore varied. At the student level, this variation was taken into account by accommodating different base years for each cohort of students. A consequence of this staggered pattern was that more years of annual data were available for the older cohorts than for the younger ones.

Definition of the initiatives being studied. The national evaluation defined the initiatives under evaluation as the ones being supported by VPSC funds. The use of VPSC funds not only defined the initiatives of interest but also 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 or outreach and media campaigns; yet others provided funds for new educational programs at *receiving schools* to increase their capacity and attractiveness to serve transferring students. The use of funds also directed the national evaluation's attention to more specific activities, while still attending to the overall VPSC choice initiatives at the 13 sites.

Observations about the use of lotteries as part of an experimental design for studying voluntary public school choice. The use of random assignment lotteries, when choice initiatives are oversubscribed, poses a challenging situation for education analysts. On the one hand, the existence of the lotteries appears to provide a “natural experiment” for analysts interested in comparing students participating or not participating in choice

³⁷The nonprofit organization operated charter schools and qualified as a school district, to be eligible for a VPSC award.

options. On the other hand, in order to conduct the analysis and fairly interpret the results, a host of obstacles must still be acknowledged and overcome. A tentative conclusion is that these barriers outweigh the apparent benefits of using the lotteries as “natural experiments.”

First, the nonparticipants may have previously invested much effort before entering the lottery—such as visiting prospective schools and filling out applications for exercising choice transfers—all of which may have raised their expectations that then were dissipated by their lottery loss (not unlike applying to college, and then being rejected). Analysts have not studied the consequences of losing under these conditions, but analysts cannot assume that the losers’ subsequent status as nonparticipants represents the desired counterfactual or “no treatment” group. In the choice initiatives’ lotteries, those not selected to participate may in fact have been subject to an alternative and undesirable treatment: becoming a group of disheartened students having to remain at their original schools and thereby performing worse than they might otherwise have performed.

Second, the lottery losers may not remain nonparticipants after their loss. The ongoing evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program that provides public school students with vouchers to attend private schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) has found that 56.6 percent of the lottery losers actually switched schools after having lost in the lottery (p. 6). Although only 4 percent actually switched to private schools, the rest did switch schools, presumably exercising a choice option of unknown sorts—but again undermining the students’ status as a “no treatment” group. Given such actual participation rates, the U.S. Department of Education report (2007) has therefore had to regard the lottery as an “intent-to-treat,” whereby a lottery *win* is recognized but as an *offering* of an opportunity (in this case of a sizable monetary scholarship) but not necessarily at all synonymous with actual choice participation (the treatment of interest). In fact, observing the lottery as an “intent-to-treat” calls further attention to the preferred counterfactual for making comparisons to students who exercise a choice option: the performance of students who did not even apply for the lottery but who *stayed* at their assigned schools. However, the *stayers* and *movers* are voluntarily formed groups, not subject to random assignment.

Third, the VPSC sites were not organized to conduct or document their lotteries as if the sites were conducting research studies. The VPSC sites followed a number of procedures that minimized the ability to study their lotteries: a) they required multiple applications from the same student (one application per school, as in applying to a college or university) and conducted the lottery among applications, not applicants; b) they did not employ any follow-up procedure to determine where lottery winners and losers may have subsequently enrolled; and c) they neglected to retain lottery records because such records lose their administrative value immediately following the conclusion of a lottery.

2. DATA COLLECTION

Overview. The relevant data included: multiple site visits to the VPSC sites; 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.

For the site visits, the instruments included field protocols to guide data collection. The protocols for the VPSC sites covered implementation at the site, district, and school level. The school survey instrument was directed to principals of schools participating in the VPSC initiatives and to administrators of participating districts in one of the statewide initiatives.

The instruments did not cover the collection and analysis of quantitative archival data to address the evaluation questions related to student achievement. Instead, individual-level student data were compiled and provided to the national evaluation by the VPSC sites.

The completed national evaluation covered the entire five-year VPSC Program and drew from multiple sources of evidence:

- Annual (2002–03 through 2005–06):
 - Original VPSC grant applications (summer 2002 only);
 - Grant performance reports from each VPSC site;
 - Individual records of participating students and a comparison group; and
 - School-level records of student achievement trends at VPSC sites and comparison sites.
- Selected Years (2003–04, 2004–05, and 2006–07):
 - Field studies of VPSC sites and comparisons; and
 - 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 designated as specific sending and receiving schools). The sites chose two schools with a lot of choice activity (i.e., having many transferring students), so that the site visit team could observe and learn about the VPSC Program’s initiative in action.

During all three rounds of field visits, a two-person team conducted the visits at each of the VPSC Program sites in the second semester of the school year (see exhibit A-1). The field protocols covered interviews with the VPSC’s project director and staff

at each site and with other key participants in the choice initiative, as well as the collection of documents and archival data in relation to the interviews.

Exhibit A-1

Schedule of VPSC Field Visits

	2003–04	2004–05	2006–07
1. Arkansas Dept. of Education (Ark.)	March 31–April 2	March 21–23	May 8–10
2. Brighter Choice Charter Schools (N.Y.)	May 10–11	April 7–8	Jan. 17–19
3. Chicago Public Schools (Ill.)	Feb. 25–27	Feb. 23–25	Jan. 23–24
4. Desert Sands Unified School District (Calif.)	Jan. 26–27	Jan. 31–Feb. 2	Jan. 30–Feb. 1
5. Florida Dept. of Education (Fla.)	May 19–21	May 2–4	Feb. 27–March 1
6. Greenburgh Central School Dist. No. 7 (N.Y.)	March 9–11	April 4–5	March 20–22
7. Hillsborough County School District (Fla.)	Feb. 3–5	Feb. 14–16	May 1–3
8. Miami-Dade County Public Schools (Fla.)	March 17–19	April 27–29	April 18–20
9. Minnesota Dept. of Education (Minn.)	April 21–23	April 11–13	April 24–26
10. Monadnock Regional School District (N.H.)	April 13–15	April 4–6	March 27–29
11. New Haven Public Schools (Conn.)	June 1–3	May 10–11	March 13–15
12. Portland Public Schools (Oreg.)	March 9–11	May 10–12	Feb. 6–8
13. Rockford School District #205 (Ill.)	May 3–5	April 20–22	Jan. 9–11

Exhibit Reads: The Arkansas Dept. of Education was visited in the 2003–04, 2004–05, and 2006–07 school years.

Source: National evaluation team.

School survey. The school survey gathered data from schools participating in the VPSC initiatives,³⁸ mainly corroborating the participation in the VPSC initiatives by the specific schools.

The school survey was based on a closed-ended questionnaire, directed at the schools' principals. The questionnaire requested information about:

- Student demographics;
- School performance;

³⁸ Participating schools were those with students who were either eligible for or enrolled in a VPSC-funded initiative.

- Choice options available to students;
- Percentages of students taking part in these options;
- Methods by which choice information was being shared with parents;
and
- Whether staff members had been receiving professional development related to school choice.

At all but one of the VPSC sites, all of the schools eligible to participate in the choice initiative were included in the survey. One statewide initiative was the exception: No schools were surveyed. Instead, the districts with five or more students participating in the choice initiative were asked to complete the survey at the district level.³⁹

The team used the following procedure to obtain a high response rate. At the request of the sites, the evaluation team first gave the sites' project directors the questionnaires to distribute to the schools, with a personalized cover letter from the project director requesting the schools' participation. Schools were asked to fax the completed questionnaires directly to the evaluation team, or to return the completed questionnaires to the site's project director. The sites sent reminder e-mails to the nonresponding schools approximately one week following the submission deadline. If necessary, the sites then made follow-up calls to the schools.

Subsequently, and following the efforts by the VPSC sites' staff (and with the permission of the site), the evaluation team then made at least two rounds of follow-up calls directly to the nonresponding schools, frequently re-faxing the questionnaire to the schools. Using this procedure, the team achieved high overall response rates (see exhibit A-2). During the final round of administering the survey, the evaluation team distributed the survey to 689 schools. Respondents at 630 schools completed and returned the questionnaire, resulting in an overall response rate of 91 percent.

Performance reports. The data collection also covered 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 the national evaluation team. After extensive review of grantees' performance reports, the evaluation team suggested that the sites provide more detailed descriptions of their VPSC-funded initiatives in subsequent annual reports.

For instance, the original reporting requirement had called for sites to report expenditures in ten categories: personnel; fringe benefits; travel; equipment; supplies; contractual; construction; other; indirect costs; and training stipends. However, these categories made it difficult to determine how funds were used in relation to the choice activities. For example, staff hired to develop new transportation routes and staff hired to

³⁹ At this site, the district was the appropriate respondent because many of the participating students were assigned to districts but not to specific schools, either prior to or as part of the VPSC initiative.

run a parent information center would both have been included under “personnel.” The evaluation team therefore suggested that the annual progress report include additional information, and that sites accompany their reports with a list of the sub-items used to compile the totals for each category (except for the “fringe” and “indirect cost” categories). The team further suggested naming the choice-related function (e.g., outreach; school capacity-building; professional development; student transportation; etc.) associated with each sub-item, rather than listing the name of the vendor or person who incurred the expense.

Exhibit A-2

VPSC School Survey: Number of Schools Surveyed and Response Rate

Site	2003–04*			2004–05			2006–07		
	No. of schools in VPSC	Surveys completed		No. of schools in VPSC	Surveys completed		No. of schools in VPSC	Surveys completed	
		No.	Rate (Percent)		No.	Rate (Percent)		No.	Rate (Percent)
A	12	8	67	12	9	75	24	14	58
B	No participating schools						5	5	100
C	19	19	100	46	46	100	65	59	91
D	13	13	100	13	13	100	19	19	100
E	No participating schools			100	96	96	Not participating in survey**		
F	6	6	100	6	6	100	5	5	100
G	205	113	55	202	182	90	211	202	96
H	56	56	100	58	52	90	62	57	92
I	107	92	86	147	129	88	133	127	96
J	6	6	100	6	6	100	6	6	100
K	24	22	92	19	19	100	42	27	64
L	81	58	72	94	81	86	86	79	92
M	21	17	81	21	20	95	31	30	97
TOTAL	550	410	75	724	659	91	689	630	91

*During 2003–04, the VPSC Program’s initiatives had not yet scaled-up to include 650 participating schools.

**In 2006–07, the site did not participate in the survey, as the initiative focused on technical assistance (TA), not schools. Data related to TA were collected during the site visit.

Source: National evaluation team.

3. METHODS FOR ANALYZING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT DATA

3.1 Overview

The complete analysis of the VPSC data required three primary steps with multiple ancillary procedures within each step. Additionally, there were many decisions made about the data and the analyses along the way that may not be completely acknowledged within the body of the report. A brief overview of the three steps is now followed by a more detailed account.

The first step involved the process of merging and recoding the data. Within that step, there were decisions pertaining to how certain variables would be recoded and treated when values were missing.

The second step involved the primary within-site analyses whereby individual growth curves were computed for each student who provided sufficient data. Similar to the first step, there were many decisions. The decisions within the second step regarded the handling of missing data, centering scores at a specific time point, residualizing scores based upon available covariates, and estimating effect sizes.

The third and final step involved the between-sites analysis. Data were aggregated to form composite scores by subject area (i.e., math or reading) and site. Once combined within subject and site, the effect size data were compared via a meta-analytic framework. Decisions about effect size weighing, outlier detection and handling, and data display were relevant at this stage.

For the purposes of completeness and clarity, those steps and decisions are detailed below. The steps are outlined in a sequential format to guide the reader through the intricacies and decisions as they were made in the process.

3.2 Data Management

Merge raw data files into single, long format file. The VPSC sites had provided their data in a series of Excel spreadsheets. Each individual row in a table represented a single student from a single cohort and data for a single year. Thus, to get data from a site for a single cohort, data were extracted from the Excel tables and concatenated to form a multiple-record or long file format. After combining the data, each student had multiple rows in the data set. Each row represented a specific time point during the data collection process and contained the available achievement data. Once the long file was complete, the student demographics were merged by the student's coded identification number to form a complete data set for each cohort and site. It is important to note that data were not combined between sites or cohorts at this time.

Recode numerical missing data codes. Once the data were arranged in a suitable format, each value was checked to ensure that the range and code were appropriate. There were some inter-site differences with respect to missing data coding. For example, some sites coded missing values with -9 exclusively while other sites used several different codes—each code representing a different type of missing value. Regardless of the code used, each missing value code was recoded to a “not available” or “NA” specification so that the statistics package would not treat the value as a legitimate observed value.

Calculate key variables for subsequent analyses. Several variables that were instrumental in subsequent stages of analysis were computed at this point. One such variable was a dummy code that represented whether the student changed schools between years regardless of group classification (i.e., enrolled or comparison group). This code was necessary to ensure that a fidelity check could be performed if necessary. A second variable was computed and held in a separate data file that represented the number of repeated observations per student. This variable was instrumental in selecting students who might be suitable for the growth curve analysis. The new data file contained the student identification number, cohort, and number of times the student had complete, valid achievement data. Data from this table formed the basis for the next step of student selection.

Identify students who possess sufficient data from both the enrolled and comparison groups. Students were retained for the analysis if data were provided for at least three (3) time points. The decision to select only students with at least three time points was based upon the fact that the aim of the analysis was to provide both individual level trajectories as well as group aggregated trajectories. Fewer than three time points would have led to some (in some sites many) students with only sufficient data for estimating a gain score. That is, two data points would have been sufficient for a change score based upon two observed time points. The intercept and slope for that change score would have been estimated without error since the line of best fit (i.e., the estimated growth curve trajectory) would be drawn through both points without any residual. Students who had only a single data point would not have provided sufficient data for anything but a single, point-estimate of performance. Thus, for the purposes of completeness and comparability, only students who provided a minimum of three data points were retained for subsequent analyses.

Compute residualized scores from raw, standardized scores provided in the original data. Each observed, raw standardized score was residualized across all students to account for racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic factors. Specifically, the variables “race” (a factor coded according to OMB standards) and “eligibility for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) Program” were used to determine predicted values from a general linear model. Those predicted values were subtracted from the observed values to form residual scores. The following equation represents the general formulation of those residualized scores (ϵ_{ij}).

$$\epsilon_{ij} = y_{ij} - \hat{y}_{ij}$$

where the subscripts i and j represent the student and time point, respectively. The predicted value (\hat{y}_{ij}) was computed with the following general linear model:

$$\hat{y}_{ij} = \sum b_{race} race_i + b_{frpl} frpl_{ij}$$

Note that the race variable consists of a summation operator because race was coded as a polytomous (i.e., multiple categories) discrete variable. The residualized scores by site will differ somewhat due to inter-site differences on the demographic characteristics.

Transform the residualized scores into z-scores. Once the scores were residualized to account for racial and socioeconomic indicators, the residualized scores were further transformed into z-scores to allow for comparisons between time and site. The z-score transformation was essential because the data provided each year by each site contained different standardized achievement scores. For example, some sites provided data for some years that ranged from 50 to 200 whereas other years data from the same students may range from 200 to 800. Furthermore, grade was relevant to the transformation because the achievement tests often differ enough by grade to warrant a different transformed score. To eliminate those intra-site differences, the data for each year were transformed into z-scores by year and grade. The general approach to this z-score transformation used the following standard z-score equation:

$$z(\epsilon_{ijkl}) = \frac{\epsilon_{ij} - \bar{\epsilon}_{ijkl}}{S_{kl}}$$

where the subscripts k and l represent the year and grade level of the student, respectively. It is important to note also that the transformation was done separately for each of the two educational domains of math and reading. Therefore, for completeness, the equation above may be further subscripted to indicate the achievement domain. For clarity and simplicity, that more complicated equation was not included.

Clean data and ensure values are complete and available for the within-site analysis. The final stage of the data management process involved a thorough check for missing or miscoded values. Some sites had so few students at specific grade levels that the z-score transformation process resulted in either illogical or missing values. In those cases, there was nothing that could be done to retain those observations and therefore they were omitted from the remaining analyses. The process of identifying illogical or missing values was governed by sample size of grade levels, actual z-score magnitude, and missing data codes. In almost all cases where data needed to be discarded, the values were confirmed by hand to ensure that there were no computational or data handling errors.

3.3 Within-site Analysis

The second step in the overall data analysis plan focused specifically on analyzing the final data set that was cleaned and coded in the previous step. After careful consideration, there was a decision made about the proper analytic technique for the within-site data. That decision was an individual growth curve model. It was reasoned that the process of reducing the data from the raw repeated observations into growth curve parameters would offer the best opportunity to capture the change process. Additionally, the options for computing growth curves include both OLS and ML approaches. Both have their advantages but only one seemed to fit best with the goals of reducing the repeated measures while maintaining as much variability in the parameters. In other words, there was an explicit goal to avoid any model-based truncation of the parameters. Those aims led to the selection of an OLS (i.e., individual regression) procedure instead of the more widely used ML methods found in software packages such as HLM and SAS. The primary difference between an HLM/Mixed model approach is that the level-one models allow for fitting of the growth curve and error covariance structures. Because the aims of the project were to use the growth curve parameters alone, the OLS models delivered what we needed and provided a clear, reduced data structure for secondary analysis. The complete process of within-site analysis is detailed below.

Estimate individual growth curve parameter estimation. Each student that had sufficient data was analyzed using a simple linear model. The linear model was specified for each subject area resulting in two sets of growth curve parameters for each student. The linear model equation for the growth curves is as follows:

$$y_{ij} = b_{li}time_{ij} + b_{oi} + \epsilon_{ij}$$

where y_{ij} is the observed value for student i at time j . The first parameter of interest is the b_{li} because that represents the linear growth parameter over time ($time_{ij}$). Time was centered at the point when the VPSC Program began at each site. Thus, time was recoded from a calendar year to integers indicating the point at which the program had begun (i.e., “0” denoting the inauguration of the VPSC Program). Interpreting the slope parameter, a positive slope did not mean that the student necessarily had higher achievement. Because the scores were transformed at each year for each grade level, the positive slope indicated that the student increased her relative standing in the grade compared to previous years. All the values represented relative achievement performance—again this was necessary to counter the problems of non-commensurable exam metrics over time and between sites.

Two other parameters are worth mentioning: the intercept (b_{oi}) and the residual (ϵ_{ij}). The intercept represents the student achievement point at which the student began the VPSC Program. Higher values indicate that the student began at high values relative to peers at baseline. The residual values show the efficiency of the prediction models by

student i and year j . Both the intercept and residuals are important for subsequent analyses and diagnostics.

Estimate effect size. Once the growth curve parameters were available for each student and for each subject area, effect size estimates could be estimated. The effect sizes were computed based upon the rate of change in z-score units from the intercept. Specifically, the equation for within-site, individual effect sizes was computed with the following formula:

$$d_{within} = \frac{b_{li}time_i - b_{oi}}{\sqrt{\frac{(SE_{oi}^2 * time_i) + (SE_{li}^2 * time_i)}{2}}}$$

where b_{li} and b_{oi} are the individual growth curve parameters estimated in the previous step, $time_i$ is the time student i spent in the VPSC Program since its inception, and SE_{li}^2 and SE_{oi}^2 are the standard errors of the linear and intercept growth curve parameters. These effect sizes are standardized values just like Cohen's d but they are weighted based upon the number of values observed. More repeated measures meant more weight to the estimated effect size. Effect sizes were then estimated for random coefficient (often referred to as random effects) models.

Aggregate effect sizes within site. Once random coefficient effect sizes were computed, the next step in the within-site analysis involved combining the effects to summarize the overall site effect of VPSC. Individual effect sizes were aggregated within site to produce a mean overall effect by subject area. The most typical way of aggregating these effects is by taking the measure of central tendency and estimating the variance about that measure. In short, the mean represented the average effect. Means, however, are adversely affected by outlier values and the effect sizes computed in the previous analysis produced a good number of values that fell well outside a believable range. Even the weighting process employed above did not protect against outlier estimates. Therefore, to treat the outliers, windsorized means were computed for each site and for each subject area. The windsorized means were based upon the innermost 99 percent of the data. Within-site but between-group effect sizes were computed by using the standard method of computing Cohen's d :

$$d_{between} = \frac{d_{wE} - d_{wC}}{\sqrt{\frac{s_{wE}^2 + s_{wC}^2}{2}}}$$

where d_{wE} and d_{wC} were the average, windsorized, within-site mean effect sizes computed for the enrolled E and comparison C groups, respectively. Additionally, the s_{wE}^2 and s_{wC}^2 values were the standard deviations computed from the windsorized, within-site

effect sizes for the enrolled and comparison. Once the between-group effect sizes were computed, further analyses were performed comparing the sites.

3.4 Between-site Analysis

The final major step in the VPSC analysis consisted of a between-site analysis. A meta-analytic approach was used for this step for a variety of reasons given in the main report.

The final student achievement trends came from six cohorts that included VPSC enrollees and matched comparison groups of students, across four VPSC sites. The cross-site analysis first estimated the student achievement trends for these two groups separately and then compared the trends between the two groups.

These two analyses served two different purposes. The first, estimating trends separately, was needed to establish whether either the enrollee or the matched comparison group was alone moving in a positive or negative direction. The goal was to determine whether the enrollee group might have been performing worse, regardless of any relative difference between it and the comparison group. The second, estimating trends relative to each other, captured the comparison between the two groups. Thus, the ideal positive result would be a finding that both groups had positive trends but that the enrollee group performed better than the matched comparison group. A less ideal finding, from a policy standpoint, would be that the enrollees performed better, but that both groups had negative trends. This less ideal situation would produce ambivalence in deciding, for instance, whether a particular educational intervention was desirable or not.

The first, or separate group analysis, involved the following estimates: the average linear slopes across sites (labeled as the “mean change”),⁴⁰ the standard deviations of those slopes, the average intercepts across sites, and the standard deviations of the intercepts. It is important to stress that these estimates all represented *unweighted* data across the sites.

The second, or two-group comparison, involved the following estimates: the weighted mean gain of the VPSC enrolled sites relative to the comparison sites and the associated confidence intervals and statistics for those values. As a point of emphasis, the second analysis differed from the first because weighting was now applied (the greater the site’s variability, the lower the weight).

The following steps were used to estimate the overall effects. All pooled effect sizes were weighted by an inverse variance procedure. For the random effects meta-analytic model, the DerSimonian-Laird estimate was used for weighting the effects prior

⁴⁰ The values represent the average change, per year, in standardized scale scores for each of the groups. Some groups’ data covered three years and others covered four or five. However, this small difference was not assumed to create undesirable artifacts as might occur if the groups varied, for instance, between three and twenty years.

to pooling. The equation below provides an estimate of the heterogeneity variance that constitutes the DerSimonian-Laird estimate of weighting pooled effects.

$$\hat{\tau}^2 = \frac{x^2 - (n - 1)}{\sum_i w_i - \frac{\sum_i w_i^2}{\sum_i w_i}}$$

where $w_i = Var(\hat{\theta}_i)^{-1}$ which is the inverse of the variance of the measure of interest in the i -th cohort and $x^2 = \sum_i w_i (\hat{\theta}_i - \hat{\mu})^2$ with $\hat{\mu} = \sum_i w_i \hat{\theta}_i / \sum_i w_i$. These pooled effects, therefore, are weighted based upon the inverse of the variance of the sampled effects. The weights only become relevant if there is sufficient heterogeneity of effects between the sites. In the case of the present analysis, there was sufficient variability to warrant the weighting by this method.

Conduct test of homogeneity. Summarizing disparate findings from sites only makes sense if those findings are reasonably homogeneous. That is, the sites must be viewed as sampled from a similar population where a measure of central tendency (e.g., a mean) suitably characterizes the effects for all sites. Testing for homogeneity in meta-analyses typically involves the Q -test—a test developed by Cochran (1954) to assess the average deviation from the mean. The Q -test can be calculated by taking the weighted sum of the squared effect size deviations from the mean effect size. Recall that effect sizes (d) were computed as the difference between groups for each subject area (see earlier effect size equation). The general formula for the Q statistic is:

$$Q = \sum w_i (T_i - \bar{T})^2$$

where T_i represents the individual effect size estimates d computed in previous steps, \bar{T} is the average effect size estimate computed for all studies, and w_i is the fixed-effect weighting factor for each study based upon the inverse variance of the study. The term w_i is defined as:

$$w_i = \frac{1}{\hat{\sigma}_i^2}$$

where $\hat{\sigma}_i^2$ is defined as:

$$\hat{\sigma}_i^2 = \frac{n_e + n_c}{n_e n_c} + \frac{d^2}{2(n_e + n_c)}$$

The statistic Q is chi-squared distributed, with degrees of freedom (df) defined as $k - 1$ where k is the number of cohorts. Homogeneity is the null hypothesis, so values of Q that exceed the chi-square critical value are indicative of heterogeneity. It should be noted that the Q statistic is underpowered for small meta-analyses (i.e., very few effects aggregated) and overpowered for large meta-analyses. Regardless of these limitations, all meta-analyses rely on the statistic to assess whether homogeneity can be ruled out.

Appendix B:
Instruments Used in the
National Evaluation

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

COVER SHEET

Date:	_____
Respondent:	_____
Title:	_____
Phone:	_____
School Name:	_____
District:	_____
State:	_____

FOR NATIONAL EVALUATION USE

ID Number: _____

Date Received: _____

QUESTIONS

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?

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 hours)
- e. other
- f. no new programs

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

2. SITE VISIT FACE SHEET

(Data collection: 2006–07)

**Face Sheet To Be Completed for
Each VPSC Site at the Time of the Site Visit**

Date of Site Visit: _____

Site Visit Team: _____

Name of Site:	_____
Lead Organization and Dept. for VPSC Initiative:	_____
Partnering Organizations:	_____
Type of Jurisdiction (e.g., rural, suburban, urban):	_____
Student Population:	_____
Ethnicity:	_____
	White African American Hispanic Asian Other

Site Visit Face Sheet, 2006-07

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3. INTERVIEW WITH VPSC DIRECTOR AND SUPPORT STAFF

(Data collection: 2006-07)

1. Definition of the VPSC Initiative

- 1.1 What activities or staff are being supported with VPSC funds? [*Use the revised proposal budget as a starting point, but be prepared for changes to have occurred.*]
- 1.2 Is it reasonable to define the initiative according to how the funds are being spent? If not, provide some other rationale for defining the initiative. [*Also check the revised proposal budget.*]
- 1.3 Describe the VPSC initiative in 2-3 short sentences.
- 1.4 How participatory was the *planning process* that was used in developing the VPSC initiative? [*Probe mainly for parent and school participation, and describe the nature of the participation.*]
- 1.5 What were the main problems encountered in *planning* (not implementing) the VPSC initiative?
- 1.6 What have been the main problems encountered in *implementing* the VPSC initiative?

2. Identity of the Schools Involved in the VPSC Initiative

- 2.1 Define the breadth of the initiative across its participating schools:

2.1.1 Academic years covered by implementation (not including planning year):	_____
2.1.2 No. and grade level of sending schools:	_____
2.1.3 No. and grade level of receiving schools or sites, by district: [<i>Also see Qs. 7.1 and 8.1 below.</i>]	_____
2.1.4 No. and grade level of remaining schools, by district:	_____
Within this number, no. and grade level of schools that might become sending schools in the near future:	_____
[<i>Define criteria used.</i>]	

Interview with the VPSC Project Director and Support Staff, 2006-07

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- 2.2 Describe any “zone” pattern and how zones were defined. *[If possible, obtain a map of the schools and of the zone pattern.]*
- 2.3 How were the sending and receiving schools identified to be part of the initiative? *[If related to school performance, obtain documentation of such performance.]*
- 2.4 Were any logically eligible schools “exempted” from becoming sending or receiving schools? *[If YES, please describe.]*
- 2.5 What are the grades for which choice options can be exercised (e.g., the entering grade for each school, but not the other grades)?
- 2.6 About how many students are eligible to transfer, due to the VPSC initiative, by grade level (and school, if possible)?
- 2.7 About how many seats will be created at receiving schools, due to the VPSC initiative, by grade level (and school or site, if possible)? *[Also see responses to Qs. 7.1 and 8.1 below.]*
- 2.8 How did the district estimate the number of seats available at receiving schools? *[Also comment on the quality of the procedures and data used by the district.]*
- 2.9 What is the schedule of tuition transfers, if any, that accompanied the student transfer?

3. Student Assignment Criteria and Procedures

- 3.1 What criteria have been used to define students eligible for transfer, and what source of data is used to review whether students are eligible?
- 3.2 How and when do the eligible students indicate whether they want to transfer, and how many potential receiving schools may they identify? *[Obtain an application form and review a sample of the completed forms.]*

3.2.1 Do they have to indicate, explicitly, that they wish to stay at their present school?	_____
3.2.2 How does the date when the VPSC choice applications are due coincide with the application dates for other choice options— e.g., to charters, magnets, or any other special schools?	_____
3.2.3 Identify the location(s) where the applications must be submitted and the rationale for selecting the location(s):	_____

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3.3 What criteria are used in deciding to approve a transfer? [Confirm the criteria through documentation and discussions with others, including parents, if possible.]

Check whether the following student assignment criteria are used; if YES, state the criterion:	Present	Criterion
3.3.1 <i>Proximity</i> preferences (e.g., 50 percent of the seats are reserved for students who live near enough to walk to school: [Note whether these families still have to fill out a choice application.]	_____	_____
3.3.2 <i>Racial fairness</i> guidelines (e.g., the ratio of Whites and non-Whites cannot vary more than 10 percentage points from that of the district as a whole):	_____	_____
3.3.3 <i>Socioeconomic fairness</i> guidelines (e.g., the ratio of students eligible for free or reduced lunch cannot vary more than 10 percentage points from that of the district as a whole):	_____	_____
3.3.4 <i>Sibling</i> preferences:	_____	_____
3.3.5 <i>Special provisions</i> , if any, for students requiring bilingual or special education programs:	_____	_____
3.3.6 <i>Substitution</i> rules when available seats, especially those designated by proximity, race, or socioeconomics, are undersubscribed:	_____	_____
3.3.7 <i>Lottery</i> or <i>random assignment</i> when seats are oversubscribed (and especially whether separate lotteries in effect exist for different subgroups of seats—e.g., Whites and non-Whites): [If used, describe the lottery or random assignment procedure.]	_____	_____
3.3.8 Whether and how a transferring student will receive <i>supplemental services</i> :	_____	_____
3.3.9 Whether and how an eligible but non-transferring student will receive <i>supplemental services</i> :	_____	_____
3.3.10 Whether the program maintains a <i>waiting list</i> , and how late in the semester students can still transfer, if a seat becomes vacant:	_____	_____
3.3.11 Whether the students originally enrolled in the receiving schools can be displaced:	_____	_____

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3.4 Have there been any complaints regarding the student assignment process:

3.4.1 By students and their families? [<i>If YES, describe.</i>]	_____
3.4.2 By sending schools' staff? [<i>If YES, describe.</i>]	_____
3.4.3 By receiving schools' staff? [<i>If YES, describe.</i>]	_____
3.4.4 By any other relevant parties? [<i>If YES, describe.</i>]	_____

3.5 How has the district's student population changed, relative to the population of school-age children?

4. Parent Notification Procedures

- 4.1 How did parents participate (and how many participated) in the planning of the choice program and especially in the design of the parent information center?
- 4.2 When were parents first notified of the choice options supported by the VPSC initiative? [*Obtain a copy of the written notification.*]
- 4.3 What feedback information is collected to assure that all parents are being properly informed about their choice options?

5. Parent Information Center(s) (PICs)

- 5.1 What district-wide enrollment does the PIC cover, and how many students is it actually serving? [*Depending upon the choice program, the number of applicants for transfer may only be a portion of the total student enrollment—obtain both numbers.*]
- 5.2 What are the physical characteristics of the PIC's location?

5.2.1 Access conditions (e.g., parking and public transportation):	_____
5.2.2 Physical facility (e.g., in a high school; working atmosphere):	_____
5.2.3 Hours and days of operation:	_____
5.2.4 No. of different languages spoken by staff, and match to student population:	_____

- 5.3 Enumerate the PIC's staff, by title and FTE. Also note the supervisory relationships and to whom the PIC director reports in the district.
- 5.4 Enumerate the outreach activities undertaken by the PIC during the past school year. Also, give some estimate of the frequency of each type of activity:

	How often?
5.4.1 Home visits or individual conferences with school (or choice) staff:	_____
5.4.2 Use of mass media:	_____
5.4.3 Use of community or neighborhood events or facilities:	_____
5.4.4 Other:	_____

- 5.5 How have these outreach activities been adjusted, if at all, from year to year?
- 5.6 How does the PIC know that its outreach activities are sufficient in reaching all eligible families? [Cite the actual data used by the PIC in developing this knowledge.]
- 5.7 What is the nature of the parent survey (sample and instrument), if any, conducted by the PIC, and how are the survey results used?
- 5.8 How does the PIC work with individual schools? [If YES to any of the following, please describe]:

5.8.1 The PIC maintains up-to-date information about the schools' enrollments:	_____
5.8.2 The PIC arranges tours of the schools:	_____
5.8.3 The PIC encourages schools to develop their own marketing materials:	_____
5.8.4 The PIC helps the schools to disseminate information about themselves:	_____

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6. Transportation Support within VPSC Initiative

6.1 Were VPSC funds used to support new transportation services? *[If YES, please describe.]*

6.1.1 Purchase of buses:	_____
6.1.2 Hiring of drivers:	_____
6.1.3 Increases in drivers' salaries:	_____
6.1.4 Revamping of technological infrastructure (e.g., computerized bus routes):	_____

6.2 Were school hours changed (e.g., staggered daily times or alternate school calendars) to control transportation costs? *[If so, describe and note whether the changes were related to VPSC or not.]*

6.3 Whether VPSC funds were used to support new transportation services or not, collect data prior to and during the VPSC Program on: *[If possible, obtain these data for individual schools, especially the sending and receiving schools.]*

6.3.1 The number of buses:	_____
6.3.2 The number of students riding buses:	_____
6.3.3 Average and range of trip times:	_____
6.3.4 The number of schools served each day by a single bus:	_____

6.4 How important are the augmented transportation services to the entire VPSC initiative (e.g., did parents pay for or otherwise support a portion of the existing services, before)?

7. Capacity-Building (New Schools or Sites to Serve as Receiving Schools)

7.1 How many *new* schools or sites (and how many seats), if any, were opened as receiving schools, with VPSC support? *[Also see Q. 8.1.]*

7.2 *What are the substantive educational themes at these schools, and in what way do they reflect a diversification or replication of themes already covered by the existing schools?*

7.3 How were the themes chosen, and did parents participate in the process?

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8. Capacity-Building (New or Expanded Programs at Existing Schools or Sites)

- 8.1 How many existing schools or sites have been expanded or added as receiving schools (and how many seats), with VPSC support? [*The total of the schools or sites and seats in 7.1 and 8.1 should coincide with the responses to Qs. 1.4.3 and 2.7 above.*]
- 8.2 What are the substantive educational themes at these schools, and in what way do they reflect a diversification or replication of themes already covered?
- 8.3 Describe the specific actions taken to increase the capacity of the existing receiving schools: [*Check each of the following, and if YES, describe.*]

8.3.1	New educational programs (e.g., magnets or academies within the school) at the existing schools:	_____
8.3.2	Administrative changes to increase the school's enrollment capacity:	_____
8.3.3	Supplemental services to assist the transferring students:	_____
8.3.4	Professional development to assist educators in providing instruction to the transferring students:	_____
8.3.5	Other:	_____

9. Capacity-Building (Sending Schools)

- 9.1 Do sending schools lose funds in relation to out-transfers? [*If so, describe the procedures and the amount of funds involved.*]
- 9.2 Are the sending schools under a formal sanction category (e.g., in need of improvement, in corrective action, or restructuring), and how long have they been in the category?

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9.3 Whether in a formal sanction category or not, what actions will be (or have been) taken to improve the future performance of the sending schools (check all of the following)?

9.3.1 Professional development or other educational assistance:	_____
9.3.2 Adoption of new educational practices:	_____
9.3.3 Restructuring of the school:	_____
9.3.4 Elimination of the school:	_____

10. Relationship to Title I Provisions of NCLB

10.1 Has the district started to offer the school choice options under the new provisions of Title I, and if so, how do these arrangements relate to those of the VPSC initiative?

10.1.1 Are different schools involved in each, or are VPSC funds used to complement the use of Title I funds for the same schools?	_____
--	-------

11. Transferring Students and Comparisons with non-Transferring Students

11.1 For each relevant academic year in implementing the VPSC initiative, obtain the following data (preferably noting the individual sending and receiving schools):

11.1.1 How many students were eligible to apply for transfer?	_____
11.1.2 How many applied, and how many were transferred?	_____
11.1.3 What were the main experiences in dealing with under- or over-subscription?	_____
11.1.4 What were the main lessons learned about the transfer process, and did these lessons lead to modifications in the procedures used the following year?	_____

11.2 Based on the analysis of individual student records [*such analysis may be done by the VPSC site*], how do the transferring students compare to those eligible but not transferring, on the following characteristics?

11.2.1 Annual academic performance: [<i>Start with the year prior to the initiative.</i>]	_____
11.2.2 Demographic characteristics (White vs. non-White; school lunch vs. non-school lunch):	_____
11.2.3 Other characteristics that might account for academic differences between the two groups (e.g., number of siblings; level of parents' education; nature of parents' employment and income):	_____

12. Sending and Receiving Schools and Their Changes Over Time

12.1 For each sending and receiving school and for each academic year of the initiative, track:

12.1.1 The total enrollments, by grade level:	_____
12.1.2 The proportion of White and non-White students:	_____
12.1.3 The proportion of students eligible for free or reduced lunch:	_____
12.1.4 The academic performance (mathematics and reading) of all the students at the school: [<i>Use all test data available, even for grades not necessarily affected by the VPSC initiative, not just the transferring students.</i>]	_____
12.1.5 Obtain district-wide averages for the above, omitting the sending and receiving schools, to permit contextual comparisons:	_____

12.2 At the receiving schools, what problems have emerged that might have been associated with the transfers or transfer process, and what remedies have been put into place?

12.3 At the sending schools, what problems have emerged that might have been associated with the transfers or transfer process, and what remedies have been put into place?

Interview with the VPSC Project Director and Support Staff, 2006-07

- 12.4 What is the evidence that the sending schools have taken more serious measures to improve their performance or otherwise to become more competitive?
- 12.5 Is there any evidence that *potential* sending schools are taking more serious measures to improve their performance or otherwise to become more competitive?

13. Contextual Conditions

- 13.1 What other choice options and programs are available in the district (not covered by the VPSC initiative), and how many students are involved in such options or programs?
- 13.2 Have these other choice options and programs changed during the period of the VPSC initiative and might they have played a role in the preceding early outcomes?
- 13.3 Have there been any notable changes by the surrounding districts that might have played a role in the preceding early outcomes?
- 13.4 Have there been any changes in the community (e.g., residential relocation patterns) that might have played a role in the preceding early outcomes?
- 13.5 How has the district's "share" of the student population changed, relative to that of private schools?
[*Obtain annual data by grade level, if possible.*]

4. INTERVIEW WITH OTHER PARTICIPATING PERSONS

(Data collection: 2006-07)

1. What is your connection to the VPSC initiative [e.g., principal or teacher at participating school, parent of participating student, other]?
2. How were you made aware of the VPSC initiative?
3. Can you briefly describe your understanding of the VPSC initiative?
4. What changes have you seen or experienced as a result of the VPSC initiative?
5. How has *student enrollment* at your school [or your child's school] changed during the past year and to what extent have these changes been associated with the VPSC initiative, compared to other conditions?
6. What changes in the *academic program* have been made as part of the VPSC initiative, and how well are these changes working?
7. What changes in *school administration* (e.g., redefining school hours or the school year) have been made as part of the VPSC initiative, and how well are these changes working?
8. How smooth or disruptive was the timing or sequence of key events in the VPSC initiative—e.g., application deadlines or parent notification dates?
9. How well do you think the VPSC initiative has been received by teachers, principals, and parents, and do you think they are sufficiently informed about any new role(s) expected of them under the initiative?
10. How has student behavior and academic performance changed, and to what extent are these changes associated with VPSC?
11. Did VPSC provide any other benefits or create any other problems that have not been addressed by the preceding questions?

5. INTERVIEW WITH THE COMPARISON DISTRICT AND TITLE I STAFF

(Data collection: 2006-07)

Procedures

One-day site visits will be made to comparison sites in spring of 2007 (February-May). Where the comparison sites are within the jurisdiction already covered by the VPSC Program's site (e.g., another "zone" in a VPSC district or another district within a statewide VPSC initiative), the needed data should be collected from the VPSC and related district staff.

Where the comparison sites are outside of the VPSC jurisdiction, initial contact with the sites should emphasize that our National Evaluation is: 1) covering public school choice, 2) selecting some sites where minimal choice options other than Title I, magnets, and charters are in operation, and 3) making site visits to sites that are near a VPSC Program's site but that did not receive a VPSC award. To minimize burden, the site visit will involve interviews with: the Title I coordinator and any related district staff (e.g., overseeing magnets and charters).

Preparation for Site Visits. Prior to any site visit, field teams should collect and analyze data about the targeted area. This information will have come from several sources, including: the VPSC Program's site that is aware of (and helped to select) the comparison site, and materials gathered from the district or state Web sites.

Assembling of Evidence and Preliminary Reports Immediately Following Site Visits. Field teams are urged to begin the formal analysis and report-writing process as soon as a site visit has ended, though additional data may still have to be collected. Assembling data and drafting narratives proceeds more efficiently and with much higher quality if this time sequence is followed. Teams should reserve the day or two *after* the site visit for this activity, avoiding other commitments.

Outline of Report. The report should follow the same heading structure as the topics of inquiry described next.

Topics of Inquiry

The topics below not only cover the "agenda" to be followed by the field team but also give explicit probes and examples regarding the type of evidence that is being sought. As a result, the protocol should provide guidance on how to know what to look or listen for, and how to recognize relevant evidence when it is encountered.

1. Public School Choice Options at This Site

Enumerate the public school choice options at this site, giving the number of schools and students involved by type of option:

- 1.1 School identified for improvement under Title I:
- 1.2 Magnet Schools (no. of schools and programs):
- 1.3 Charter Schools:
- 1.4 Other choice arrangements, including unsafe school choice and desegregation (*describe*):

[If options were identified under 1.2, 1.3, or 1.4 above, be sure to cover Q. 3 below.]

2. New Title I Choice Arrangements

How has the district started to offer the school choice options under the new provisions of Title I? (*probe for*):

- 2.1 Use of designation as a Title I school identified for improvement in defining sending and receiving schools:
- 2.2 Expanded transportation services:
- 2.3 Provision of supplemental services:
- 2.4 Expanded or improved parent notification procedures:
- 2.5 Other (*describe*):

3. Other, non-Title I Choice Arrangements

Describe the procedures used for the other choice options identified in Q. 1 above (*address the following questions for each type of option separately*):

- 3.1 How are eligible students defined?
- 3.2 How are students/parents notified of their choices? [*Be sure to cover all the communication modes—e.g., see Q.5 in the School Survey instrument.*]
- 3.3 What criteria are used in selecting students to exercise their choice?
[*Be sure to cover all criteria—e.g., see Q3.3 in the VPSC field instrument.*]

Interview with the Comparison Site, 2006-07

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- 3.4 What proportion of eligible students were able to exercise their choice?
[Also determine the proportion receiving their 1st, 2nd, etc. choices; obtain data for the past 2-3 years, if possible.]
- 3.5 How have transportation services been affected, if at all, by the choice arrangement? *[Be sure to cover all facets of these services—e.g., see Q.6 in the VPSC instrument.]*
- 3.6 Are other choice options likely to be implemented in the future?

4. Trends Associated with Choice Options

Determine whether the district maintains records of individual students who have transferred or of the performance of sending and receiving schools. The following questions may be addressed once, even if the district has more than one choice arrangement.

- 4.1 Are there any data showing trends in academic performance by the students who have exercised their choice? *[Probe for data for the past 2-3 years, if possible.]*
- 4.2 Are there any data showing trends in academic performance by the schools involved in the choice arrangement? *[Probe for data for the past 2-3 years, if possible.]*
- 4.3 What are the district's policies, views, and preferences regarding school choice options?
- 4.4 What interest has been expressed by parents, communities, or students regarding school choice options at this district?

5. Contextual Conditions

- 5.1 Have there been any notable changes by the surrounding districts that might be relevant to either the choice options or their outcomes at this district?
- 5.2 Have there been any changes in the community (e.g., residential relocation patterns) that might be relevant to either the choice options or their outcomes at this district?
- 5.3 How has the district's "share" of the student population changed, relative to that of private schools in the area? *[Obtain annual data by grade level, if possible]*
- 5.4 Is the district implementing other approaches to school improvement as an alternative to choice?

Appendix C:
Supplemental Data About
Individual VPSC Sites

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Exhibit C-1
State Education Agencies Used VPSC Funds to
Support Widely Different Choice Priorities

State departments of education received three of the 13 VPSC awards.

One did not use the VPSC funds to support any particular choice options directly but instead used the funds to provide technical assistance to its districts, to plan and implement their choice options. The technical assistance appeared to be an appropriate priority, given the state's historically wide array of choice options on top of options implemented by individual districts.

A second state used the funds to support an urban-suburban interdistrict choice arrangement. Such an arrangement fulfilled the state's commitment, stemming from the settlement of a racial discrimination lawsuit, to provide opportunities for low-income students in the state's largest urban district to transfer to suburban schools.

The third state initiated a new option whereby students did not need to attend their regular schools but received Web-based curricula and instruction at off-campus locations. The state already had experienced some legislative controversy over supporting off-campus schooling, and the new option provided an opportunity to strengthen such schooling as well as to test it by permitting students to take the annual state assessments.

Exhibit C-2
VPSC Initiatives Coincided With
Existing, Districtwide Choice Options

Four of the 13 VPSC sites used the VPSC funds to enhance preexisting choice options whereby students could choose to attend any school in the district.

At three districts, the VPSC funds helped the districts to strengthen the academic programs at under-enrolled schools, making them more attractive, as well as to formalize the selection and assignment procedures in exercising choice options. The fourth district already had been actively planning its new districtwide option, and the VPSC funds helped to support the implementation of the option—e.g., the kick-off marketing campaign to solicit choice applications, and the development of “attractor” programs and associated professional development at selected schools.

At none of the four sites was it possible to disentangle the influence of VPSC funds from districts' original designs and other sources of funding support.

Exhibit C-3
Sites Split Their VPSC Funds to Support a Variety of Activities, Not Limited to a Single Choice Initiative

Some of the different combinations of activities at the VPSC sites included:

- Supporting after-school services for students in the VPSC initiative but also supporting marketing and parent information centers catering to participants in all choice initiatives;
- Supporting program development for schools targeted to be part of the VPSC initiative but also supporting marketing campaigns and materials related to all other choice options; and
- Assisting providers of new supplemental educational services for two years until new charter schools had been approved and were able to open for enrollment.

Exhibit C-4
VPSC Initiatives Could Be Separate From or Coincide With Title I Choice

Two VPSC sites defined their VPSC initiatives to coincide directly with their fulfillment of Title I choice requirements, defining sending schools as Title I schools “identified for improvement” and receiving schools as higher-performing schools. At a third site, the specific set of low-performing VPSC sending schools included but were not limited to the site’s Title I schools. The remainder of the VPSC sites defined and administered their VPSC initiatives totally apart from their Title I choice options.

Exhibit C-5

Five Years of VPSC Participants

VPSC Site	Data for 4 Years	Eligible					Applying					Enrolling				
		2006–07	2005–06	2004–05	2003–04	2002–03	2006–07	2005–06	2004–05	2003–04	2002–03	2006–07	2005–06	2004–05	2003–04	2002–03
A		n.a.	290,142	318,231	279,800	206,700	n.a.	214	198	774	717	n.a.	214	198	450	450
B	√	2,594	670	0	0	0	n.a.	n.a.	0	0	0	266	196	0	0	0
C*	√	311,481	320,331	300,000	332,055	0	n.a.	n.a.	4,831	4,487	0	11,371	13,068	878	1,076	0
D	√	10,292	10,452	10,452	6,775	6,425	161	170	608	545	37	161	170	111	55	37
E		n.a.					n.a.					n.a.				
F	√	1,795	1,682	1,842	720	0	1,795	1,682	1,842	720	0	1,795	1,682	1,842	720	0
G	√	163,159	46,838	28,349	0	0	2,042	1,620	9,924	0	0	1,969	1,494	4,270	0	0
H	√	150,000	134,878	108,845	45,971	0	2,312	n.a.	3,884	162	0	901	3,039	2,755	162	0
I**	√	25,333	27,266	29,531	29,000	0	827	674	1,037	3,417	0	827	674	1,037	759	0
J		n.a.	8,235	4,073	3,941	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	167	126	19	n.a.	121	48	31	19
K***	√	8,444	4,970	4,849	1,725	4,905	1,205	446	741	190	501	1,205	446	741	191	501
L	√	45,970	45,727	51,000	48,900	0	4,818	5,249	5,007	4,936	0	3,144	3,783	4,249	3,844	0
M	√	4,863	4,993	5,224	6,500	1,660	76	114	149	364	117	35	34	34	157	80
Total		723,931	896,184	862,396	755,387	219,690	13,236	10,169	28,388	15,721	1,391	21,674	24,921	16,163	7,445	1,087
Total Number of Sites Reporting		10	12	11	10	4	8	8	11	10	5	10	12	11	10	5
Mean for the 10 sites with 4 years of enrollment data		72,393	59,781	54,009	47,165	n.a.	n.a.					2,167	2,459	1,592	696	n.a.
Percent of eligible students enrolled at the 10 sites												3.0	4.1	2.9	1.5	n.a.

Exhibit Reads: Site A for 2005–06, reported 290,142 eligible, 214 applying, and 214 enrolling VPSC participants.

*For 2005–06 and 2006–07, the site may have counted transfers from earlier years along with first-time enrollees.

**The number of eligible students reflects the site's students, K–8, who are eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program. The number is an underestimate: suburban students who have the option to move to the site's magnets are not included in the eligibility count.

***The 2002–03 applicant number (190) and enrollee number (191) are as reported by the site. The site's staff explained that an enrollee was placed without a formal application.

n.a.= data were not available for that year.

Sources: Grant Performance Reports, supplemented by site visit databases.

Exhibit C-6
Choice Initiatives Limited to Zones Within a District
Nevertheless Involved a Broad Array of Sending Schools

Two large urban VPSC sites designed zonal initiatives, giving special attention to schools in particular zones in their district. One site eventually scaled up to cover ten zones and 65 schools; the other had two zones totaling 106 schools, but VPSC funds focused on 23 of these 106 schools. The sites chose the zones because the schools in them had tended to be under-enrolled and underperforming.

In theory, the restrictions to these zones, in lieu of districtwide coverage, would have classified these initiatives as having targeted selected schools. However, although most transferring students made within-zone transfers, at both sites students in the entire district were eligible to request transfers into the schools in these zones. Thus, the potential sending schools actually represented a broad array of schools, leading to the classification of these initiatives as “broad” and not “targeted.”

Exhibit C-7
Eligible Sending Schools Were Restricted
but Not Necessarily to Low-Performing Schools

Five VPSC sites limited the eligibility for their choice initiatives to students attending specific sending schools, and not all of the schools in their districts. However, the designations at two of the sites were based on other factors than school performance: at one site that had a statewide initiative, the sending schools were limited to those located in the districts that had agreed to participate in the initiative, not all of the districts in the state; at the other site that started a charter school initiative, the charters were mainly designed to attract students previously attending specific schools in the school district, but the schools did not have to be low-performing.

In contrast, the three VPSC sites that limited eligibility to low-performing schools did choose those schools because of their performance on state assessments.

Exhibit C-8
Capacity-building Occurred at Receiving Schools
That Already Were (Presumably) Higher-performing Schools

Several of the VPSC sites enhanced academic programs at receiving schools even though these schools had already been designated as higher-performing schools. At one site, the academic changes and an infusion of computer technology benefited the students already enrolled at the receiving schools. At another site, a school previously designated as an acceptable receiving school, became “identified for improvement” midway through the VPSC initiative. At a third site, surveys showed that parents were not particularly swayed by “attractor” programs at receiving schools.

Exhibit C-9

Local Sites May Need to Focus on a “Tapestry” of Choice Options, Rather Than on Any Single Initiative

One of the two sites that had put into place the fourth type of choice arrangement—a “mixture” of the first three arrangements (see section 3.2)—previously only had one choice option serving a multidistrict region. In hindsight, the “mixture” may have been the site’s way of responding to the diversity of local needs by trying to create a tapestry of choice options rather than focusing on a single type of initiative.

Exhibit C-10

“Attractor” Programs at Receiving Schools May Not Have Been Needed to Attract Incoming Students

The VPSC sites frequently put new education programs into place at the receiving schools. One motive for such programs was that they would more readily attract students from other schools, either by diversifying or intensifying the curriculum to match the incoming students’ interests.

One VPSC site invested considerable effort in defining and implementing a set of what it called “attractor” programs at a series of receiving schools. Two years later, the site’s parent survey revealed that parents were attracted to the schools by their overall reputations, for academic excellence or even for school safety, but the parents’ preferences were not influenced by the presence of the attractor programs. The VPSC site subsequently reduced its emphasis on these programs.

Exhibit C-11

Explicit Efforts May Be Needed to Maintain the Performance of Receiving Schools

One site’s choice initiative had predesignated sending schools that had been deemed low-performing according to *NCLB* standards. Students could transfer to other schools in the district, but the site also used VPSC funds to strengthen the academic programs at four specific receiving schools that were located near the sending schools. The four schools also had students with backgrounds similar to those at the sending schools. Two years after VPSC enrollment had started, two of the four receiving schools fell into the *NCLB* category of “identified for improvement.” Whether (as in the eyes of the VPSC initiative’s staff) students transferring from the low-performing schools exacerbated the receiving schools’ performance, explicit precautionary steps are needed to avert such outcomes in the implementation of choice initiatives.



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