

**Interdistrict Choice Beyond the Classroom:
Transfer Student Challenges in Selecting and Attending Suburban Schools of Choice**

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I acknowledge that the University of Michigan exists on stolen land home to the Anishinaabe. As I live and work on this land, I want to recognize the sovereignty of the Three Fires Confederacy—the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi—along with that of all Indigenous peoples. The following work could not be what I aspire for it to be if I did not first acknowledge the continuing effects of colonization including the existing institutions, structures, and systems that uphold and perpetuate colonial power and violence.

ABSTRACT

Interdistrict transfer is the largest form of school choice in the United States, yet little is understood about how students experience these programs on an individual level. This thesis uses two sets of semi-structured interviews of recent Michigan high school graduates to investigate how families make decisions about school choice in a regional context and subsequently what challenges central city transfer students face in suburban educational environments. The first subject group consists of former students from a central city community who transferred to suburban public schools through Michigan’s interdistrict Schools of Choice program. The second group consists of former students who remained in the central city district through high school. Based on my results, I argue that we must add complexity to our understanding of interdistrict choice in three specific ways. First, we must acknowledge and analyze the dynamic agency that students share with parents in making decisions about where to attend school. Second, central city transfer students in suburban interdistrict choice programs encounter significant social and emotional challenges as a result of their transfer. Finally, where the needs of transfer students diverge from the needs of residential students on the basis of racial,

socioeconomic, and geographic differences, I find that transfer students receive inadequate institutional support from their chosen suburban schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Late summer, 2007 was an exciting time for me. An incoming third grader at my neighborhood elementary school in Lansing, Michigan, that upcoming academic year would be the first since kindergarten that I'd share the same teacher as my best friend Lucas. While Lucas and I lived down the street from each other and played on all the same youth sports teams, we had spent very little time together at school during first and second grade. For those two years, our at-school friendship had been confined to the hours where they let out our two classes for recess. Eager to carry on our playground conversations about baseball and Pokémon back in the classroom, it was understandable why 8-year-old me was counting down the days until school started.

A couple weeks before school began, I learned that another one of our school friends, Alex, would not be going to our same school for third grade. Alex played on the same soccer team as me and Lucas, and he had been in my class for second grade. Just a few days later, my parents told me that Lucas—my best friend—would be following Alex and leaving our school. The two of them, along with a handful of my other friends, were transferring to a public elementary school in one of Lansing's western suburbs. My excitement for the upcoming school year quickly turned to bitter disappointment. The way that I remember my parents explaining the reason for the transfer, Alex's little sibling had dietary restrictions that would be better cared for by specific programs they had at the new school. Alex left to be with his little sibling, and the way I rationalized it at 8 years old, Lucas and the rest of my friends followed him there to keep him company so that he wouldn't be lonely in his new school. This was my first experience with Michigan's Schools of Choice program.

Schools of Choice is the Michigan’s version of an interdistrict transfer policy—otherwise known as interdistrict open enrollment or public school choice. The program, which was established under sections 105 and 105c of the School Aid Act, allows certain non-resident students to enroll in outside school districts that neighbor their own (Michigan Department of Education, 2013). Individual school districts can participate in Schools of Choice on a voluntary basis and are allowed to determine the limits of out-of-district enrollment, the specific schools and grade levels that will admit transfer students, timelines for applying, and whether to make specific resources available to transfer students. Interdistrict transfer is the largest form of school choice in the United States (Reback, 2008). In Michigan, around 10 percent of all K-12 public school students are participants in Schools of Choice (Cowen et al., 2015). Including Michigan, 30 U.S. states have some form of opt-in interdistrict transfer program similar to Schools of Choice (NCES, 2017). Only three states—Alabama, Maryland, and North Carolina—do not allow for any form of interdistrict transfer at all (ECS, 2018).

I later came to follow a similar path as my elementary school friends through Schools of Choice when I transferred out of the Lansing School District for sixth grade. That fall, my two brothers and I started fresh in the neighboring East Lansing Public Schools. The first few days in East Lansing were a whirl of excitement and bewilderment. For the first time, I was surrounded by other kids who looked and talked like me at school. I was amazed at how popular soccer—a sport that only a few people had played back in Lansing—was at my new school. Some of the other students in East Lansing even played on regional travel teams—something that was almost unheard of at my old school. My new school even had an orchestra, a band, and a choir. I couldn’t believe how different it all felt.

As I grew up within the East Lansing schools, I began to question some of the experiences I had in the district. I noticed how kids from Lansing were made to congregate in random places around East Lansing after school while we waited, sometimes for hours, for our parents to get off of work and come pick us up. I began to wonder things like why it was that the Lansing sports teams were so much weaker than East Lansing's, even though the majority of our athletes, myself included, were transfers from the central city. Most of all, I noticed how I was permitted to slip in and out of class unquestioned and wander around the hallways while my Black classmates were stopped by security guards and required to show hall passes. While the following thesis does not speak to all of these questions and observations, it is significantly influenced by my personal experiences. My time in Lansing made me want to understand why my elementary school friends transferred away to the suburbs along with so many others like them. My time in East Lansing made me want to understand how transfer students are treated in their adoptive school districts and what impact their treatment has on their overall experience in school. These curiosities inform the foundations of this thesis and constitute my own personal interest in the subject.

This thesis will investigate how and whether families think about school choice in a regional context, and how interdistrict transfer influences the K-12 educational experiences of students from central city communities who transfer to school districts in the suburbs. The aim of this research is not to provide a conclusive assessment of whether or not interdistrict transfer is an effective mechanism for improving academic outcomes or reducing educational inequality. Instead, I seek to develop a nuanced understanding of the social, emotional, institutional, and agentic challenges that are unique to the suburban educational experiences of central city transfer students in interdistrict transfer programs like Schools of Choice.

When I first started conducting background research for this project, I was shocked—although not necessarily surprised—to learn that social scientists have failed to observe any overall academic benefit to participation in Schools of Choice in Michigan (Cowen & Creed, 2017). My initial research was guided by a general curiosity about what could prevent students from thriving in a system ostensibly designed to set them up for academic success (Chubb & Moe, 1990). If market-based reforms such as Schools of Choice are supposed to improve academic outcomes, then why aren't these benefits being observed, and what does that mean for public education in a regional context?

With this general motivation in mind, I developed a qualitative research project to study K-12 student experiences as they relate to Schools of Choice transfers between central city and suburban districts. My project seeks to understand how families think about school choice in a regional context, as well as identify some of the challenges students face upon transferring to suburban environments. Using the greater Lansing region as a case study, I conducted two sets of semi-structured interviews of individuals who had recently finished their secondary education. The first interview group was comprised subjects who had remained in the Lansing School District (LSD) for the duration of their educational experience. The second group involved students who lived in Lansing, but who had transferred to the suburban East Lansing Public Schools (ELPS) through Schools of Choice. All subjects interviewed graduated from high school within the last five years, at which point they were all residents of Lansing. Students were interviewed about their K-12 experiences on a variety of topics including their classroom experience, social life, commuting tendencies, and the way their families thought about where to attend school. The aim of the interviews was to gain a more holistic understanding of the Schools of Choice experience from the student perspective.

Over the course of the interviews, it became clear the prevailing discourse used to talk about Schools of Choice and similar “choice” programs conveniently obscures the underlying complexity involved in student experiences moving between urban and suburban spaces. My thesis argues that we must add nuance to both the way we understand how student mobility outcomes materialize, as well as the way we conceptualize the differences between “failing” and “better” schools in the context of interdistrict transfer. In the first part of my argument, I assert that we must view student mobility outcomes as a product of family unit thinking, in which students and parents consider student mobility based primarily on the collective needs of the family. Additionally, I find that parents and students share influence in thinking about where to attend school. This marks a departure from previous literature, which has considered student mobility outcomes exclusively as top-down parental decisions based on the individual needs of each student in the family separately. This argument is the topic of my first chapter. The second part of my thesis argues against the use of universalizing language that considers “better” schools in the suburbs to univocally offer a higher quality educational experience to all individual students than “failing” schools in central cities. I found that the experiences of individual students in reality is much more complex. I contend that central city transfer students have a divergent set of needs as compared to the residential student population of the suburban schools that experience the largest enrollment influx through Schools of Choice. These divergent needs are the result of racial, socioeconomic, and geographic differences between transfer and residential students. My results reveal that central city transfer students in suburban educational environments often experience a unique set of social and institutional challenges based on these divergent needs. Chapter 2 of my thesis will focus on the social and emotional challenges that are unique to transfer students in suburban schools. Finally, Chapter 3 will outline how suburban

educational institutions often fail to adequately support the needs of their central city transfer population as a result of their tendency to prioritize the needs of their residential population. My results will provide several plausible explanations for the academic outcomes of school choice found in previous studies as well as offer necessary theoretical frameworks to inform future research on the subject of interdistrict transfer.

SCHOOL CHOICE IN THE LANSING AREA

This thesis uses Lansing, Michigan as a case study to investigate how interdistrict transfer programs function between urban and suburban school districts. Each of the subjects interviewed for this project lived in the city of Lansing during their K-12 education. The non-transfer group remained in Lansing schools until the end of their secondary education while the transfer group enrolled in a neighboring suburban public school district at some point from elementary to high school. This section will give a general overview of the context in which these students thought about and experienced school choice. I will start with a description of the greater Lansing region and its schools before going into a brief history of interdistrict transfer in the state of Michigan.

The Lansing Area in Context

Lansing is located in the center of Michigan. The small city of 120,000 residents is about an hour's drive from Detroit and serves as the state capital. The local economy is split between state government and a declining industrial core. Like much of Michigan, the history of Lansing is defined by the automotive industry. The region—which was the birthplace of several car manufacturers, most notably the now-defunct Oldsmobile—is now down to two automotive assemblies, both owned by General Motors. While the state government employs many middle

class civil servants and bureaucrats, many of these individuals live outside the city. Lansing is a primarily working class place. Like many central cities across the postindustrial Midwest, the decline of factory work, the transition to the service economy, and white flight have destabilized Lansing's economy and chipped away at the size of its population. This has had a dramatic effect on the city's Lansing School District (LSD).

While Lansing is home to nearly 17,000 children currently enrolled at public K-12 institutions, the Lansing School District only enrolls about 10,500 students. The rest of the almost 6,500 Lansing students are enrolled in either charter school or—more commonly—other public school districts surrounding the city Lansing (Mack, 2019). Lansing is a convenient case study for interdistrict transfer programs because it has high participation in the Schools of Choice program and there is comparatively little participation in other non-regional forms of school choice such as charter schools and private schools. Because the state of Michigan employs a centralized per-pupil model of school funding, the loss of these students through Schools of Choice represents a significant loss in funding each year. Historically, the Lansing School District has had three high schools serving grades nine through twelve: Sexton High School just west of downtown, Everett High School located in Lansing's expansive southside, and Eastern High School, which is currently switching from the historical high school building downtown to a former middle school building constructed about ten years ago. While all three high schools have remained open, enrollment loss and budget cuts have led the district extend enrollment to grades seven through twelve for Sexton, Everett, and Eastern. During the past two decades of enrollment loss, there has also been a proliferation of specialized programs and magnet schools in the LSD. While the city of Lansing is over 54 percent white and only about a quarter Black, the schools in Lansing are significantly less white.

Table 1, Demographics of Lansing Schools (U.S. News, 2020)

	% Black	% white	% Hisp.	% Asian	% 2+ races	% Amer Indian	9-12 enrollment	%FRL
Sexton	56	15	14	9	6	.4	548	76
Everett	41	24	19	9	7	.4	1435	70
Eastern	38	25	25	8	4	1	820	72

East Lansing, Michigan is a separate city that shares most of Lansing’s eastern border. With nearly 50,000 residents, East Lansing is the capital city’s largest suburb. It is also the home to Michigan State University, a major research institution that is the second largest employer in the region, behind only the state government. As opposed to Lansing’s declining industrial economy, East Lansing has a vibrant information and education economy. As a result, the community and its residents are much wealthier in East Lansing than in the central city. The median home value in East Lansing is well over twice that of homes in Lansing. East Lansing also has a population with a much higher level of educational attainment than Lansing. While only about a quarter of Lansing residents over the age of 25 have a bachelor’s degree or higher, nearly three quarters of East Lansing adults have (ACS, 2019). In addition to being wealthier and more educated, East Lansing is also a much whiter community than Lansing.

In many ways, the community’s East Lansing Public Schools (ELPS) reflects these demographics. ELPS has one high school called East Lansing High School and one middle school (grades 7-8) called MacDonald Middle School. East Lansing High School is 58 percent white, 20 percent Black, 8 percent Asian, and 6 percent Hispanic and about a third of the school is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL). However, these school demographics also reflect a large influx of Black, Latino, and low-income students who come from within the

borders of the Lansing School District. While only about 3,000 current K-12 public school students live within the limits of ELPS, the district enrolls over 800 students from neighboring districts. The vast majority of these out-of-district students come from Lansing. This means that nearly a quarter of all students in East Lansing schools come from Lansing (Mack, 2019). ELPS receives the second largest number of interdistrict transfers from Lansing behind only Holt—a slightly less wealthy suburb to the south of Lansing. No other district in the area has a higher proportion of out-of-district students.

Throughout this thesis, I use the word “urban” in reference to both the schools in Lansing and the students from there. Commonly, this word has been used ambiguously and ineffectively. I use this word out of convenience to denote that the city of Lansing as compared to its suburbs is disproportionately made up of residents who are low-income, Black or Latine, and have low-levels of educational attainment. Therefore, when I refer to “urban transfer students,” I am specifically referring to students who come from Lansing and either are—or come from a community where people are more often—low-income and people of color. Additionally, I give preference to the term “interdistrict transfer” to describe the transfer of students between school districts in this thesis. Other studies refer to the same programs as interdistrict open enrollment, interdistrict choice, or public school choice. I find “interdistrict transfer” to be the most useful because it is primarily descriptive and deemphasizes the myth that mobility outcomes are necessarily the product of conscious decision making and open access.

History of Interdistrict Transfer in Michigan

Several forms of school choice have existed in the state of Michigan over the past three decades. Schools of Choice is Michigan’s interdistrict transfer program, which is designed to

allow for students to transfer from their residential public school district to a neighboring public school district. This type of voluntary transfer program exists in various forms in a majority of U.S. states (NCES, 2020). Michigan's interdistrict Schools of Choice program was first implemented in the 1990s under sections 105 and 105c the State School Aid Act. Section 105 stipulates that students living in one district may be accepted to be enrolled in any other public school district within the same intermediate school district (ISD).¹ Section 105c allows students to transfer to districts that are outside but bordering their ISD.

Two years prior to the roll out of Schools of Choice, Michigan underwent major school funding reform with the passage of Proposal A, which centralized the vast majority of school funding in the state. Under the new funding law, the use of local property taxes for school funding was mostly eliminated, part of the state sales tax was reapportioned to schools, and financial resources began to be distributed using a complex per-pupil formula (Militello et al., 2008).² This means that Schools of Choice involves not only the transfer of students between schools, but also the transfer of the funding associated with each student. With 10 percent of all of all K-12 public school students statewide participating in Schools of Choice, the program has enormous financial implications.

In Michigan and many other states, interdistrict transfer is an opt-in program, meaning that school districts can choose not to accept students from other districts. However, due largely to the significant financial incentives associated with receiving Schools of Choice students, the vast majority of Michigan school districts participate in the program. District-level participation slowly rose during the first two decades of the program before stabilizing over the past several

¹ In Michigan, intermediate school districts are generally county-based and provide various services to local districts

² Importantly, while most districts in Michigan are prohibited from using property taxes to fund their operational and instructional expenses, capital expenditures (such as building construction and renovation) remain funded in large part by local property taxes.

years at around 80 percent. Additionally, since there are no restrictions on students departing from particular districts, nearly every district in the state loses at least some students to interdistrict transfer (Mack, 2019; Spalding, 2013). While most every experiences enrollment turnover due to Schools of Choice, the net impact of interdistrict choice on enrollment and the consequences of those changes in enrollment vary significantly between different districts across the state.

In Michigan, central city district such as Lansing suffer the largest net enrollment losses through Schools of Choice. Overall trends in interdistrict transfer see the bulk of enrollment flowing from districts that serve high concentrations of low-income students to districts with more historical advantage (Ni & Arsen, 2011). In the Lansing area, which is mostly encompassed by the Ingham Intermediate School District, LSD is the only local district to experience a net loss of enrollment via Schools of Choice. Suburban districts such as Holt, East Lansing, Waverly, Haslett, and Okemos experience the largest net increases in enrollment through interdistrict transfer while outlying rural districts like Williamston, Mason, and Stockbridge experience much smaller net increases (Mack, 2019).

As previously discussed, the Lansing region provides a useful case study for how interdistrict transfer operates between urban and suburban districts. The high popularity of the program in concert with the relatively low levels of participation in other forms of choice in the region make Lansing useful for studying interdistrict choice. In the coming analysis, I will explore how families think about where to attend school in this regional context as well as how students experience interdistrict choice between Lansing and its suburban communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis offers a series of realignments to the existing discussions surrounding the political implications of interdistrict transfer and school choice more broadly. In this literature review, I will give an overview of the existing frameworks that social scientists use to think about school choice and the effect it has on the educational experiences of students. The first subsection will be devoted to an overview of the current academic debate over interdistrict transfer programs. This is intended to give a general sense of where this project fits in with other research on similar topics. The second subsection will be devoted to how researchers conceptualize the ways in which families make decisions about where to send their child to school. As my thesis will later reveal, I argue that we must make two specific modifications to the way that previous researchers have thought about decision making and school choice. The final two subsections of this literature review will give an overview of our current understanding of the social, emotional, and institutional factors that are relevant to how many urban Schools of Choice students experience educational life in the suburbs. These two subsections are meant to provide the theoretical basis for my later discussion of the unique challenges faced by urban transfer students.

Overview of Literature on Interdistrict Choice

Compared to other forms of school choice in the United States, interdistrict transfer has a relatively underdeveloped academic literature. While charter school and private school vouchers in particular have received a high level of attention, public school choice programs such as Schools of Choice have not been afforded the same degree of scrutiny. This is alarming given the popularity and widespread nature of interdistrict choice programs, which have been implemented

in various forms across the vast majority of US states (NCES, 2017). In Michigan alone, around 10 percent of all K-12 public school students in the state participate in Schools of Choice (Cowen et al., 2015). Across the country, hundreds of thousands of students commute to out-of-district public schools each day, making interdistrict transfer the largest form of school choice in the U.S. (Reback, 2008). Based on both the immense popularity of interdistrict choice and the pressing nature of the research that has emerged on the subject of such programs, the subject of interdistrict transfer merits far greater academic investigation. This study will further develop the current literature and identify critical gaps in our understanding in order to guide future research. In this subsection of the literature review, I will give an outline of the general understanding of interdistrict transfer we have from the existing literature. In following subsections, I will focus more intently on specific literatures relevant to the contents of my results.

A significant portion of the existing literature on interdistrict transfer focuses on the question of who participates in these programs. There is widespread consensus that certain demographic factors, such as race, class, and academic background act as determinants of participation in interdistrict transfer. However, the exact effect that each of these factors has on participation is a matter of debate, and often varies state to state. One of the main sources of conflicting evidence is the role that markers of privilege have in determining participation in interdistrict transfer programs. Studies of Colorado's interdistrict transfer policy have suggested that many markers of disadvantage, such as FRL qualification, participation in English Language Learning or special education services, and low reading scores are negatively associated with interdistrict transfer (Holme & Richards, 2009; Lavery & Carlson, 2015). While some studies of Colorado show that race and class play variable roles in participation, others have suggested that white students are more likely to transfer (Phillips et al., 2012). On the other hand, studies from

Michigan have suggested that the likelihood of participation in interdistrict transfer is positively associated with markers of disadvantage. Black students, low-income students, and students with low math performance were all found to participate in Schools of Choice at disproportionately high levels (Cowen et al., 2015). While researchers found disparate results on who chose to transfer in the first place, the literature is much more uniform in identifying the factors that determine whether transfer students will remain enrolled in their nonresident district. Black students, low-income students, and low-performing students were all disproportionately likely to drop out of interdistrict transfer programs (Cowen et al., 2015; Lavery & Carlson, 2015). My research will expand on these studies by investigating factors in the individual experiences of students that could explain the variable roles of race, class, and academic background in choosing and maintaining enrollment in interdistrict choice.

A complementary segment of the academic literature on interdistrict transfer explores the determinants of enrollment flow between school districts. As compared to the determinants of individual participation, there is much greater academic consensus on the factors that influence what districts students transfer to, and what districts they transfer from. School districts that experience large net influxes of students through interdistrict transfer tend to be associated with more advantage. These districts have higher test scores, serve higher-income residential populations, and often have larger proportions of white students (Fossey, 1994; Reback, 2008; Holme & Richards, 2009; Carlson et al., 2011; Ni & Arsen, 2011; Lavery & Carlson, 2015). Additionally, school districts that serve high concentrations of low-income students are at increased risk of losing a greater number of students to interdistrict transfer (Holme & Richards, 2009; Ni & Arsen, 2011). In Michigan, central cities like Lansing experience the largest net loss of enrollment through Schools of Choice, while suburbs like East Lansing experience the largest

net increase (Ni & Arsen, 2011). These shifts in enrollment put serious fiscal stress on disadvantaged school districts that lose out to their wealthier neighbors (Arsen et al., 2015).

Another significant portion of the existing literature is devoted to analysis of the academic outcomes of participants in interdistrict transfer programs. Studies based on standardized tests performance have found that participation in interdistrict transfer has no effect on academic outcomes (Cowen & Creed, 2017). However, it is difficult to disentangle these results from research that shows that student mobility itself is negatively associated with high or improved academic performance (Rumberger et al., 1999; South et al., 2007; Xu et al., 2009). Given the widespread nature and financial significance of policies like Schools of Choice, evidence of their null academic effects should be jarring if we are to understand interdistrict transfer even partially as an academic program. This thesis seeks to develop our understanding of the academic outcomes of interdistrict transfer by revealing numerous barriers to transfer students' education that might contribute to previously observed null effects.

The vast majority of the literature on interdistrict transfer uses quantitative methods to investigate how interdistrict transfer functions on a structural level. Regardless of whether researchers are studying individual characteristics of transfer students or district-level flows in enrollment, the personal experiences of students with interdistrict transfer are rarely represented in the analysis of school choice researchers. Without these important perspectives, quantitative studies on interdistrict transfer are limited in what they can contribute to our understanding of *why* we observe specific outcomes. This research can effectively observe many of the outcomes of interdistrict transfer but does a poor job of explaining the mechanisms that produce these outcomes. My study will advance the literature on interdistrict transfer by offering an in-depth analysis of the personal experiences of individual students who are affected by the regional

choice landscape. The inclusion of the narratives of these students is necessary to achieve a fuller understanding of how interdistrict transfer works in practice.

School Choice and Decision Making

One important area of research that is relevant to this thesis centers around the question of how student mobility outcomes manifest. For several decades, there has been significant academic inquiry into how families make decisions about school choice generally. While this literature does not focus specifically on interdistrict transfer, it is useful to this thesis since families do not consider one school choice mechanism in isolation from other forms of choice (Singer, 2020). This subsection will outline the existing theories about how families make decisions on where to enroll in school before identifying important holes in the literature that this thesis will seek to fill.

The existing literature on school choice policies centers around four different types of programs—charter schools, private school vouchers, interdistrict transfer, and intradistrict transfer. In its original conception, school choice was meant to improve schooling outcomes based on the ability of rational decision makers to select “better” schools for their children to attend. This would subject low-performing districts to competitive market pressures, which according to these theories, was supposed to improve school quality (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1997). However, there is little empirical data to suggest that school choice improves education in this way and, on the contrary, there is strong evidence that it contributes to increased stratification and segregation (Scott & Holme, 2016). Many studies still approach school choice as a product of individual choices (Schneider et al., 2000; Stewart & Wolf, 2014; Altenhofen et al., 2016; Schuls, 2018). These studies stick to original conceptualizations of

school choice that imagine parents as rational actors who are motivated primarily by academic concerns (Berends, 2019). However, as an increasingly large body of research emerged to refute the solidity of individual choice models, many social scientists began to alter the way they think about school choice mechanisms.

Studies from this newer group of academics suggest that there are several factors beyond individual rational decision making that influence where students attend school. These studies assert that school choice is a function many factors, including family resources and social capital (Lubienski, 2007; Harris & Larsen, 2015; Jabbar, 2015; Hamlin, 2018), school geography and transportation access (Bell, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Scott & Marshall, 2019; Yoon & Lubienski, 2020), and institutional policies (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002; Lenhoff, 2020). While studies that prioritize the role of individual choice rely heavily on the framework of rational choice theory, this opposing body of research assumes a framework more akin to positioned choice, in which the process of school choice is intimately linked to the identity and social context of the decision maker (Cooper, 2005). These studies, which can also be understood to conceptualize school choice agents as expressing a bounded rationality, advance our understanding of how individual choice is influenced and constrained by structural, institutional, and social factors (Jabbar, 2011).

My thesis will expand upon the positioned choice literature by deemphasizing the role of individual choices based on rational academic considerations and examining the holistic context in which families think about regional school choice. Additionally, I will seek to advance this literature by investigating the relationship between the needs of individual students and the needs of the entire family in shaping student mobility outcomes. A final contribution I will make to this literature involves an analysis of the dynamic agency of students in influencing school choice decisions. Every study that I have cited on the topic of school choice decision making has

assumed—either explicitly or implicitly—a model of parental decision making, in which parents are exclusive agents. This failure to acknowledge and analyze the active role that many students play in influencing where they attend school represents a significant hole in the literature. This thesis will seek to remedy this oversight by demonstrating and analyzing how students share a variable degree of agency with their parents in making decisions within the context of school choice.

Social, Emotional, and Institutional Factors Relevant to Educational Experiences

Both in public discourse and the academic literature, there is a tendency to group schools into a binary based on their perceived and observable academic quality. Studies adopt the language of “failing” and “better” schools when talking about school quality in relation to school choice (Yoon & Lubienski, 2020). In the context of interdistrict transfer, these categories are often divided between disadvantaged schools in central city districts and advantaged schools in suburban districts. Most studies that reproduce this binary do so by focusing solely on school-level data on academic performance (Bell, 2007; Militello et al., 2008; Holme & Richards, 2009). This simplification universalizes our perception of educational experience and constructs the perception that some schools are better for all students than other schools, regardless of individual identities or circumstances. My study aims to disrupt these assumptions by investigating the individual experiences of students with the social, emotional, and institutional components of education through interdistrict transfer. In doing so, this thesis will provide several qualitative explanations of the academic outcomes of school choice that have been observed in previous research. In this subsection of the literature review, I will outline the existing literature on the social, emotional, and institutional factors that influence students’

overall quality of education. These factors cause different students to experience the same schools in disparate ways. While the majority of this literature does not explicitly analyze school choice, a great deal of this study's analysis in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 will be devoted to connecting our understanding of these non-academic elements of education to the ongoing discussion on interdistrict transfer.

One of the most important factors in the overall experience of students—academic and otherwise—is the quality of their school social environment. The way that students perceive their school environment has major ramifications for their level of behavioral and cognitive engagement in school (Wang & Eccles, 2013). In turn, the students' level of school engagement has a strong influence on their academic achievement (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). There is extensive evidence that friendships play an important role in determining the quality of students' social environment and are significant to student success (Bellmore, 2011; Lavy & Sand, 2012; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Goldstein et al., 2015; Zucchetti et al., 2015; Ng-Knight et al., 2019). In particular, researchers have observed that the stability of high quality friendships and the continuity of friendships of various qualities have an impact on academic outcomes (Lavy & Sand, 2012; Ng-Knight et al., 2019). This is of particular relevance to interdistrict choice, in which students often leave established relationships in one school system to go to a school that is geographically isolated from their former classmates and neighborhood friends. Studies on the transition between elementary school and middle school—which in some ways resembles the changing social environment involved in interdistrict transfer—have shown that a loss of friendship and peer rejection during periods of transition can be especially detrimental to student achievement (Bellmore, 2011; Goldstein et al., 2015).

There has also been a significant amount of research done on the way that social stigmas against students and their schools can influence students' level of school engagement. These stigmas are undergirded by racialized tropes, which disproportionately harm Black and brown students and schools that serve communities of color (Noguera, 2003; Harper, 2015). One study of Philadelphia's school choice landscape found that there is substantial institutional stigma associated with students, teachers, and staff who learn and work at neighborhood schools rather than charter schools. This hurts students' self-esteem and level of engagement in their school (McWilliams, 2017). A study of interdistrict integration programs suggests that these institutional stigmas follow transfer students from urban communities to suburban schools, where they turn into individual stigmas (Ispa-Landa, 2021). These stigmas hurt academic performance through stereotype threat. Stigmatized students internalize stereotypes and perform worse as a result (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This thesis will work to bridge the gap between the literature on institutional stigma and the interdistrict transfer literature by investigating how residential students in the suburbs harm urban transfer students by constructing racialized stigmas against the community in Lansing.

Students' mental and emotional experiences in relation to education are closely linked with social environment and also have an important effect on academic outcomes. Academic stress in particular has an enormous negative effect on mental health, physical health, and academic performance (Shankar & Park, 2016). When students are in periods of transition, stress becomes more severe and academic outcomes suffer along with the quality of students' friendships (Goldstein et al., 2015). As a result of academic stress, poor academic performance leads students to develop a low sense of self-esteem (Schraml et al., 2012). The relationship between self-esteem and academic performance is bidirectional. Some studies demonstrate the

contributions of self-esteem to academic performance while others show how academic performance affects self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 2003; Di Giunta et al., 2013). Chapter 2 of my analysis will go into detail about how urban transfer students experience decreased academic self-esteem. A small subset of academic literature focuses on the relationship between academic self-esteem and family support (Román et al., 2008). When students have strong familial support networks, self-esteem is more resilient, and students experience increased academic achievement. Some studies have found that this relationship between family and self-esteem is even more pronounced in low-income populations (Malecki & Demaray, 2006).

A final topic of research that is relevant to this thesis involves the role that institutional services play in shaping the experiences of students. For interdistrict transfer in most states, the marginal cost of educating an additional transfer student is outweighed by the accompanying per-pupil funding associated with each student (Reback, 2008). This means that receiving school districts are financially profiting from the program. However, districts that profit from interdistrict transfer often fail to support the needs of these transfer students, in particular students of color (Learned-Miller, 2017). Many institutional services are important in providing a quality education to students. Three areas of institutional service that are of particular relevance to interdistrict choice are the provision of transportation, afterschool programming, and culturally competent teachers and staff. In many states, including Michigan, districts that receive transfer students are not required to provide transportation services to nonresident students (Cowen et al., 2015). As a result, transfer students do not have the same access to schools and the commute to and from school becomes a complex operation (Schlossberg et al., 2006; Bierbaum et al., 2020). Because of this, many students can get caught in between school and home. In this context, school-run afterschool programs have been shown to increase the academic performance

of participants (Mahoney et al., 2005; Vandell et al., 2007). My analysis will make an important contribution to this literature by examining what happens to transfer students in the absence of structured afterschool programs. Finally, the background and behavior of teachers and staff have strong impacts on the educational experience of transfer students. Demographic mismatch between teachers and students can hamper the performance of students of color while multicultural educational practices can improve outcomes (Zirkel, 2008; Gershenson, 2016). The effects of the services provided by guidance counselors and other school staff are not as thoroughly understood. This thesis will connect our understanding of the role of these services in education to the school choice debate by investigating how individual students experience these policies in relation to interdistrict choice.

The following analysis will introduce necessary nuance to the way we talk and think about school choice. First, I reveal the inaccuracy in the assumption many researchers make that influence over decision making about school choice comes exclusively from parents. I argue that students and parents share power in thinking about questions of student mobility. Second, I introduce the family unit thinking model, in which students and parents consider student mobility based primarily of the collective needs of the family. This pushes back against the implicit assumption made by many researchers that decisions made about school choice are based on the individual needs of students in isolation from the needs of their siblings and parents. I also expand upon the work of school choice researchers who have stressed the importance of non-academic factors in informing thinking about school choice by giving a detailed assessment of the effect of friendships, institutional stigmas, and specific programmatic offerings on school choice considerations. In the second part of my thesis, I reject the universalizing language used heavily in public and academic discourses that creates a perception that some schools are better

for all students than other schools. In contrast, I present the diversity of experiences within “better” suburban schools to show that individual experiences with academic institutions are anything but universal.

METHODS

This study is intended to analyze the state of Michigan’s Schools of Choice policy—a public school choice program that permits students to transfer from one public school district to a neighboring public school district. The aim of this research is twofold. First, it seeks to develop an understanding of how families think about school choice in the regional context of interdistrict transfer. Second, it aims to uncover the experiences of urban transfer students in suburban educational institutions in relation to Schools of Choice. This thesis focuses on the challenges these students face attending school in the suburbs and the ways in which their needs are or are not accommodated by their adoptive school district. In order to develop an understanding of these issues, I relied on a set of semi-structured, in-depth interviews of two sets of recent students from Lansing, Michigan, of which members of one set remained in the local Lansing School District throughout their K-12 experience while those in the other transferred to the neighboring East Lansing Public Schools through Schools of Choice.

The sample of interview respondents consisted of 10 subjects who had recently finished high school in either the Lansing School District or East Lansing Public Schools. Each individual lived within the borders of the Lansing School District while attending high school and graduated from high school within the past five years. The Lansing region was chosen as a case study for this project for two reasons. The first is that Lansing is highly relevant to this study’s research question. The community has high rates of participation in Schools of Choice and

relatively low rates of participation in public school academies (charter schools) as compared to similar regions in the state (Mack, 2019). This gives a clearer picture of how thinking about interdistrict transfer occurs without being overshadowed by considerations of charter school enrollment. Additionally, the Lansing region is a clear example of the central city-suburb dichotomy that is the interest of this study (Militello et al., 2008). The second reason for choosing the Lansing region is a matter of convenience. Over the course of the project, COVID-19 made in-person and partner-based recruitment impossible. Rather than form partnerships with school administrations during the peak of COVID anxieties and chaos, I chose to prioritize convenience and safety in my recruitment strategy. As a graduate of East Lansing High School and a former student in LSD, I relied on personal networks to form the base of the sample.

Subjects were recruited using a modified snowball sampling technique, in which each interviewee would pass on information about the study to other potential subjects. Initial interviews were made using personal connections to former students of both Lansing and East Lansing schools. The study received U-M Institutional Review Board exemption in July 2020, and subjects were given \$20 in compensation for their interview responses. Each interview took place remotely over videoconferencing software or by phone call and lasted for approximately one hour. Purposive sampling in the initial recruitment phase was used in order to create a sample that reflected the demographic diversity of students participating in the Schools of Choice program in Lansing. Interviewees are referred to using pseudonyms.

Table 2, Demographic Characteristics of Transfer Sample

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Education	Family income	Grade level at transfer
Aria Johnson	21	Woman	Black, white	4-year university	Low-income	8 th
Brendan Parsons	22	Man	white	Community college	Middle-income	9 th
Cesar Ramirez	20	Man	Latino	Community college to 4-year university	Low-income	9 th
Griselda Davis	21	Non-binary	Black	Community college to 4-year university	Middle-income	3 rd
Hayley Hendricks	22	Woman	white	Community college to 4-year university	Middle-income	9 th
Noah Meyers	19	Man	white	4-year university	High-income	6 th

Table 3, Demographic Characteristics of Non-transfer Sample

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Education	Family income
Adam Cooper	22	Man	white	High school	Low-income
Kaylee Fulton	21	Woman	white	Some community college	Middle-income
Max Bona	20	Man	Black	4-year university	Middle-income

Each interview was conducted in a semi-structured format, in which conversation followed a loose progression of topics. Separate interview guides were used for interviews with transfer students in East Lansing schools (Appendix A) and non-transfer students who remained in Lansing schools (Appendix B). These interview guides covered similar topics but were structured differently to accommodate for the respective experiences of transfer and non-transfer students. Before each interview, I went through the process of informed consent and ensured that there were no concerns about the study or videoconference platform. I began each interview by asking questions about the holistic experience of attending schools in each student's initial

school experiences. I then proceeded to ask questions in a loosely chronological pattern that advanced through the transfer process, high school, and post-graduate plans. Both transfer students and non-transfers were asked about their background information: where they attended schools for kindergarten through high school, what they remember about their classroom experiences, what they remember about their social experiences in school, and how they felt about these experiences. Transfer students were asked about when their family first considered transferring schools, what their motivations for transferring were, what the process was like, and how they felt about the process. Non-transfer students were asked about whether their family had ever considered transferring schools, and if so, how those conversations played out, how they felt about the existence or absence of those conversations, and what they knew of school choice. Each interviewee was asked about their experiences since leaving high school as well as how they felt their time in Lansing or East Lansing schools shaped what they were currently doing. Many interviews of transfer students concluded with a discussion of the subject's overall assessment and reflections on Schools of Choice.

While interviews followed a general structure, subjects were given the opportunity to talk on whatever relevant topic they chose to share, so not all questions were asked in the same order, and not all questions were asked of all subjects. The dynamic of each interview was reasonably comfortable, and most of the subjects felt eager to share their experiences. Two of the initial subjects were close friends of mine while the rest were either acquaintances or strangers. My familiarity with some of the subjects may have increased their willingness to open up to me earlier on in the interviews. However, it is also possible that my proximity to some of the interviewees may have caused some of them to be more cautious about sharing specific personal experiences with me. As a transfer student through the Schools of Choice program myself, I

found I was well equipped to ask relevant probes about specific details of the transfer experience. My general understanding of the schools in the Lansing region made it easier to follow complicated discussions of student mobility in the area.

At times, as a white researcher, I felt poorly suited to listen to the responses of some of the Black interviewees when they shared experiences with racial discrimination and inadequate institutional support. This was not because these conversations were uncomfortable. Rather, this feeling was due to the conflict I felt between my role as a supportive figure and my role as a researcher who does not share the same kind of systemic and interpersonal experiences. I believe that my identity was not lost on the subjects, and some responses were likely modified in order to accommodate my role as a white researcher. At times, the process of recruitment and setting up interviews felt abnormally formalized for communication with peers of roughly my own age. This formality did not seem to linger over the course of any of the interviews. In general, people felt willing and eager to share, with many noting that they had not thought specifically of their experiences within the context of Schools of Choice before the interview. I ended each interview by giving the subjects an opportunity to ask any questions they might have had about my study or the topic of public school choice. In many interviews, this was a fruitful discussion on the realities of Schools of Choice. One recent graduate of a Lansing high school asked me about my experiences transferring to East Lansing. He wanted to know what it was like because he had a younger sibling who was currently attending a Lansing middle school and contemplating transferring to a neighboring district through Schools of Choice.

Interviews were recorded either through the videoconferencing software or on an external recording device in the case of phone interviews. Each interview was transcribed using an online speech-to-text API. Transcription errors were corrected manually by comparing the text with the

audio recordings. My coding process took place over two stages. The first stage involved line-by-line open coding. I used open coding on the first two transfer interviews as well as the first non-transfer interview. From these codes, I formed the basis to perform focused coding on the remainder of my interviews. These codes were used to identify when and how subjects were talking about different topics of interest.

Methodological Limitations and Unique Contributions

Initially, I viewed this study's analysis of former students as one of many limitations. At the onset of this project, I had imagined that I would be interviewing current students in schools about their everyday experiences. However, as my project developed, I began to appreciate the value of conducting interviews with people who had had time to look back and reflect on their experiences as a whole. Although the temporal separation undoubtedly did pose limitations, such as increased recall error, it also provided the project with many unique insights. For example, interviewees were able to compare how they felt about certain experiences in the moment to how they felt about it in reflection. Often students expressed disappointment, regret, or even anger about how they had previously felt about something in their K-12 education. Additionally, interviewing former students allowed me to analyze the relationship between Schools of Choice and post-high school experiences. Future studies should investigate the perspectives of current students in relation to interdistrict choice as well as the perspectives of former students in different communities.

There were a fair number of limitations to my sampling technique and outcomes. As previously mentioned, the initial stages of my recruitment strategy were heavily influenced by my own personal connections. This allowed me to purposively create a more representative

sample, but it also means that some of my interviewees may not have felt comfortable sharing specific personal experiences. Additionally, as it turned out, all of the interviewees in the transfer group went on to community college or a 4-year university after high school. Because it is difficult to tell whether this represents bias in my sample or is representative of suburban participants in Schools of Choice, future research should investigate the connection between interdistrict transfer and post-high school educational attainment. Additionally, the sample does not contain any subjects who did not graduate from high school, nor does it contain any subjects who dropped out of the Schools of Choice program. This absence was not deliberate, and it represents significant source of bias. The Lansing School District in particular has a relatively high drop-out rate (US News, 2021) and exit out of the Schools of Choice program is a fairly common experience, especially for students who are Black, low-income, or low-performing (Cowen et al., 2015). Additionally, race is a significant moderating variable that influences the relationship between interdistrict transfer and educational experiences. However, due to the variety of other topics discussed in this thesis, race was not analyzed in as much detail as the complexity and significance of the factor necessitates. Future research should look specifically at the experiences of Black students and other racial groups in interdistrict transfer programs.

Finally, another limitation of note is the length of the timeframe under investigation in this project. While it is important to compare interdistrict experiences across grade level (for instance students who transfer in elementary school will have different experiences in Schools of Choice than students who transfer in high school), looking at all experiences from kindergarten through graduation necessarily cedes some important detail and complexity. Future studies should look into student experiences in interdistrict programs over shorter timeframes, such as elementary school, middle school, or high school.

RESULTS

Throughout the course of my interviews, it became abundantly clear that the current academic and public discourses surrounding interdistrict transfer programs like Schools of Choice were conveniently omitting the underlying complexity involved with “choice” programs. These reductive narratives diminish student mobility outcomes to a parental decision based on the goal of moving students from some version of “failing” schools to “better” schools.

While many studies have appropriately moved away from viewing all parents as rational actors with complete agency (Bell, 2007; Fong & Faude, 2018; Berends, 2020), there is still a striking unanimity within the existing literature in viewing parents as independent decision makers. My data shows that rather than school choice decisions being an exclusively top-down parental judgment, in many cases students share influence with parents in thinking about where to attend school. This is important because it implicates students themselves in investing in experiences that they may later realize they weren’t prepared to manage. I will also introduce the concept of family thinking regarding student mobility, in which decisions about school choice are made based on the needs of the family as a whole rather than the optimization of the academic needs of each student in isolation. While academic concerns are sometimes a significant motive behind independent participation in Schools of Choice, I found that family dynamics, transportation logistics, social relationships, and institutional stigmas against neighborhood public schools are all important considerations that influence family thinking about student mobility to an equal or greater degree than academic concerns. Chapter 1 will give an overview of how family thinking about student mobility transpires from the student perspective.

Although much of the academic literature acknowledges and indeed focuses on the structural factors that lead to differential outcomes between districts, there is still a tendency to conceptualize schools in the binary of “failing” versus “better.” The existence of this binary public narratives surrounding schools in urban settings is well documented (McWilliams, 2017). While sometimes representative of school-level academic outcomes, this language also universalizes school-level educational experiences and implies that “better” schools will always provide a higher quality educational experience than “failing” schools for all students. This implicitly supports the idea that parents should move their students from “failing” schools (often in central cities) to “better” schools (often in suburbs) in order to improve their child’s educational experience. My research shows that the reality is much more complex. Urban transfer students and residential suburban students have divergent needs based on racial, socioeconomic, and geographic differences. Suburban environments often subject urban transfer students to social and emotional distress on the basis of these differences. Additionally, suburban educational institutions are often set up to exclusively accommodate the needs of their residential population, leaving transfer students without access to many of educational benefits that they might have transferred for in the first place. Chapter 2 will explore the subject of social challenges faced by urban transfers in suburban schools while Chapter 3 will show how divergent needs lead to inadequate institutional support for transfer students. Although some schools may perform higher at a school-level than others, the reality of where an individual student will thrive educationally is much more complex. Altogether, the following three chapters will provide an argument in support of a shift towards more complex ways of thinking about and analyzing interdistrict transfer.

CHAPTER 1: How Families Consider Regional Student Mobility

Traditional ways of talking about school choice tend to mask the complexities that underlie how families consider the questions about regional student mobility in the context of Schools of Choice. As discussed in this study's literature, popular discourse and rational choice theories on school choice in the academic literature assume that school choice operates through the informed and accurate decision making of parents who are primarily motivated by a concern for improving the academic quality of their student's education (Schneider et al., 2000; Stewart & Wolf, 2014; Altenhofen et al., 2016; Berends, 2019). This simplifies matters in a way that obscures the reality of school choice unnecessarily and harmfully. In this chapter, I argue that we must add nuance to our understanding of how regional student outcomes come to be in three ways.

First, parents and students often share influence in thinking about where to attend school. This runs contrary to the assumptions made by the vast majority of the existing academic literature, which assumes parents to be exclusive agents in making top-down decisions about school choice for students of all ages. Second, I argue that families do not consider the needs of individual students in isolation from the needs of the rest of the family when thinking about interdistrict school choice. Instead, I propose a model of family unit thinking in which students and parents consider school choice in the context of the needs of the entire family, including parents and multiple siblings. This constitutes an important modification of previous theories on school choice, which implicitly assume that families think about school choice in ways that prioritize the academic and personal needs of each child as an individual, rather than as part of a family. Finally, I add on to existing literature that calls attention to role of social networks, demographic differences, geographic limitations, and institutional stigmas in influencing student

mobility outcomes by arguing against academic considerations as a primary or exclusive consideration of families thinking about interdistrict transfer (Bell, 2009; Altenhofen et al., 2016; Austin & Berends, 2018; Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018).

Although subjects talked about their experiences thinking through multiple forms of school choice—most notably intradistrict choice within the Lansing School District—this chapter will focus primarily on interdistrict dynamics. While other studies have shown that families consider many forms of school choice simultaneously (Singer, 2020), I will consider alternative forms of school choice as outside of the scope of this project except in cases where it directly relates to interdistrict transfer. This chapter will begin with a discussion of the relationship between students and parents in thinking about regional mobility before introducing the concept of family unit thinking as relates to school choice. I will conclude with an analysis of the various non-academic factors that influence where students go to school.

Student-parent dynamics in thinking about interdistrict transfer

The current academic literature on school choice leaves almost no room for student agency in thinking about their own mobility independent of their parents. Each study cited in this thesis that talks about school choice decision making fails to consider the role of students in considering where to attend school. My data suggests that this represents a serious oversight. While there were certainly instances of parents making top-down decisions about school choice, the majority of students interviewed reported that they shared influence in thinking about student mobility with their parents. In two cases out of ten, the primary drivers behind school choice decisions were students rather than parents. Based on these results, I argue that we must consider the influence of students in thinking about their own regional mobility. Parents are not alone in

thinking about school choice, and more often than not, they are not the only party that has a say in where students end up going to school. We should embrace the complexity denoted by the idea that decisions about school choice are frequently the product of more than one type of decision maker.

The data from my interviews with urban transfer students does suggest that there are some instances in which parents make top-down decisions about school choice against the immediate wishes of their students. This was the case with three of my subjects out of ten. For Griselda Davis, his parents' decision to move him from Lansing to East Lansing the summer before third grade came as a surprise. Griselda is a 21-year-old Black nonbinary student from a middle-income family. He attended a private school for kindergarten before attending first and second grade at an elementary school in the Lansing School District. After transferring to East Lansing, Griselda stayed in the district through graduation. He then went to two years of community college before transferring to a 4-year university out of state. He says that he remembered his parents' decision to move him and his little brother from Lansing to East Lansing schools as coming out of nowhere.

My parents, um, they kind of just like sprung it [the transfer] on us a week before school. They had talked about...I remember them talking about...well, so I would say maybe a month before school, I remember them mentioning it to us like, "oh, you guys might switch schools." (Griselda Davis)

Griselda's responses indicate that he had very little to do with making considerations about where to attend school. "To be honest, I'm not really sure when the consideration [to transfer to East Lansing] came along, it was kind of just sprung on me." It is potentially unsurprising that parents would make decisions alone on behalf of an 8-year-old, such as in Griselda's case, but

there were other instances of top-down parental decision making for middle school and even high school students. While it may be the case that top-down parental decisions are more common in thinking about school choice for students of a younger age, my data is insufficient to determine this conclusively.

Cesar Ramirez is a 20-year-old Latino from a working family who currently studies at Michigan State University, where he transferred after two years of community college. He attended school in the Lansing School District all the way through eighth grade, at which point his parents told him that he would be transferring to East Lansing for high school. While it is clear that his parents discussed the possibility of interdistrict at length, Cesar did not take part in those conversations.

Probably when I was in eighth grade, they [my parents] were like, “we’re thinking of sending you to East Lansing for high school.” So I was like, oh, cool.

(Cesar Ramirez)

While he wasn’t initially in favor of the plan to transfer, Cesar says he wasn’t too bothered by his parents’ decision: “I was cool with it or whatever.” However, after thinking about it for a while, Cesar remembered more about how he had wanted to stay in Lansing for high school. He maintained this attitude for the first year or two at East Lansing.

At first, I didn't want to [transfer], because you know, it was a different school. I wasn't gonna really know anyone there, so I was going to be like...and plus I had so many friends already in middle school who were going to go to Lansing high schools, so I kind of wanted to go there, you know, just cause I had a bunch of friends. (Cesar Ramirez)

Some top-down decisions, while still influenced predominantly by parents, were much less of a surprise to students. Noah Meyers switched from LSD to ELPS in fifth grade at the same time as his two older brothers. A 19-year-old white man from a high-income family, Noah also attends Michigan State University, which he enrolled in directly after graduating from East Lansing High School. He remembers that he didn't see any reason to move schools at the time of his transfer. He didn't want to move schools because he wanted to stay with his friends who would all be attending the same elementary school together for fifth grade.

I did not want to [transfer to East Lansing]. I like Lansing and I had friends and I didn't really see a point at the time. People don't really like change I guess, and I was already accustomed to everything. I didn't need to change anything.

(Noah Meyers)

Noah's experience is unique from the previous two examples of top-down decisions because unlike Griselda and Cesar, transferring schools did not come as a surprise to Noah, even though he was initially against the move. We will see in the following cases that many students played a more influential role in thinking about where to attend school.

In contrast to the previous examples of top-down parental decision making, two of the interview subjects in this study took a clear lead in influence thinking about student mobility. Aria Johnson is a 21-year-old mixed-race Black and white student from a low-income family. She grew up attending public school in Lansing with several siblings until she transferred to East Lansing's MacDonald Middle School in 8th grade. After graduating from East Lansing High School, she started college at Michigan State University where she is currently on track to graduate. Although she lived in Lansing for most of her life, her family spent a brief stint living in East Lansing even as they continued to attend Lansing schools. It was during this time that

Aria made neighborhood friends who motivated her to transfer to East Lansing, which she did after her family moved back to Lansing. Aria was the only child in her family to attend school outside of the Lansing School District. This was because Aria took it upon herself to convince her mom to let her transfer to East Lansing for middle school. Her older brother graduated from a Lansing high school and her younger siblings remained enrolled in Lansing schools. When asked about when her family first considered transferring schools, she responded:

It was more me asking my mom. My mom didn't really want to do it. That was around seventh grade, before eighth grade. That's when they [the Lansing School District] were changing, they were moving all the middle school kids to the high schools and stuff, and I didn't want to be a part of all that. That kind of made me nervous. I lived in East Lansing at the time and I knew some people, so I was like, you know, I have friends here, it seems like a better school, so I talked my mom into it. (Aria Johnson)

In this case, Aria was more influential than her mother in thinking about and ultimately making decisions about school choice. In fact, Aria's influence was strong enough to overcome her mother's opposition to the proposed transfer. As a single parent supporting a large family on a small budget, Aria's mom had plenty of reservations about sending her to East Lansing.

She [my mom] was like, "I don't want to drive you." I don't remember how I convinced her. I think I was just telling her it was a better school, I had friends there, you know, I think it would be a better experience for me. She kind of was concerned, she figured it would be a lot because you get free lunches and stuff in Lansing schools and there was buses—it was a lot easier for her. I mean, I'm one

of five kids, so it was kind of hard to just drive me around wherever I want. I don't really know what specifically convinced her. (Aria Johnson)

Aria's ability to "convince" her mom to let her go to school in East Lansing shows the complexity involved with family decision making about Schools of Choice and interdistrict transfer programs like it.

Kaylee Fulton provides another example of a student who took a leading role in thinking about school choice. Kaylee is a 22-year-old white woman from a middle-income family. She spent her entire K-12 experience in the Lansing School District and never really considered transferring outside of the district. Kaylee currently works in retail and spent a single semester at community college. Throughout her time in elementary school and the first part of middle school, she was relentlessly bullied by several of her classmates. This motivated her to pursue intradistrict transfer midyear, less than a semester into middle school. Through LSD's intradistrict system, Kaylee transferred to a different middle school within the district for the remainder of sixth grade where she had a much better experience. The main driver behind Kaylee's transfer in middle school was her own strong desire to switch schools. She felt her parents were very supportive of her in making her own decisions.

They [my parents] were in my corner the whole time, for sure. They just wanted the best for me. They didn't like that I was coming home so upset every day at that school. (Kaylee Fulton)

In this case, Kaylee's experiences and desires held the most influence in how her family thought about schooling options. Her parents played a facilitating role rather than a decision making one. Kaylee was also the most influential family member in deciding which middle school to transfer

to. Kaylee was interested in visual art at the time, so she was very interested in transferring to the district's arts magnet school.

I mean, Gardner [Middle School] was an option too, but I think I really just wanted to go to Pleasant View because of the arts thing, and they [my parents] just listened to me. They were like, "if you want to go there, you can go there. We don't care, we'll do it." (Kaylee Fulton)

A similar dynamic took place in the year leading up to high school when Kaylee wanted to go to a different Lansing high school than her family's geographically assigned school. Since she had not gone to her neighborhood middle school, most of her friends and classmates were not going to be attending her neighborhood high school. This motivated her to again turn to intradistrict choice, which her parents happily facilitated. While Kaylee did not consider regional student mobility in the ways that Aria and other interview subjects did, she was still highly influential in her family's thinking about mobility within her district.

In the cases of both Kaylee and Aria, parents were by no means the exclusive decision makers on matters of student mobility. While it is possible that these students represent extreme cases, they nonetheless reveal the complexities and diversity of parent-student relationships surrounding thinking about school choice. School choice cannot be conceptualized using parental decision making alone because decisions about where to attend school are often influenced by students as well. The remainder of the interviews show that there is often a more equal sharing of influence than in the cases of Griselda, Cesar, and Noah or those of Aria and Kaylee.

Max Bona is a 20-year-old Black man who is currently a student at Michigan State University. He is from a middle-income family of West African immigrants. Max attended the Lansing School District for every year between kindergarten and graduation. His father was a

teacher at the high school he graduated from. While Max and his little brother have only ever attended school in the LSD, Max's older brother went to Lansing Catholic High School and his cousins went to school in Okemos—a wealthy and highly educated suburb to the east of East Lansing. Although Max remained in Lansing for the entirety of his primary and secondary education, he says that this was never meant to be the plan.

I actually wasn't supposed to attend Sexton High School throughout my four years. I was going to go there my freshman year and then either end up transferring to Okemos or Lansing Catholic. But then I ended up liking it at Sexton and just decided to stay because I got used to it and a lot of my friends that I went to middle school with attended the school as well. (Max Bona)

We can tell by this excerpt that there were many reasons in Max's mind that motivated him to stay at Lansing Sexton. He felt a sense of belonging and comfort that drew him to the school. "I felt like I had a bit of my roots set into the school" he said. However, there were parts of Max's experience that made him want to transfer to a different school such as Okemos, Lansing Catholic, or East Lansing. For Max, college readiness was incredibly important and served as a motivation to transfer.

At the time, I wasn't too bothered by it [remaining in Lansing schools]. But then, going into school more like after freshman year, like, me noticeably seeing the differences between the schools, just from what they offer, that's when it really started to affect me, just because I was trying to take all the AP classes and getting prepared for myself. Then that's when I started noticing that they didn't offer as much as other schools did. (Max Bona)

To recount, Max influenced his family's thinking about school choice in contrasting ways. On one hand, he was drawn to high school in Lansing because he was already well integrated into the community and he felt engaged and comfortable. On the other hand, as high school progressed, he began to feel more and more anxiety about the superiority of college readiness at other schools that he was potentially missing out on. While Max was influential in thinking about his own mobility, the ultimate outcome of his family's consideration of student mobility was also heavily shaped by his parents. The fact that he stayed at Sexton was a product of both his own and his parents influence on decision making. This example demonstrates how students and parents can work cooperatively to shape student mobility outcomes. Max came into the discussion with one set of needs and priorities and his parents came in with another. The end result was that Max stayed in Lansing, but this only came about as a product of balanced decision making power between both Max and his parents. This sharing of influence was common across my interviews of transfer students. Later on, I will discuss how Max's parents' thinking was influenced not only by Max's individual needs, but also the needs of the family as a whole. This mode of collective deliberation is what I call family unit thinking and is the subject of the next subsection in this chapter.

Family unit thinking: How family needs influence student mobility outcomes

Traditionally, academics and proponents of school choice have made an implicit assumption that school choice decisions are made based on the individual needs of the student in question. Under rational choice theories, decisions are made in order to optimize the academic outcomes of an individual student (Schneider et al., 2000; Stewart & Wolf, 2014; Altenhofen et

al., 2016; Berends, 2019). Even in studies that move away from this simplistic view of thinking about school choice, researchers are rarely explicit in moving away from conceptualizing student mobility as based exclusively on the needs of individual students (Bell, 2009; Altenhofen et al., 2016; Austin & Berends, 2018; Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018). Over the course of my interviews, I found that families consider school choice in the context of the needs of the entire family unit at once. Rather than thinking about what was best for each student in isolation, decisions (when decisions are made at all) are based on a calculation of the costs and benefits to the student in question, their siblings, and their parents. I call this type of thought process family unit thinking.

As you will recall from the previous section, Max Bona shared influence with his parents in deciding to remain at Lansing's Sexton High School through graduation. While everyone had Max's best interest in mind, his parent's decision making was also heavily influenced by the needs of the family as a whole. His father, who was a teacher at Sexton, supported Max in remaining in Lansing because it made for a more manageable commute.

My dad actually taught us in high school. He was working there my freshman year. And he liked the fact that, you know, we could just drive to school together. It was a lot easier on his part. So I think he was also a big deciding factor in whether I'd stayed or went to a different school. Just because then we would have to have done the whole Schools of Choice thing, and it was just I think a lot easier for everyone for me just to stay at Sexton. (Max Bona)

In this scenario, the family is not thinking about Max's individual needs in isolation from the rest of the family. While Max's own academic experience is important, the decision is also

influenced by the needs of his parents. In the end, the outcome reflected what was “easier for everyone.” This is an example of what I call family unit thinking.

Over the course of the interviews, the concept of family unit thinking played out most clearly when families were considering the needs of multiple students at once. Rather than thinking about each sibling in isolation, families often utilized the mobility of one student to accommodate the needs of their sibling. The most useful illustration of this is the way families optimize their chances for gaining admittance to particular Schools of Choice districts by submitting transfer applications for more than child at once. The School Aid Act, which is the legal basis for Schools of Choice, provides preferential enrollment to applicants who already have siblings attending the out-of-district school. This way, even if a family isn’t able to enroll a child, they would like to transfer to a different school in one year, if that child’s sibling is able to enroll, the initial child will have a much greater chance of being admitted the following application year. For instance, recall that Griselda Davis is a 21-year old Black student who transferred from Lansing to East Lansing in third grade. Griselda remembers that there wasn’t really a need for him to transfer schools at the time. He was excelling in his classes at Lansing, he had lots of friends, and he had an important in-school familial support networks of siblings and cousins who were in the district. However, Griselda’s younger brother was struggling academically in the Lansing schools. His parents were interested in moving him to East Lansing to find academic support.

At that point, my younger brother would struggle in school a bit, and so he actually bounced around between two different schools in the Lansing School District...because there was a particular teacher there that they thought would be good with kind of helping him with whatever he was having trouble with in terms

of learning the material. And so I think that had a lot of influence on their decision to switch us. They felt as though, in East Lansing, he might be able to get the help he needed—why, I don't know. (Griselda Davis)

Instead of keeping Griselda in Lansing schools where he was thriving and switching his little brother to East Lansing in search of academic support, the family decided to submit applications for both siblings to transfer. Griselda got accepted, but his little brother was not.

We were both placed into the lottery, and my younger brother didn't actually get in. So for a moment, I attended school in East Lansing...and he stayed back in the Lansing School District. And they hoped that because they have a sibling clause—usually if you have like a sibling in the district it's a lot easier, they're more willing to allow the other student to also transfer into the district—that they would just wait out a year. (Griselda Davis)

Without specific academic motivation for Griselda, his parents enrolled him in ELPS to increase the future chances of enrollment for his little brother, who they hoped would be able to improve academically in East Lansing. In this case, the primary considerations for Griselda's mobility were not his own, but rather those of his little brother. Griselda's parents considered the prospect of his mobility in combination with that of his brother's—not in isolation. This type of family unit thinking about school choice was common among interviewees with siblings.

Hayley Hendricks is a 22-year-old white woman who is currently enrolled at Michigan State University after attending a few years of community college. She is from a middle-income family and attended a local K-8 Catholic school until she transferred to East Lansing for high school. She has one sister who is two years older than her, attended the same Catholic school, and transferred to East Lansing High School two years before Hayley. While there was a

deliberate thought process about where to send Hayley's sister for high school, the way they considered where to send Hayley two years later fell squarely within the family unit thinking model.

My sister who's two years older than me, she had kind of a harder time at [our Catholic school] ...So she really didn't want to go to Lansing Catholic and she was really good at playing the clarinet. So my parents thought, well, you could go to East Lansing and you could have a better experience with music and being in band and in jazz band and marching band and all that stuff. So that's why she wanted to go to East Lansing. They had considered going to Haslett, but East Lansing was a little bit closer, so that's just what they decided on. And then since she was already there, they thought it would be easier for me to be accepted. I don't really remember what that process was, but they thought it'd be easier for me to go if she was already there. (Hayley Hendricks)

In this example, Hayley's mobility was not considered separate from that of her older sister. She followed her sister to East Lansing, not necessarily because it was the best thing for her independently, but rather because it was the most convenient for the family. This example does show that sometimes, thinking about student mobility prioritizes the needs of the individual student more than other times. For Hayley's older sister, her need to get out of the Catholic school environment and her desire to play in high quality music ensembles were both independent considerations that were prioritized in relative isolation from the needs of the rest of the family. However, when it came time to think about Hayley's mobility, there was more of an emphasis placed on the needs of the family unit as a whole. Accordingly, the family unit thinking

model should be considered dynamic with varying levels of independent and collective thought at different times.

Another sphere in which family unit thinking plays out frequently is in balancing the needs of students with the transportation constraints of parents. We have already seen in the cases of two students who remained in the LSD through graduation. Max Bona—the 20-year Black student who graduated from the Lansing high school his father taught at—was independently motivated to transfer to Okemos or Lansing Catholic for high school based on a desire for higher quality college preparation. However, his needs had to be considered in concert with the needs of his parents who found it much more convenient for him to remain at the same school as his father so that they could commute together. In his own words, “It was just I think a lot easier for everyone for me just to stay at Sexton.”

Kaylee Fulton, the 22-year-old white woman who made frequent use of intradistrict choice, had a similar experience that prevented her from thinking about her own mobility regionally. While Kaylee expressed a strong independent desire to leave her unsafe educational environment in Lansing, her experience with family unit thinking limited her view of what schools she could possibly transfer to. Ultimately, this constrained her choice set so that she only considered transferring to other schools within the Lansing School District.

I don't think it [interdistrict transfer] was much of an option with us. No, I don't think my parents really wanted to drive me out of the district, which I was fine with. To be honest, I didn't really consider it.

My mom was driving me to and from school all the time and I don't think she would've wanted to drive a long distance. We were just looking inside the school district and I didn't even think about going outside of it. (Kaylee Fulton)

In the cases of both Max and Kaylee, individual needs were considered within the context of needs of the entire family. Although many of Kaylee's individual needs were influential in thinking about where to send her to school, those needs were modified by the needs of her parents, who didn't think they could drive her outside the city for school every day. In this way, we see that family unit thinking is not only dynamic, but also a moderator of individual thinking.

Social and academic factors that motivate interdistrict transfer

Over the past two decades, a large amount of academic work has been done to complicate the traditional rational choice models of school choice. Alternatively, many researchers have moved towards theories of positioned choice and bounded rationality (Cooper, 2005; Jabbar, 2011). These studies emphasize the role of social networks, institutional stigmas, transportation limitations, and other social factors in modifying and constraining individual choices (Bell, 2009; Altenhofen et al., 2016; Austin & Berends, 2018; Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018). In this section, I plan on extending this literature by detailing three factors that influence regional student mobility outcomes. In particular, I argue that friendships, institutional stigmas, and specific academic programming are three important factors that influence the way families think about school choice. While these were not the only three factors that came up throughout my interviews, I will devote special attention to them because the existing literature has not explored them as comprehensively as it has for other factors, such as transportation constraints. These factors complicate traditional ways of thinking about school choice as a decision based on primarily

academic reasoning. My data suggests that academic concerns are rarely the sole motivating factor for families thinking about school choice. Instead, academic concerns are often paired with any number of other factors including student friendships and institutional stigma against central city schools. When academic considerations are primary, they are often conceptualized in ways that we wouldn't think of initially, such as in the provision of specialized academic programming.

The first factor is student friendships and the desire to preserve friendship continuity across students' educational experiences. Many students in Lansing were already well established in their social and academic environments by the time their families considered the possibility of interdistrict transfer. Students had made friends, familiarized themselves with academic requirements, joined extracurricular and specialized programs. Much of this stayed more or less constant from elementary school into high school and students were overall comfortable in the Lansing School District. Students who stayed did so in part because they felt that departure from the familiarity within their own district would prove more costly than the potential benefits of attending a different district. For Max Bona, by the time he had reached high school, he had already established his "roots" in the educational fabric at Sexton.

I ended up liking it at Sexton a lot and just decided to stay just because, like, I got used to it and a lot of my friends that I went to middle school with attended the school as well. So it felt just a little bit more comfortable there. I felt like I had a bit of my roots set into the school, just because I was very involved and stuff like that. (Max Bona)

Friendships and continuity were similarly important for the siblings of Aria Johnson. Aria was the only sibling in her family to transfer to East Lansing, which she did in 8th grade. She tried to

convince her siblings—an older brother who was a junior at Lansing Sexton at the time and three younger siblings in elementary school—to come to East Lansing with her, but all of them declined. They preferred to maintain the stability of their friendships by remaining in Lansing. According to Aria, her siblings took a complete disinterest in the prospect of following her to East Lansing. “They didn’t really care” she says. Her siblings were much more content to stay in Lansing with the friends and programs that they were accustomed to.

I tried to talk them into it [transferring to East Lansing]. I was like, “you guys should come too” and they’re like, “no.” Because my older brother...he was a junior, so he was already almost done, so he didn’t care. And the other ones, they didn’t care. They were in Spanish immersion classes. They’ve been with the same kids their whole lives basically, so they had no interest. (Aria Johnson)

However, the role of friendships also influenced Aria herself in the opposite direction. For the brief period of time her family spent living in East Lansing during seventh grade, Aria developed several friendships with people from her suburban neighborhood. Additionally, Aria played on a club softball team where she made several close friends who attended ELPS. Between her neighborhood friends and her softball friends, Aria was convinced to transfer to East Lansing. When asked why she wanted to transfer to East Lansing, she said “it was just because of my friends. That’s really it.” In this scenario, the presence of friendships in East Lansing was key to the observed outcomes rather than the absence of strong friendships in Lansing. Throughout the interviews, it was more common for the presence of friendships to play a role in influencing student mobility decisions than the absence of friendships.

A second important factor in motivating families to leave Lansing was institutional stigma against central city schools. This was a motivating force not only for interdistrict transfer

to neighboring districts, which tended to occur in late middle school to early high school, but also for initial enrollment in nontraditional academic institutions in early elementary school. The two interviews in which institutional stigma against the Lansing School District was most significantly expressed as a motivating factor for student mobility occurred with students who had never actually attended traditional public schools in Lansing. Recall that Hayley Hendricks went to a K-8 Catholic school until she transferred to East Lansing for high school. Brendan Parsons is a 22-year-old white man from a middle-income family who now works as a software developer after going to community college. Rather than attending his neighborhood schools, Brendan enrolled at a K-8 charter school in Lansing from kindergarten until high school. For both Brendan and Hayley, institutional stigma against the schools in Lansing was a motivating factor in their families' decisions both to attend nontraditional schools for K-8 and to transfer to East Lansing for high school. While Brendan talked about many of the "problems" with Lansing schools within the frame of academic quality, much of his family's aversion to the school was social and reputational. Concerns about the quality of education were vague and appeared to be veiled concerns about other aspects of the schools in Lansing. Brendan Parsons was aware that he was biased against the Lansing schools in his view of them, but he also felt that some of the stigmas were valid.

I think in general there's just like a negative connotation of the Lansing schools for either quality of education and just like, problems. I guess it's more of a thing with the high schools and things like that, but I feel like there's just a negative stigma around quality and probably especially like money spent at the schools for learning resources and things like that. Like, if I think of any of the Lansing schools, they don't stand out to me as "oh, that's a great school." I think like, "oh

yeah, is that in Lansing? It's probably not that good of a school." That's just my take on it if I think about it. That's my bias, but I think there's probably some truth in that. Just like, probably money spent ant the schools and I don't know, maybe the teachers don't care as much or at least that's the feeling I get. I wouldn't want to send my kids to a proper Lansing school. (Brendan Parsons)

These types of vague concerns with Lansing schools were only shared by white interviewees who had never actually attended traditional public school in Lansing. The way they talked about the inferiority of LSD schools closely resembled some of the racially-coded language transfer students encountered in East Lansing from residential students. This suggests that the border between Lansing and East Lansing had differing levels of significance for urban transfer students with different demographic backgrounds. For some transfer students such as Brendan or Hayley, their whiteness, neighborhood, or school and family background may have made it possible to distance themselves to some degree from the stigma associated with Lansing. Indeed, Brendan and Hayley appear to play a role in the stigmatization of their own community. For other transfer students with different racial, class, and personal backgrounds, it may have been more difficult to sever the negative associations between themselves and the stigma of their home community. Chapter 2 will focus more these associations and the negative effect of the East Lansing residential student body's racialized perceptions of Lansing.

Lastly, when academic considerations were a primary motivation for school choice, they manifested in very specific ways. This appeared most commonly as families pursuing specialized academic programs at specific schools. In these instances, families were not transferring because they thought one school was "better" than another, but rather because they were interested in a particular academic offering. During the first part of high school, Brendan Parsons took part in

an accelerated math program at Michigan State University for gifted students called CHAMP. One of the main reasons his family chose to transfer to East Lansing was that ELPS, unlike many other districts, had a policy where they paid for tuition fees of their students who enrolled in the accelerated program at MSU.

One of my friends, he went, he was in the CHAMPs program, but he ended up going to Grand Ledge and then they wouldn't cover the cost for the CHAMPs program. So he ended up dropping out and missing out on, you know, a really good education and being able to advance his math because his parents couldn't afford to do the program. Whereas East Lansing I think continued to pay for ours. We would have paid for it if we had to, but it definitely wouldn't have been easy to pay for it at the time. So having the school willing to pay for it, for me to go there was really great and, you know, just helped to further advance my education.

(Brendan Parsons)

Similarly, the Spanish immersion program offered to Aria Johnson's younger siblings in elementary school was a motivating factor for their decision to stay in Lansing for school. While families do sometimes think about school choice in terms of the quality of education, academic concerns are come down to the simple matter of which schools have a specific programmatic offering.

In this chapter, I've proposed three ways in which we can add nuance to the way we talk about school choice. First, we should consider the influence of students in thinking about where to attend schools. Parents and students share dynamic levels of influence in considering school choice and making decisions about where to enroll. Second, I introduced the concept of family unit thinking in which families consider school choice in the context of the entire family unit

rather than each individual student in isolation. Finally, I outlined three factors that influence school choice, which have not been given appropriate levels of attention in previous literature. In the next chapter, I will develop an understanding of the types of social and emotional challenges that urban students face upon transferring to suburban educational environments.

These findings are important because of what they reveal about the way interdistrict transfer works in practice. The fact that families don't make decisions about where to attend school based solely on the individual needs of students in isolation suggests that individual academic outcomes may not be the most accurate or relevant measure of the overall effects of programs like Schools of Choice. This is supported by the finding that social factors influence decision making to a similar degree as academic factors. If improving the quality of education is not the primary driver behind interdistrict transfer, then perhaps it should be unsurprising to us that previous research has not observed benefits to average academic outcomes as a result of participation in interdistrict transfer (Cowen & Creed, 2017). My finding that students share agency in thinking about where to attend schools is significant because it implicates students themselves in their investment into educational experiences that, as later chapters will reveal, students may not have been prepared for. In other words, students made decisions about school choice, but many may not have known what they were getting themselves into. The following two chapters will go into more detail on the social, emotional, and institutional factors that faced urban transfer students upon enrolling in the suburbs.

CHAPTER 2: Social and Emotional Challenges to Urban Transfer Students

Over the course of my interviews, it became clear that urban students who transferred to suburban districts face a unique set of challenges as a result of their participation in Schools of Choice. This chapter will focus on the social and emotional challenges faced by urban transfer students enrolled in suburban educational environments. While the following analysis is not meant to establish casual relationships between my results and the lack of positive academic outcomes of Schools of Choice students observed in previous studies (Cowen & Creed, 2017), my results do uncover several factors unique to the interdistrict choice experience that could plausibly act as barriers to improved academic performance. As part of an attempt to move away from universalizing narratives that describe suburban districts as inherently better for all students than central city districts, this chapter is meant to develop a complex understanding of the unique social and emotional challenges that moderate the experience of urban transfer students in suburban environments. My aim is to provide a sketch of a handful of the daily challenges of urban transfer students in suburban districts that stand in the way of a positive educational experience. I argue that future conceptualizations of interdistrict transfer must explicitly consider these individual challenges to urban transfer students in order to achieve a more complete understanding of how these programs work in practice.

Urban transfer students' perceptions of the benefits of Schools of Choice

The existing narratives surrounding interdistrict transfer programs in the public sphere has overwhelmingly focused on the positive aspects of Schools of Choice. In both sets of interviews, transfer students and non-transfer students alike expressed positive opinions on the program overall. This is reflective of the overwhelming popularity of interdistrict transfer in the

United States (Holme & Richards, 2009). Due to this popularity, what are commonly perceived to be the benefits of interdistrict choice are well-known. Additionally, proponents of school choice make loud and frequent arguments for what they believe are the benefits to programs like SoC (DeGrow 2017; Mackinac Center 2018; Degrow 2019). Because of the widespread knowledge of the supposed benefits of interdistrict transfer are well-known, I will focus my analysis on the challenges associated with participation in interdistrict transfer. While this may not reflect the explicit overall reflections of the majority of interviewees on the subject of SoC, which were generally positive, it does reflect the way they talked about the balance of benefits and challenges associated with the program. In each interview of transfer students, subjects talked at length about challenges they faced as a result of their participation in SoC, and only briefly about any benefits. Most often when describing the benefits they associated with their participation in SoC, subjects used more ambiguous vocabulary that had less to do with personal experience and more to do with general senses than when compared with how they talked about the challenges they experienced. This suggests the benefits they felt they experienced were less tangible than the challenges they faced. The following pages will first lay out what transfer students perceive to be the benefits of attending suburban schools before going into a detailed analysis of the social and emotional challenges facing transfer students in East Lansing.

In the previous section, I discussed many of the factors that influenced the way students and families make decisions about where to attend school. The results of the interviews found that, beyond academics, families generally were influenced by several non-academic factors when thinking about school choice. Regardless of what those factors were for each family, the students interviewed generally felt positive about the quality of education that was offered at ELPS. While subjects were often vague in naming what exactly made the quality of education in

East Lansing so high, much of their contentedness often involved what they viewed as the district's superior level of college preparedness compared to the Lansing School District.

In general, most transfer students interviewed reflected positively on their time in Schools of Choice when considering their experience in suburban schools as a whole. In reflecting on their Schools of Choice experience, urban transfers overwhelmingly listed college preparation as the primary advantage they gained from transferring schools. In many cases this was the only direct benefit of Schools of Choice that students cited and—in the students' minds—seemed to overshadow the many challenges of SoC they shared.

Overall I think I made a good decision to go to [East Lansing]. I think I got a better education. I think it prepared me for college a lot more so than it would have been in Lansing, but I say that [subjectively] cause I wouldn't have known. But looking at my siblings, I dunno, I feel like there's some things that they're lacking. (Aria Johnson)

Recall from the last chapter that Aria Johnson, who is mixed-race Black and white, was the only one of five children in her family to attend school outside of the Lansing School District. While originally motivated to transfer primarily because she had friends in East Lansing, Aria's discussion of the benefits of Schools of Choice centered almost exclusively around the differences in college preparedness she observed between herself and her family and friends in Lansing schools. She also felt like going to East Lansing drove her to attend college in ways that an education in Lansing might not have, although she didn't name this necessarily as a positive aspect of her time in the suburbs. Of her old friends from her time in Lansing, she says only about one of them ended up in college. She felt that had she remained in Lansing, she might not have been pushed to pursue higher education in the same way. "It was definitely a greater push

[in East Lansing] to go to college than maybe I would have gotten before” she says. Had she stayed in Lansing she says, “I think maybe I would have ended up not going.” Beyond the social pressures she felt to go to college, the only other specific benefits she named about East Lansing that could have prepared her better for college were a less chaotic classroom environment and a much more diverse set of elective course offerings. Although she spoke of the “quieter” classroom environment in East Lansing in a positive light, she did also mention that when first transitioning to East Lansing schools, she felt most at ease in the least disciplined classrooms in the school. “I had a Spanish class in 8th grade that was just chaotic in East Lansing. I was like, oh this reminds me of my old school. So I felt most comfortable in that class.” She wasn’t exactly sure what made the classrooms feel more uncomfortable in East Lansing but she thought it could have been either that “the teachers were more strict” or that there were just “a lot more rules to follow” than in Lansing. Additionally, while she did feel there were “a lot more opportunities” at East Lansing, the only opportunities she named were electives, which she said Lansing schools had a large number of offerings in as well, both in middle and high school.

Other transfer students felt similarly about the advantage that East Lansing presented in terms of college preparedness. While individual students named a number of different unique benefits to attending school in the suburbs, a sense that East Lansing prepared students better for college was the only benefit that was a reoccurring theme across the majority of the interviews. The feeling that students are better prepared for college after attending East Lansing was also shared by students graduates of Lansing high schools.

Across most of the interviews with urban transfers, there appeared to be a vague sense that school in East Lansing offered a “better education” than schools in Lansing, although students were hesitant to say that East Lansing was a “better *school*” than those in Lansing.

When asked about how the quality of education at East Lansing compared to schools in Lansing, Cesar Ramirez—who transferred schools in 9th grade—responded that “In my opinion, I think it was much better than when I had it in middle school in the Lansing schools.” The distinction between “better schools” and “better resources” was made clearer by Griselda Davis, a student who transferred to East Lansing in elementary school.

It wasn't so much about the schools being better, which is a common thing that would always get thrown around when it comes to Schools of Choice kids: “We went to East Lansing schools because they were better.” It wasn't so much that they were better, but they had more resources. The resources weren't distributed equitably. (Griselda Davis)

While there is a sense that ELPS does offer a better education in general, there is no consensus between interviewees on what exactly that entails. Students were also unclear as to whether or to what degree this “better” education was accessible to urban transfer students like themselves. While there was uncertainty over what exactly made East Lansing made it a better school, it is reasonably easy to see where this perception that is coming from. In the last chapter I discussed how two of the white transfer students displayed strong biases against the educational environment in Lansing, despite never having attended public school in the district. These interviewees felt that these views were mostly imparted on them by their parents. Later in this chapter, I will discuss how the residential student population in East Lansing holds similarly stigmatizing views. I will also discuss that, while the rest of the transfer students interviewed did not start out as active contributors to stigmatizing narratives about Lansing schools, many of them adopted damaging perceptions of their home communities upon transferring to the suburbs.

Geographic and social isolation in transfer student populations

High school and middle school can be difficult times socially for just about any type of student. Troubles with friends, anxieties about school, and other various social discomforts were a common theme across all interviewees—transfer students and non-transfer students alike. However, the bases of these social challenges were distinct between the groups of students. Urban transfers faced a unique set of social and mental challenges as a consequence of their participation in the Schools of Choice program. Many of these challenges were due to a combination of geographic isolation from friends and school, unfamiliarity and discomfort with the social environment in East Lansing, and the degradation of previous support networks associated with Lansing.

While many students who attend traditional public school in Michigan live in the same neighborhoods as many of their friends and classmates, Schools of Choice students are commonly geographically isolated from their school friends. Interdistrict transfer students don't have the quintessential experiences of attending their neighborhood school, being in class with their neighborhood friends, and walking home or taking the school bus back to their neighborhood. Every single transfer student interviewed shared some experience or sensation of being left out in some way or another based on where they lived. Most transfer students interviewed reported living a minimum of 15 minutes away from their school by car. As students with working parents living in a transit-poor community, most transfer students had no reliable way to travel to friends' houses or school events in East Lansing outside of school hours. The most common effect this had on the transfer students interviewed was a lack of personal relationships with other students at East Lansing outside of the context of the physical environment of school. All but one of the transfer students interviewed reported feeling limited

in their social interactions with other classmates as a result of their participation in Schools of Choice. Commonly, this resulted in what Cesar Ramirez explained as: “I didn’t really hang out with anyone my first few years in East Lansing.” Students like Noah Meyers reported that living so far from East Lansing was almost entirely prohibitive of engaging in social activities outside of school.

I'd say [living far from school] probably had a negative effect because like, once I came home from school or whatever, I wouldn't go back to East Lansing, ever. So like, I went to probably less things than I would've if I lived nearby. Things like school events, friends' houses, parties, stuff. (Cesar Ramirez)

When asked about how things would change had he gone to school in Lansing he spoke in terms of geographic distance and accessibility. “If I had gone to Lansing for high school? I would’ve gone to school like a mile away compared to like ten miles, so I could just ride my bike back and forth or something.” Noah said that in terms of social connections, this would have been preferable to him.

For some subjects, living far away from East Lansing felt like a sort of social exclusion at times. Beyond simply a logistical difficulty, Hayley Hendricks felt that her distance from school was used by some of her friends to as an excuse to leave her out of different social events.

I think [the distance from school] made it harder for me to hang out with friends because, well, I don't know. Some of the girls I hung out with would say like, “you live so far away, so we can't come pick you up. So, I'm sorry, we didn't invite you” or some stupid shit like that. (Hayley Hendricks)

Along with other factors, this prevented many of the transfer students from forming close relationships with their classmates in East Lansing. Throughout my time analyzing the

interviews of different transfer students, I began to get the sense that while students generally had no trouble making surface-level friendships, many students felt that they didn't have any particularly close relationships with anyone they went to school with in East Lansing. This was best summarized by Hayley after she was asked about how she felt about the social consequences of living far from school listed above.

I had my friends at East Lansing, but I didn't have any like, really, really close friends. I just had friends kind of all over the school. I had my lacrosse friends and then when I was in student congress, I had some of those friends, and then I had my band friends, and then my class friends. So I had people I talked to, but no one that I was texting every day, no one really, really close. (Hayley Hendricks)

This sense of a lack of closeness was shared by Brendan Parsons, a transfer student who attended East Lansing for the first time in 9th grade after spending his first nine years of school at Windemere Park Charter Academy—a K-8 public school academy (PSA) in Lansing. Having gone to the same school from kindergarten to 8th grade, Brendan formed several close friends at Windemere Park, all of which he says he's still close with today. Unlike in East Lansing, Brendan describes talking with his friends all day, even outside of school hours.

We would always hang out outside of school as well. Like, my friend Jon, we were all on the soccer team, so we'd go to soccer practice and go over to each other's houses and stuff. And we were just like friends, like we'd all play video games together too. So like, you know, just after school every day, always getting on Skype calls and talking. So usually I'd be talking with them all day long for the most part. (Brendan Parsons)

This was distinct from his experiences with friends at East Lansing. Along with the fact that he lived in Lansing, far away from his East Lansing classmates, Brendan also felt that the fact that everyone already knew each other at East Lansing High School was barrier to him developing close relationships with his high school classmates.

It definitely felt, at least at first, like going into a school district where everyone knows each other growing up. I've definitely felt that, you know, people are already friends and a lot of people have known each other for a really long time, so trying to fit in, it definitely feels like you're outside in that regard, or maybe that's just my perception of it. But I definitely felt like people already have established friend groups and stuff, so it's harder to become friends with people who already have a friend group...if you're the new kid from a different school, you don't know anything about them, they don't know anything about you, but they already know stuff about other kids. So there's like a weird dynamic there.

I felt like it was harder to become friends with people because of that. Like, you feel like people already have friends, so you know why they don't need [new ones]. Like, they don't need your friendship cause they already have their best friends and stuff like that. So it's kind of weird. I felt like it was harder to make as meaningful relationships. (Brendan Parsons)

As a result of this, Brendan said that he felt a lot closer with his friends from Windemere Park than he ever did with his friends from East Lansing. Part of why it was so hard for Brendan to make meaningful friendships was the fact that he lived far away from his classmates. He says he really only spent time outside of school with one of his friends from East Lansing.

I definitely feel like if I had lived in the area it probably would have been a lot different just cause like, you can walk over to people's houses and it's way easier to hang out. (Brendan Parsons)

While distance did appear to be the main factor in transfer students' social isolation, comparisons with the experiences of non-transfer students in Lansing revealed that a particular kind of distance, unique to Schools of Choice students in the suburbs, is key. Kaylee Fulton, a graduate of Lansing Everett High School who used intradistrict choice programs for middle and high school lived the same distance away from school as many of the urban transfers lived from East Lansing—a drive of about 15 minutes. However, unlike most of Schools of Choice interviewees, Kaylee made close friends in high school and spent a lot of time over at friends' houses hanging out outside of school hours. This is particularly interesting given that Kaylee reported that most of her friends lived near each other in the neighborhoods surrounding Everett High School. As the lone friend who lived far away, it would make sense that Kaylee would have experienced many of the same effects of geographic isolation due to intradistrict choice as the Schools of Choice transfers had experienced with interdistrict choice. However, this appears not to be the case. Kaylee describes a balance between spending time together at school and outside of school:

Yeah well, mainly we had our own lunch table, you know, just the nerds fucking lunch table. We all sat there. The majority of our high jinks was spent in the lunchroom. We had a few classes together, but we also did spend a lot of time outside of school. Sometimes skipping class (bad), but yeah, we were also hanging out outside of school all the time—always one of our friend's houses pretty much. (Kaylee Fulton)

It's not that Kaylee didn't face obstacles to hanging out with friends due to how far she lived away from everyone, but instead that those obstacles didn't prevent her from forming close relationships and spending social time outside of school. Unlike the Schools of Choice transfer students, Kaylee didn't report any instances of social exclusion based on geographic distance. Even though she lived just as far from her friends as many of the Schools of Choice students did, Kaylee's friends at Everett (as well as their families) were much more willing to accommodate for the distance than it seemed most of the residential students at East Lansing were.

My friend Peyton...she got a car when she was a sophomore, so it was sophomore year, junior, and senior. Most of the time we were kind of riding with her, but before that, it was usually one of our moms picking up, dropping us off.

I was the one who lived the farthest. They all kind of lived like a ten or even five minute walk from each other's houses. I always had to bum a ride off of someone cause I was kind of a 15, 20 minute car ride away. (Kaylee Fulton)

Even though Kaylee was the only one who had to "bum a ride off of someone" to spend time with her friends outside of school, this never became a problem that limited her social interactions. One of her friends or one of her friends' parents was usually willing to drive the 30-40 minutes round trip in order to facilitate their relationship. It would make sense that Kaylee's friends might go to such lengths had they grown up together for years in the same schools together much like Brendan Parsons and his close friends from Windemere Park. However, Kaylee didn't meet her close and accommodating friends until her freshman year of high school. Even though she used intradistrict choice to attend Everett and only knew limited people, she had no trouble making close friendships, which bridged the physical distance between them. This is

in stark contrast to the experience of Brendan, who similarly transferred to a new school for 9th grade but found it nearly impossible to form close relationships in East Lansing and didn't spend any time outside of school with high school classmates. This begs the question of what is so different about the experience of Kaylee in the Lansing schools as compared to Brendan and the rest of the interdistrict transfers in East Lansing. It's not just that new students have difficulties making friends. It's not just that people who live far away from their friends face difficulties making social connections outside of school. It is important to remember that Kaylee comes from a lower middle class family and worked throughout high school. On average the types of people she would encounter as friends in Lansing would come from families with much less wealth than the types of people that Hayley and other transfer students would be encountering in the suburbs. If anything, Kaylee's friends should be less capable of socially accommodating her geographic distance. And yet, we find that this physical distance is a much less significant barrier to Kaylee's social relationships than the equivalent amount of distance is for urban transfer students in East Lansing. I argue that as a result of the social environment in East Lansing and the physical distance in between the two cities, urban transfer students face a unique stigmatization of geographic distance that limits their social interaction outside of school and prevents students from forming close and rewarding relationships during their time in suburban schools.

Stigmatization of urban spaces and perception of social difference among transfer students

Aria Johnson's social experience in Schools of Choice gives us a clearer sense of what this stigmatization looks and feels like for urban transfers in East Lansing. Recall that Aria is mixed-race Black and white from a low-income, single-parent family. She and her siblings

moved from apartment to apartment around Lansing during her life between elementary and high school. She transferred to East Lansing's MacDonald Middle School in 8th grade and immediately had a difficult time fitting in socially. While she already had friends who went to East Lansing schools from a youth softball team and a short stint living in East Lansing, Aria quickly encountered difficulties fitting into the social environment at her new school. When asked about how living far from school affected her experience in East Lansing, her response included descriptions both of geographic-based logistical barriers to socializing as well as a stigmatization of her home community by her friends in East Lansing that led them to avoid out-of-school interaction with her.

Socially, [the distance between home and school] definitely sucked...For the most part of high school, I lived in the southside of Lansing, so it's like 25 minutes to get there, so I didn't go to a lot of after school events, and before I had my car, no one wanted to come pick me up. My mom wasn't going to drive me, so it was a lot of stuff I missed out on for sure.³

I stayed with my grandma a lot [during high school]—she lived in Haslett—because I was kind of embarrassed, you know, I lived in a townhouse on the southside and then, you know, some of my friends that were older were kind of like, “I don't want to go drive out there to get you.”⁴ And they were kind of very negative about stuff like that. And so I kind of, I dunno, internalized stuff like that and tried to avoid it. (Aria Johnson)

³ Lansing's southside has a reputation for being especially poor, even among residents of other neighborhoods in Lansing

⁴ Haslett is a wealthy suburb to the east of East Lansing. Its median home value is more than twice that of Lansing's (ACS, 2019)

Before transferring to East Lansing in 8th grade, Aria spent nine years going to public school in Lansing—first at Forest View Elementary and later at Pattengill Middle School. To her, Lansing was most different from East Lansing in terms of the diversity of its student body and its accepting social environment. When comparing Lansing to East Lansing, she said that for the most part there wasn't too much difference, but it did “feel like [Lansing] was a lot more diverse, for sure. The kids were a lot more accepting. I feel like there wasn't a lot of the social stigmas [in Lansing] that I encountered when I got to East Lansing.”

Aria's perception of difference in East Lansing was reflected in the experiences of urban transfer students throughout the interviews. One of the most significant differences between how students in Lansing and transfer students in the East Lansing experienced school was the way in which they perceived their own individual difference to their respective student bodies. In Lansing, which has strong racial diversity, students felt they stood out from the rest of the student body in ways that reflected their own uniqueness and personal identity above and beyond superficial differences. In other words, the way they perceived difference reflected the ways in which they viewed themselves. Race and socioeconomic background were never discussed by Lansing students—both the Black majority and the white minority—as identities that set people apart from one another within the student body. Instead, students described an atmosphere of “different cultures” (Kaylee) and “different perspectives” (Max) that made students feel comfortable and taught them to understand people. When students in Lansing did perceive difference, it was either in a positive light, or else one that reflected their own individuality. For instance, when asked if there was anything that set him apart from other students at Sexton High School, Max Bona—whose family is from West Africa—talked about his cultural background and identity as an immigrant. While he felt like this difference was embraced when he was

younger, it waned in significance as he and his classmates grew up. It only manifested in how he approached schooling, and what he referred to as his family's "culture of education." He says that "education was definitely something that was stressed in my household growing up." In his eyes, the one thing that set him apart from his classmates was being "raised a little bit different and coming from a different culture [where the] culture of education is different in the household than a lot of my friends."

The differences perceived by urban transfer students in East Lansing were of an entirely separate nature than the ones noticed by students attending Lansing schools. As a general theme across the interviews, transfer students were made to feel different through stereotypes more often than students who stayed in Lansing. In East Lansing, the way that urban transfer students experienced difference had less to do with who they believed themselves to be and was more so about what other people perceived them to be. For instance, when asked the same question as Max about whether anything set them apart from the rest of the student body at their school, Cesar talked about his race and how that affected the way he made friendships.

What separated me from the East Lansing student body? Probably...I don't know.

Honestly not really nothing. Probably my race to be honest. I was one of the very few Mexican men there in my graduating class.

Yeah [that did affect my experience in East Lansing]. I mean, not too much, not too bad, you know. Cause like, you can always relate to people that are similar to you more than the people that normally have nothing to relate to. You know?

Kind of like, you can relate to people more that grow up in the same kind of

culture as you, so it's easier to make friends that way. But other than that [it didn't really have an effect on me] to be honest. (Cesar Ramirez)

Max and Cesar, both of whom are from immigrant families with strong ethnic identities, experienced social difference in entirely disparate ways. For Max, his difference in Lansing was substantive and was a topic of conversation rather than any sort of barrier in his K-12 experience. For Cesar, his difference in East Lansing was perceived as racial and made it slightly more difficult to make friends. This was a new experience for Cesar, who grew up going to LSD's Averill Elementary and Dwight Rich Middle School where he says he didn't feel different as a product of his race. He felt there wasn't anything that set him apart from his elementary and middle school classmates in Lansing.

Some of the Black interviewees shared testimony on the racism they faced in Lansing at-length. Griselda Davis, who is a Black non-binary person, transferred to East Lansing in elementary school. While East Lansing is a predominantly white school at every grade level, a large portion of the diversity they have at the high school level is derived from Schools of Choice students from Lansing. This is a result of both the overwhelmingly white composition of the residential East Lansing student body as well as the fact that participants in Schools of Choice are disproportionately Black. However, many of these students don't transfer until middle or high school. This often leaves Black students who transfer early on in elementary school as the only Black student in the classroom. This left many Black students at risk of being subjected to interpersonal racism from their classmates and teachers. Griselda gives one testimony of this from his time in East Lansing.

I remember a specific instance in middle school. This kid, he just always messed with me. And one time I was in class and the teacher turned the lights off and he

goes, he said something to the effect—it's not verbatim—of some type of joke of them not being able to see me because I was so dark. And he was a white student! And, you know, in the Black community, growing up people would say things—It didn't affect me too much—about my skin complexion, you'd be on the dark end of the spectrum, that's a whole nother thing, but there'll be comments like that mentioned, so it will always be like a go-to for people. But I tend to kind of expect it [from Black people]. It wasn't as bad because you know, I would jab at them back. But for me, hearing a white person say that, a person that's not part of my community, that doesn't even remotely understand that experience, I'm like, oh, you're being racist. (Griselda Davis)

For many transfer students, the way they perceived difference in the suburban schools was detrimental to their educational experience. To Aria Johnson, being different was one of the most memorable parts of her time in East Lansing. As compared to Lansing—where she attended school up until 8th grade—the social environment in East Lansing felt “a lot more judgmental” to her, especially when it came to the way the student body approached difference.

I felt very...I dunno. I did feel a lot different than a lot of people. I mean, I feel like they look kind of down on people who come from Lansing, I guess. And you know, I'm from a big family, we don't have a lot of money or stuff like that. There's a lot of different things, you know, like the clothes you wear. And I came from a school with uniforms and so I'm over here wearing like graphic t-shirts and stuff, and everyone's looking at me like what are you doing? So yeah, that was very difficult. (Aria Johnson)

Not only did Aria come to perceive socioeconomic difference in ways that she was totally unaware of in Lansing, but this difference led to stigma and social pressures, which drastically decreased the quality of her experience in East Lansing. In fact, as a result of this, she says her experience was so that she initially wanted to transfer back to the Lansing schools. “Eighth grade I hated it. I wanted to transfer back every single day.” The only reason she ended up staying, she says, is because her mom made her stick it out since Aria had been the one who wanted to go through the trouble of transferring in the first place.

The results of the negative social environment were so strong that they even came to have an effect on the way in which Aria and many other transfer students came to view themselves and their community. In the case of Aria, this involved an internalization of East Lansing’s stigma against Lansing and poverty. As a result, Aria’s relationships with her old friends from Lansing schools began to suffer.

It kind of sucks that I couldn’t have kept up with other people [from Lansing]. But I don’t know if that was more me kind of trying to merge into the social status of what I thought would be a person in East Lansing versus them, you know. Cause I feel like my mentality kind of changed. I went to East Lansing, I started looking down on Lansing whereas when I was in [Lansing], I didn’t care. And so it’s something I reflect on now, you know, why did I think that, I literally went to those schools. And so I don’t know if that kind of went into how I viewed my friendships, or...”

I’m kind of mad at myself for [the way I looked down on Lansing in high school], honestly. I dunno, it’s stuff like especially when you look in the sports. It’s things

like, oh, Lansing schools suck, all these things like that. I just feel like it's things you hear in passing by and stuff like that. People talk down on them, and then they're ghetto, they're this, they're that, and stuff like that. [In high school I was like], oh you know what, you are [ghetto]. That is how it is. [But then I realized after high school that] I went there, like, they're calling me ghetto. It's just stuff like that that I didn't really piece together. (Aria Johnson)

Initially, Aria did not actively hold stigmatizing views about the schools and people in Lansing. However, upon being exposed to the social environment at ELPS, many of the stigmas shared by residential students as well as some transfer students like Brendan and Hayley were imparted onto Aria. While her reflections now reveal that she has become aware of the contradictions between her negative associations of Lansing and her own self-image, she says that at the time it was not clear to her the ways in which existing in the social environment of East Lansing was affecting her views on herself and her community.

Effects of interdistrict transfer on mental wellbeing and academic self-esteem

Over the course of the interviews, by far the most common effect that transferring to the suburbs had on the self-image of Lansing Schools of Choice students was a decrease in their academic self-esteem. In this way, urban transfer students perceived structural educational inequality as an incredibly individualized experience. Rather than understanding the academic differences between them and their suburban classmates as purely a consequence of structural inequalities and divergent familial backgrounds, transfer students often internalized academic differences and came to feel it was their own fault for not being smarter. This type of loss of self-

esteem is heavily linked with poor academic outcomes (Baumeister et al., 2003; Di Giunta et al., 2013).

Most of the transfer students interviewed who had previously attended public schools in Lansing felt that they were near the top of their class in terms of academic performance while they were in the LSD. Cesar Ramirez said that back in Lansing he was “probably one of the smartest kids in class.” Griselda Davis, who attended Lansing’s Elmhurst Elementary, felt his academic performance in Lansing was better than most: “I tended to be a lot more advanced than a lot of the other kids in my classes.” A majority of the transfer students interviewed who had previously attended Lansing public schools were in either a gifted and talented program in elementary school or otherwise took at least some honors classes in middle school. As a result of this, many transfer students came into East Lansing schools with a positive academic self-image. In other words, these students felt like what Aria Johnson referred to as “one of the smart kids.” However, these views quickly changed for most transfer students once they saw what class was like in the suburbs. Kids who had previously understood themselves as being smart began to view themselves more so as average students. For Cesar Ramirez, his experiences in classes at East Lansing in high school changed the way he viewed not only himself, but also the quality of education in Lansing overall.

[The quality of education in Lansing] was, I mean it was alright I guess. I guess I didn't really know at the time while I was in middle school, but once I got to high school at East Lansing I kind of realized like, damn, most of these people, they kind of know a lot of stuff. Instead of like here in Lansing, I was kind of always used to be the smartest kid. And then I had went from being that to being just an average person, you know. (Cesar Ramirez)

Even though many students were aware that structural factors were responsible for the differences they perceived in the academic performance at a classroom level in Lansing and East Lansing, most of the time students internalized negative thinking about themselves.

[When I transferred to East Lansing] I thought I was like, you know what? I'll be just as smart as them. But then [I took] my math placement test and then I was just in the normal math. I was like, why am I not in the advanced math? So, it was definitely kind of a big eye-opener to me. Cause like, I was used to kind of being one of the smart kids, and now I'm like, I'm just an average kid. (Aria Johnson)

Oftentimes this academic self-image was also by the process of class selection during the initial transition period of a transfer. Many students who had previously taken honors classes in Lansing during middle school were placed in lower track courses by counselors at East Lansing without any discussion on the matter with students or families. The role of counselors will be explored in greater detail during the following chapter on institutional challenges faced by transfer students.

The changes in self-image associated with transferring to East Lansing had significant repercussions beyond a depreciation in academic self-esteem. For Aria Johnson, the stress involved with being in a new, more competitive academic environment translated to issues with anxiety and mental health.

I mean, I still had pretty good grades [after I transferred], but I don't know, I felt very like nervous and on edge. I was very self-conscious all the time. I was a pretty confident kid when I went to Lansing schools, but then when I went to East Lansing, it's kind of like all that was like, bye. I definitely felt like very stressed. I

felt, I dunno, I couldn't focus very well, but I still did okay in my classes. (Aria Johnson)

It is clear from this example that the stress and anxiety associated with transferring to East Lansing had a negative impact on her education. As she says, she had a hard time engaging in class, even though she still managed to do fine academically. While her issues with mental health manifested in academic challenges, Aria believed that her problems came less from her academic experience in East Lansing as much as her adverse social experiences, which were discussed earlier.

Griselda Davis also struggled with his mental health at times during middle school in East Lansing. He believed that this negatively impacted the way his teachers viewed his academic performance. Rather than offering him the support he needed, Griselda—who is Black—felt that his teachers began to view him as lazy. “I think the general idea was that, because I had traditionally performed well, and that I wasn’t in this moment, it was because I wasn’t trying enough” he said. Griselda began to feel acutely aware of some of the ways white students in particular were supported in their mental health struggles in ways that he, as a Black student, was not.

I saw a lot of grace, I guess, or understanding, being extended to folks who struggled with different things mentally, emotionally, and [I saw] how that impacted their academic performance. But I oftentimes felt as though it wasn't extended to me, and even more so I felt like there was a very particular type of person—I think the anxiety-ridden or super depressed student, person, kid, has a certain stereotype in people's heads. It has a certain look in people's head and that look wasn't me. It wasn't someone Black. It wasn't someone that was always

kind of smiling and fairly social. I wasn't...I'm not a very...I didn't really express sadness. That wasn't how I grew up, that's not the way I was raised. I think I just never really had a space for that, at least for like a public display of sadness. And so, I think a lot of times, if I kind of would express like, "well maybe I'm going through these different things," or [say] there's this illness that's causing me to struggle, it was kind of met with eye rolls, and then I would kind of feel slighted or even discriminated against because I'm like, well, you know there's this white girl over here who kind of fits the trope of the typical depressed or anxiety-ridden high schooler, middle schooler. And they would receive all this help and assistance. And it was just something that I couldn't locate. I couldn't get it no matter what, I kicked and screamed—not from home, not from school. So it was a challenge.

(Griselda Davis)

This experience with inadequate institutional support for urban transfer students in East Lansing will be the main focus of the following chapter.

Degradation of social support networks through interdistrict transfer

At the same time that urban transfer students were facing these social and emotional challenges that came with school in the suburbs, many of them found that they were less equipped to deal with these challenges as a result of the degradation of their social support networks exacerbated by their participation in SoC. Both non-transfers who stayed in LSD and transfers who had started at LSD expressed the beneficial effects of having a strong in-school support network. This support came in various forms. Some students benefitted from going to the same school as their older siblings who could pass down insider knowledge about how to

navigate certain teachers, classes, and school-specific challenges. Others had the benefit of going to the same school as childhood friends from their neighborhood. The significance of maintaining the long-term friendship continuity in school for student wellbeing and academic achievement is well documented (Shankar & Park, 2015; Zucchetti et al., 2015; Ng-Knight et al., 2019).

For Griselda Davis, he benefitted early on in Lansing from attending the same school as many older family members, who he knew could support him. Griselda felt that regardless of what school he was attending at the time, he would have stuck out a little due to his gender performance, which was perceived as feminine. However, even though this did pose some challenges to him, Griselda felt he had a positive social experience in Lansing because of the in-school support of older family members.

I don't necessarily think I fit in, so to speak. But I definitely had a positive social experience, I had a lot of friends. I actually had some family members, some older kids, so when I got there I wasn't completely just thrown into the wilderness. I had some people looking out for me.

I was always a little different. I think my performance wasn't typical for my gender at the time. I think early on I was identified as being effeminate, or a femme, or whatever you'd like to call it, and so that came with some struggles. But I think I've always had a good grip on my voice and standing up for myself, and I do think in part I was blessed, I had cousins there, my younger brother attended there with me. So I think I had people to look out for me, which may have bolstered my confidence. (Griselda Davis)

However, for many transfer students including Griselda, transferring to the suburbs meant losing this level of in-school social support. In East Lansing, Griselda did not have people to look out for him in the same way he did in Lansing. While it may not have been a direct result of this degradation, we have seen earlier in this chapter that his mental health at ELPS did suffer. Undoubtedly the existence of a strong in-school support network in East Lansing would have been beneficial in some way during this time. Griselda missed that familial support in particular when faced with struggles specific to East Lansing, such as interpersonal racism in a predominantly white space. The lack of such support resulted in bullying and him feeling more fully the effects of prejudice against him.

I've kind of always been cognizant of certain prejudices and so I've always challenged them. But because of that, I think it hurt my feelings and it made me upset and I didn't have those brothers or those cousins to defend me. (Griselda Davis)

For Griselda, East Lansing was an environment in which he needed to be defended—from bullying, racism, and homophobia. Unfortunately, unlike in Lansing, Griselda was forced to defend himself alone in the suburbs without the help of family members.

For some students, even at-home relationships were strained in relation to the Schools of Choice experience. Earlier in the chapter, I discussed how Aria Johnson lived with her grandmother in the suburbs for a period of time in high school, in part because she felt embarrassed to be living in a poor area on the southside of Lansing. Aria, who also went through mental health struggles during her time in East Lansing, would not have been able to rely on her family in the same way. Not only did East Lansing expose her to a social environment that shattered her self-confidence, rendered her damagingly self-conscious of her family's

socioeconomic status, and made her look down on her own community in ways she would later come to resent, her experience with Schools of Choice also took her away from her mother and siblings. It is very likely that this significantly decreased her ability to cope with the reality of the social environment in East Lansing. While transfer students endured newfound social and emotional challenges in suburban schools, they often found themselves ill-equipped to deal with these problems as a result of their participation in interdistrict transfer.

This chapter has covered a number of the unique social and emotional challenges that urban transfer students face upon entering suburban educational environments. These challenges include social isolation, difficulties making quality friendships, loss of academic self-esteem, and struggles with mental health as a result of social and academic distress. While my data cannot conclusively say that any one of these factors in particular directly causes transfer students to struggle to achieve positive academic outcomes, the preceding testimonies from transfer students give a more holistic picture of the quotidian reality they face in suburban schools. Too often when we talk about school choice, we think of schools like East Lansing as universally better for every student than schools like Lansing. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the reality of the situation is much more complex. Students need high quality friendships in order to perform the best that they can academically (Lavy & Sand, 2012; Zucchetti et al., 2015; Andrew & Flashman, 2017; Ng-Knight et al., 2019). Their academic success is often contingent on their sense of belonging and how comfortable they feel engaging in the school environment (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Geographic, racial, socioeconomic, and stigmatic factors prevent many urban transfer students from experiencing this in the suburbs. We cannot instinctively view East Lansing schools as universally “better” for all students based on district-level performance when

it is evident that transfer students and residential students have vastly different experience within the school. In the next chapter, I will analyze how these factors form the basis of divergent needs between transfer students and residential students.

CHAPTER 3: Divergent Need and Inadequate Institutional Support

Students from Lansing are different than students from East Lansing. They come from different communities, they live with different families, and they have a distinct set of needs that set them apart from other students who live in the suburbs. It has been well-documented that participants in Michigan's Schools of Choice program are more likely to be Black, low-income, or low performers academically (Cowen et al., 2015).⁵ In contrast, like many mid-Michigan suburbs, East Lansing is overwhelmingly white, high-income, and hosts a student body with high scores on standardized tests compared to LSD and state averages (US News, 2021). Urban transfer students have a divergent set of needs from the residential student population in East Lansing based on differences in geographies, race, and wealth. Across my interviews, I observed a pattern of East Lansing schools failing to adequately support the needs of their urban transfer students in areas where their needs did not overlap with those of the district's residential population. This set up an institutional mismatch in which the unique needs of transfer students proved incongruous with the services provided by ELPS. Where Schools of Choice students do not have needs in common with East Lansing's residential student population, they often receive inadequate support from their adopted school system, when support exists at all. This is a complexity that the dominant narratives surrounding school choice conveniently cover up. The way that we talk about suburban schools as universally better for all students than central city schools erases the differences between the experiences of different types of students in suburban environments. The following chapter will analyze the ways in which the needs of urban transfer students diverge from the needs of residential East Lansing students and will subsequently

⁵ This is a statewide trend that may not hold exactly for the Lansing School District although it underlines how this is a policy that primarily deals with the mobility of disadvantaged student groups

demonstrate how this has led to an institutional failure to address the needs of East Lansing's urban transfer student population.

East Lansing Public Schools, as an institution, is set up to provide services to the students with the types of socioeconomic status that are representative of the greater East Lansing residential student population. As a community, East Lansing is much wealthier than Lansing. East Lansing has a vibrant information and education economy centered around Michigan State University—the city's core employer. In contrast, Lansing's economy is split between the state government—which mostly employs people outside of Lansing—and the declining automobile industry. These socioeconomic disparities are reflected in the demographic makeups of the two neighboring districts. While over 70 percent of the Lansing School District's student body qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL), less than one-third of East Lansing's student body is on FRL, significant proportion of these students transferring from Lansing. Over the course of the interviews with urban transfer students in East Lansing, it became clear that East Lansing Public Schools is not prepared to support low-income transfer students in the same way they support high-income residential students within the district. This poses a number of challenges to urban transfer students attending school in East Lansing.

Barriers to college readiness

Many Lansing students transferred to East Lansing under the promise of better preparation for college. However, once the transfer students arrived at their new schools, many of them found that benefits such as college readiness were not as accessible to them as they were to the district's residential student population. In preparing students to succeed in college, the administration, teachers, and staff at East Lansing were not prepared to support transfer students

who came from a different socioeconomic background than the typical residential student. The experiences of low-income transfer students reflect an institution that is set up to support the high-income students that represent the majority of East Lansing's residential population. Many transfer students, particularly from low-income families, felt that the staff at ELPS operate under the assumption that everyone's familial and economic background was the same as that of the residential majority. Aria Johnson is mixed race Black and white and from a low-income single-parent household. She described several instances in which the school counselors failed to adequately support her because they assumed her mother—who was raising and supporting several children in different schools—would give her support that in Aria's eyes was not feasible. When asked why she felt counselors didn't account for her situation and offer her the support she needed, she responded:

I don't know. I don't know if maybe they just weren't used to [it]. I don't know. I don't know if it's just an expectation that your parents help you out with things like that or just questions they're not used to asking. Cause like, I asked one of them like "Hey, do you know how to get waivers for these college applications? My mom can't afford it." And they're like, "Um, I don't know. Email them maybe?" And I was like "uh, I guess, thanks?" (Aria Johnson)

While it is shocking on its own that a high school counselor would not know how to complete a college application fee waiver, this example demonstrates more generally that ELPS does not encounter or accommodate the needs of low-income students frequently enough for it to be institutionalized. It shows that support services at ELPS are set up to serve students that have fundamentally different needs than those of low-income transfer students. Aria's experience with her school counselor demonstrates how ELPS as an institution is more prepared to support the

needs of their higher-income residential population than their lower-income transfer students from Lansing. As a result, low-income transfer students are left to navigate challenges such as college applications primarily on their own. We can again see this in the example above where the counselor tells Aria to figure out the problem on her own by emailing colleges herself.

Griselda Davis, who is Black and ended up attending a 4-year university after two years at community college, transferred to East Lansing in elementary school along with his younger brother, in part because his parents wanted to prop them up for success in college. However, when it came time to begin the college admissions process in high school, Griselda found that he was at a significant disadvantage to his peers—who he noted to be white—with more resources from East Lansing.

A lot of things I was responsible for paying on my own. So, I couldn't necessarily afford to pay for SAT prep like a lot of the white students at my school or students with those resources. And I definitely noticed when it came, when I got the first score. I didn't get to take all the practice exams. And I remember all my friends were like "oh I got this" and I was like, "oh, well I got this." And the school kind of prepared me as best as I can, but I just didn't know what to expect. I didn't know what to anticipate. So that was a struggle. (Griselda Davis)

Everyday barriers to school life and engagement

The lack of institutional support for low-income transfer students extends far beyond the realm of college admissions and results in an educational environment that is difficult and confusing for low-income students to navigate. On top of the social stigmatization of poverty that transfer students had to deal with (discussed in Chapter 2), the school system in East

Lansing itself has a series of financial requirements that act as barriers to low-income transfers. Aria, who transferred to East Lansing from the Lansing School District at the end of middle school, noted that one of the most significant differences between the two districts was the way money was relevant in East Lansing.

It was definitely very different in East Lansing. Lansing is kind of like, I don't know. I don't remember when they implemented free breakfast and lunch and stuff like that...but they didn't have all these crazy fees for things and all that stuff. I didn't have to worry about all that. No one really talked about that kind of stuff. So there's a lot of stuff in East Lansing that they're like "oh you got to pay for this, you got to pay for that." I'm like "oh, wait, what?" Stuff that I did not expect. (Aria Johnson)

The free breakfast and lunch mentioned by Aria in the quote above is a reference to a district-wide initiative started in Lansing in 2011 that provides free breakfast and lunch to all students enrolled in the Lansing School District. No such program exists in East Lansing and unlike in Lansing, where no action is required on the part of students and families to receive free meals, low-income students in East Lansing who are eligible for FRL are required to apply to the district to receive benefits. Furthermore, families with students attending East Lansing must reapply for FRL at the start of each school year, with low-income students either paying for lunches or going without food until the application is submitted and approved by the district (East Lansing Public Schools, 2020). The stark difference in district policies surrounding free and reduced-price lunch programs is just one example of the divergent ways in which each district approaches the needs of low-income students.

The disconnect between the provision of services at ELPS and the needs of low-income students permeates throughout the educational and social experiences of transfer students in East Lansing. The district attaches participation fees to extracurricular activities such as sports, with no easily navigable institutional waiver mechanism for low-income students. Coming from Lansing where these “pay-to-play” type schemes were nonexistent, Aria felt surprised, confused, and unsupported by the financial environment at East Lansing. “There’s all these like financial things” she said, “like what, \$365 you have to pay for sports?” Aria, who played softball throughout middle school and high school in Lansing and East Lansing both, could not afford the fees in East Lansing and felt alone in trying to find a way around them.

Stuff like that, that was kind of challenging for me to navigate, like all the new fees you had to pay for things like that.

I think a lot of it was like, money-based things that they [the counselors] didn’t really know how to navigate. Cause I had to pull a lot of strings to get my sports fee waived. Cause like, my mom’s like “I’m not giving you almost \$400.” (Aria Johnson)

The existence of participation fees and the lack of formalized institutional mechanisms to accommodate low-income students in East Lansing is indicative of a district that is prepared to support only the high-income students that make up the majority of its residential body. Many of the residential students in East Lansing come into school with economic, social, and cultural capital that allows them to navigate sports fees, college applications, and other challenges without the direct support of the school administration. However, for these same resources that most residential students come to school already possessing, urban transfer students must rely on

counselors, teachers, and administrators to gain access. When those support figures aren't used to providing that kind of support, which most of their students already have at home, urban transfers in East Lansing are often made to do without.

Between school and home: Afterschool experiences in hostile interstices

While institutional support is often inadequately provided to low-income students within the district, there are many cases in which the unique needs of transfer students are ignored outright by the district. The most obvious example provided through interviews of former transfer students is in the way Schools of Choice students experience space between the formal school day and home. Interviewees shared astonishing commonality in their afterschool experiences in that they were left without transportation home and without access to a safe and stimulating environment for the intermediate time between school and home. Without accessible transportation from their parents or from a robust regional transit system, transfer students were neglected by their suburban adopted district who failed to provide them with afterschool programming or transportation. Furthermore, the racial and socioeconomic differences between transfer students and the residential population in addition to the geographic reality of attending school in a city outside of where you live created unique challenges to Schools of Choice students after school in East Lansing.

Throughout my analysis of the interviews with urban Schools of Choice students in Lansing, it became clear that these students shared a common afterschool experience, distinct from the typical experiences of residential students in Lansing and East Lansing. All but one of the transfer students interviewed reported frequently spending more than an hour in East Lansing after the end of the school day in middle and high school, separate from their participation in

formal afterschool events and programs. Most commonly this involved spending unstructured and unsupervised time at the nearby municipal library, local restaurants and coffee shops, or otherwise waiting at the school building doors for the end of the working day when their parents could pick them up. While transfer students were somewhat varied in how they reflected on the time they spent in the hours following the end of the school day, they shared a striking unanimity in the spaces they occupied in the time and space between the classroom and their homes.

By far the most common place for Schools of Choice students to wait for transportation home was the East Lansing Public Library. The library, which is operated separately from ELPS by the City of East Lansing, is located in the backyard of East Lansing High School and about one and a half miles from the district's MacDonald Middle School. The only interviewee who did not have experience going to the library after school was Brendan Parsons who transferred to East Lansing in 9th grade where he already had an older sister attending who owned a car and could drive him home immediately after the school day ended. Every other interviewee had significant experience going to the library to hang out with friends, study, or wait for their ride. Noah Meyers transferred to East Lansing—and subsequently began going to the public library after school—in 5th grade. “Early on we used to go to library every day after school, which sucked” he remembered. Cesar Ramirez says that before he got his license, he'd stay in East Lansing all day by himself before getting picked up whenever his mom got off work. “I would actually just go to the library and just like, do some homework or something, you know? Just kill time.” If transfer students didn't go to the library, they sometimes went to local businesses in downtown East Lansing, about a mile from school. Hayley Hendricks and her older sister couldn't get picked up until their parents finished work around 6:00pm. “In high school, we would usually go to the library and wait if we didn't have lacrosse practice or something. Or we

would go to Starbucks or Bubble Island and wait.” Hayley and her sister weren’t missing out on anything kind of structured programs or otherwise stimulatory environment by going to coffeeshops instead of library. Neither the high school nor the district library had any consistent programming for students waiting to be picked up from school.

While the subjects had differing opinions on how their afterschool experience affected them overall, they were reasonably unified in their memories of being averse to inaccessibility of their homes. A minority of students felt that their academic outcomes actually improved as a result of their captive attentions after school—they did their homework because they felt there was nothing better to do in that space at that time. In contrast, many students, such as Noah Meyers, felt that their academics suffered because of the inaccessibility of their own home after school.

I just feel like it’s more time in the day [when you get to go home after school].

Like, when you get home at 7:00pm, you do your homework and then go to bed or whatever. But you have time to actually do stuff if you come home earlier, plus like, you’ll eat food at home and do all types of things (Noah Meyers)

When asked about whether staying at the library had an impact on his education, Noah responded that he “probably didn’t get as much homework done because of staying after,” although he said the effect wasn’t too significant.

For other students, the effect of being cut off from school went far beyond academics. Griselda Davis, like almost every other transfer student interviewed, had to wait afterschool for several hours to be picked up each day. However, the high school had a policy that prohibited students from staying in the building for longer than 30 minutes after the end of the school day unless they were there for a school-sponsored event. In order to get around this, Griselda joined a

number of different student organizations. However, Griselda said that this behavior was more of an exception than a rule for other Black kids like him. Whereas he was able to navigate the whiteness of the school administration and student clubs, he says that other Black students struggled. As a result, Griselda felt as though he overextended himself. This led to a great deal of stress and caused him to suffer both academically and mentally.

One thing that sticks out to me is like, it'd be harder to do homework [for students who couldn't go home after school]. I feel like most students prefer a very comfortable environment to sit down and study or do homework, and it just wasn't that after school because we would either be in this kind of foyer [in the school building] or if we were forced to be outside, we'd be in the cold. We didn't really have a chance to sit down and get work done until then, by the time our parents would come and pick us up, and then we would get home—especially if we participated in any other type of afterschool activities—there wouldn't be as much time, because you have to go to bed so you can get back up and do it all over again. And so I remember, just because I was so involved in lots of clubs and different things, I just felt like I had no time, and it eventually started taking a toll on me. I was really stressed all the time, I had some things with anxiety. I mean, I would even physically get sick, just cause I wasn't sleeping—I didn't have time.

(Griselda Davis)

Rather than accommodate students with no place to go after school, ELPS often went to extreme lengths to ignore the needs of their transfer population. As a result of the ban against staying on school grounds longer than 30 minutes after the school day, many students congregated around the exit doors in the building's western wing (what Griselda referred to as the foyer) rather than

go to the district library or other places around East Lansing to wait for their rides. Here, they were accompanied by the school's security officers. Many of the interviewees remembered the majority of this group of students to be Black. Griselda said that although he was able to navigate the school administration in a way that permitted him to join different school clubs so he was allowed to stay after school, many of his Black classmates were not as successful.

For a lot of other kids who weren't able to form relationships with security or administration, they really had a hard time. I remember it would be snowing or raining they'd be trying to put the kids outside. That's terrible. (Griselda Davis)

As discussed in Chapter 1, students and families are often motivated to transfer to suburban districts like East Lansing based on the vague promise of a “better” education. However, this chapter has shown that upon transferring to suburban educational environment, many of these students find that the very resources that they transferred in pursuit of are inaccessible to people with their race or income. Transfer students find that much of what makes ELPS more academically successful than LSD on a district level comes down to the resources and knowledge that residential students bring into the class from home. As discussed in Chapter 2, this can have significant negative effects on the self-image and academic self-esteem of students from Lansing. What's more, many of these students find that several of their race- and class-specific needs are not supported institutionally by East Lansing schools. While LSD might not have had the same institutional capacity as East Lansing, they still made an attempt to accommodate the needs of their community and were oftentimes successful.

This is complexity that is missing from the current narrative surrounding school choice. In both public and academic discourses, the language we use to talk about programs like Schools of Choice universalizes the experience of education and creates the perception that suburban

schools like East Lansing always provide a “better” education to all students than urban schools like Lansing. As we see from the examples discussed in this chapter, the reality of the situation is far more complex. While East Lansing may be excellent at providing education to the types of students that make up the vast majority of their residential population who come into school with a certain number of privileges, they are less inclined to accommodate the unique needs of students who enter their district from Lansing. While many transfer students undoubtedly encounter new benefits as a result of their transfer, we must add more nuance to our discussion of school choice by speaking openly and honestly about the widespread challenges that accompany these transfers.

CONCLUSION

It's almost like a lot of times what they came out here for was in vain. They came out here and they got abused, they got mistreated, they got exploited. And so yeah, I would make sure that they did well. I would actually make sure, in fact, that resources are distributed in a way that I wouldn't have to leave my community to get ahead in life, or to get more opportunities. I could go to my neighborhood school, with my neighborhood friends, and get into the same great colleges and get the same great jobs and the same opportunities. (Griselda Davis)

My findings suggest that the narratives and frameworks we use to talk about school choice do not do justice to the underlying complexity involved in thinking about regional student mobility and the experiences of central city students in suburban educational environments. In this thesis, I have argued that we must reject reductionist ways of thinking about student mobility by adding complexity to our understanding in two specific ways. First, we must expand our understanding of how student mobility outcomes manifest. As I have shown, this should include acknowledging and analyzing the dynamic agency of students in making decisions about where they attend school as well as pursuing a shift towards a model of family unit thinking in which decisions about school choice are made based on the needs of the entire family as a unit rather than the academic needs of each individual student. Second, I have argued that urban transfer students face a unique set of social, emotional, and institutional challenges as a consequence of their enrollment in suburban districts that have residential student bodies with widely different needs than their own. Not every school provides the same quality of educational experience to every type of student. These results demonstrate the failures of universalizing language and discourses that categorize schools using binary “good versus bad” logic based on school-level

characteristics. Researchers, policymakers, and public discourse surrounding school choice must transcend simplistic ways of understanding student mobility in favor of the frameworks suggested in this thesis.

In this project, I set out to develop a better understanding of how families think about regional school choice as well as how urban transfer students experience interdistrict transfer programs in suburban environments. In my first chapter, I presented three findings on how families think about the possibility of school choice in a regional context. I found that in many families, students share agency with their parents in thinking about where to attend school. I also found that academic considerations are rarely the sole or primary consideration for families in choosing where to attend school. Lastly, I introduced the concept of family unit thinking, in which families make decisions about student mobility based on the needs of the entire family as a unit rather than the needs of each individual student in isolation. In my second chapter, I argued that urban transfer students face unique social and emotional challenges based on their geographic isolation, racial and class differences from the suburban population, and the stigmatization of their home community. In many cases these social barriers decrease the number and quality of transfer students' friendships, negatively impacts their level of academic engagement, and exacerbate mental health problems. In the final chapter, I argued that where the needs of urban transfer students do not overlap with the needs of the suburban residential student body, suburban educational institutions often neglect the needs of transfer students. These needs most often diverge based on racial, socioeconomic, and geographic differences between the residential and transfer populations.

My results in Chapter 1 reveal that in order to fully understand how interdistrict transfer works, we must revise the ways in which we think about who makes decisions about school

choice and how. Every study cited in this paper concerning school choice decision making fails to consider the dynamic agency of students themselves in thinking about where to attend school. Many previous researchers have failed to analyze factors beyond individual academic quality and their effects on student mobility outcomes (Schneider et al., 2000; Stewart & Wolf, 2014; Altenhofen et al., 2016; Berends, 2019). My results reveal that in order to understand interdistrict transfer in all its complexity, we must rethink the role that students play in decision making and the influence of non-student needs in creating student mobility outcomes.

The findings of the first chapter are important because they help us to understand what is happening with the adverse experiences of transfer students described in the final two chapters. When choosing a school to attend, families do not and cannot think in purely academic terms. In a similar way, the experience of transfer students in suburban schools is shaped by much more than classroom academics. Over the course of my interviews, it became clear that students from Lansing are transferring to suburban schools based on the vague promise of something better. Sometimes this promise involved better access to college while other times it involved things like high quality friendships and the desire to go to a nicer school. In each form that this promise assumed, it never reflected the whole story of what was to come with school in East Lansing. Regardless of whether students took an active role in pursuing their transfer or were pushed to switch schools by their parents, students were never fully aware of what they were getting themselves into with interdistrict transfer. Students who exhibited agency in making decisions to transfer were investing in an experience that they did not fully understand and often did not know how to manage. While none of the subjects interviewed dropped out of the Schools of Choice program (although Aria Johnson nearly did), the challenges described in this study that transfer students faced bring new meaning to the fact that so many students in interdistrict choice

programs do. Given the race- and class-specific adversity and hostility involved in much of the social experience of transfer students in suburban schools, it is unsurprising that Black students and low-income students are disproportionately likely to exit Schools of Choice (Cowen et al., 2015).

Chapters 2 and 3 reveal a disturbing underside to the urban transfer student experience in Schools of Choice, which is not appropriately studied using the existing frameworks applied to school choice. Future studies of interdistrict transfer must take into account the integrative experiences of students in school choice programs, based on both its impact on academic outcomes and its significance in its own right. The social isolation, stigmatization, prejudice, decline in self-confidence, and degradation of support networks discussed in Chapter 2 that urban transfer students experience when attending suburban schools is crucial to understanding interdistrict transfer. No study of school choice is complete without a discussion of how individuals experience these policies. When we fixate exclusively on academic outcomes and school-level characteristics, too much of the overall student experience slips through the cracks in our analysis. This overall experience is important both in its own right and based on its effect on academic outcomes. In order to succeed academically, students must feel supported in all aspects of their educational experience. They need quality friendships, healthy relationships with teachers and administration, and genuine opportunities to actively engage with the school community (Bellmore, 2011; Lavy & Sand, 2012; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Shankar & Park, 2015; Zucchetti et al., 2015; Ng-Knight et al., 2019). Future research must more earnestly incorporate these factors into their approach to understanding school choice. These factors are all important in how they affect academic outcomes, but more so, they are important because they currently adversely affect the lives of students.

Policymakers and suburban school administrators must take it upon themselves to improve the experience of interdistrict transfer students. Advantaged suburban schools in Michigan are profiting off of the influx of transfer students through Schools of Choice. As the system currently functions, it seems to allow the schools of whiter, more affluent communities to siphon away funding and enrollment from less advantaged districts that have a much greater need for the funding. What's more, as we saw in Chapter 3, some suburban districts like East Lansing then capitalize on the influx of out-of-district Black and brown students into their schools to tout the diversity and multiculturalism of their districts in the hopes of attracting even more funding and students. In this crude model, if suburban districts win and urban districts lose, then I argue that transfer students are left marginalized in between.

At the same time that suburban districts profit off of their per-pupil enrollment and the perceptions of multiculturalism that are constructed around transfer students' presence in the student body, these students are often refused many of the substantive benefits that motivated their transfer in the first place. School districts must go to greater lengths to support the social, academic, and emotional wellbeing of transfer student populations. Some of the challenges discussed in this thesis have simple solutions. For instance, schools with out-of-district students must invest in making the time and space between home and school more manageable for students who live far from school. These changes could take the form of transportation resources—which are currently denied to transfer students under Michigan's Schools of Choice law—or more robust afterschool programming that specifically accommodates the needs of out-of-district students. In general, receiving districts must do more to make their services more accessible and useful to the types of transfer students they enroll. For districts like ELPS, this includes reforms such as eliminating school-related fees and hiring teachers and administrators

that reflect the makeup of the transfer student population and know how best to support them. Suburban school districts need to identify areas where they are failing their transfer students and take substantive measures to ensure that they make up for where they have previously let those students down.

While these reforms are important, it is critical to acknowledge the fundamental advantages that neighborhood schools have over the interdistrict transfer model. Neighborhood schools are uniquely effective at providing for the needs of their own community. When a student from one district attends school in another community, this advantage is lost, regardless of the quality of the out-of-district school. As discussed in Chapter 3, suburban districts are not set up to accommodate the specific needs of urban students in the ways that their neighborhood schools are. Additionally, the neighborhood model is also more conducive to long term friendship stability, strong in-school support networks, and high levels of engagement in the school community as a result of geographic proximity. The benefits of this model are evidenced by the success of residential students in suburban schools. As a result, policymakers must move to reinvest in neighborhood schools that experience large losses of enrollment through interdistrict transfer. No one should have to feel like they need to leave their community in order to access opportunity and quality education. However, it is impossible for these schools to adequately support their students as they continue to hemorrhage enrollment and funding to various forms of school choice. Policymakers on the state level must take it upon themselves to stop the bleeding by pursuing funding reform that accounts for past and current inequities and prioritizes districts that need funding the most. In order to reach a point in which all families feel fulfilled in attending their neighborhood schools, we must also engage in a narrative shift in the way we talk about school choice. Both public discourse and academic literature tend to rely on

school-level academic performance to create a perception that some schools are universally better for each student than other schools. As this thesis has repeatedly demonstrated, the reality of the matter is much more complicated. At the same time that suburban schools move forward in supporting their transfer students more adequately, there must also be funding reform and narrative shifts in the way we talk about school choice to eventually render the need for interdistrict transfer obsolete.

Although my analysis may lead some readers to think that I am arguing for one of either the abandonment or expansion of interdistrict transfer programs, I believe that the solution is less straightforward than that. Indeed, before we can truly reach a complete solution, we need to improve the ways we think about school choice, as I have laid out throughout this thesis. In the meantime, I argue that the path forward lies somewhere in between both and neither answers. While it is true that decreasing the need for interdistrict choice should be a target for policymakers, after conducting my interviews, it is impossible to ignore the ways in which marginalized families use Schools of Choice to practice agency within constrained circumstances. Many families genuinely believe that the way they use interdistrict choice is an optimization of opportunity. I believe it is reasonable to argue that choice should be protected, not constrained for these specific families in their present context. However, a crucial piece of this choice equation—and one that has historically been ignored by advocates of school choice—is the genuine option for all families to feel comfortable attending their neighborhood school. No school choice policy is complete without this capability. We should not misunderstand interdistrict transfer to be a solution in and of itself. At best, it is an inherently imperfect tool for families to seek out greater opportunity. At its worst, it deepens district-level inequality and hurts transfer students from marginalized communities. While interdistrict transfer still exists,

researchers and policymakers must highlight the roots of its imperfections and what school systems must do to mitigate these harms. At the same time, radical changes must be undertaken in the way we invest in schools, both financially and ideologically, in order to one day render interdistrict transfer obsolete.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Transfer Student Interview Guide

- I. Initial School District
 - a. What school district were you first enrolled in?
 - b. What do you remember most about your time there?
 - c. How long did you stay in that district/were there any other districts you attended before coming to the district you graduated from?
- II. Initial School District Academic Experience
 - a. What do you remember about your classroom experience in Lansing?
 - i. What do you remember about your teachers in Lansing?
 - ii. What did you like/not like about them?
 - b. What types of class did you take? Were you in any Gifted & Talented programs/remedial programs?
 - c. How did you feel about the quality of education you received?
 - d. How do you feel you were doing academically compared to your classmates?
 - i. Did you ever feel like you were falling behind or waiting for the rest of your classmates to catch up?
- III. Initial School District Social Experience
 - a. How well do you feel you fit in socially at school in Lansing?
 - i. What makes you say that?
 - b. Was there anything about you or your classmates that made you feel different or that you didn't belong?
 - c. Tell me about some of your friends from school in Lansing

IV. Schools of Choice Application Experience

- a. When did your family first consider changing districts/applying to Schools of Choice?
 - i. When did you first apply?
- b. What is your impression of the Schools of Choice program?
- c. What led you or your family consider transferring?
 - i. Did the initiative come from you or your parents?
- d. What districts did your family end up applying to/was East Lansing your first choice?
- e. Why did you settle on East Lansing?
 - i. Did anyone else in your family already attend different districts?
 - ii. Did anyone else in your family apply to transfer at the same time or after you did?
- f. Do you remember wanting to transfer schools when you did?
 - i. What made you feel this way?

V. Suburban Academic Experience

- a. What do you remember about your classroom experience in East Lansing?
- b. What do you remember about your teachers in East Lansing?
 - i. What did you like/not like about them?
- c. What types of class did you take? Were you in any advanced class in high school?
- d. How did you feel about the quality of education you received?
- e. How do you feel you compared to your classmates academically?

- i. Did you ever feel like you were falling behind or waiting for the rest of your classmates to catch up?

VI. Schools of Choice Experience

- a. How did you get to school in high school?
 - i. If someone else drove you, what was your relationship to that person?
 - ii. About how long did it take to get to/from school?
 - iii. About what time did you leave in the mornings?
 - iv. When did you come home from school?
- b. On a typical school day, about how many times a day did you used to go to and from East Lansing?
- c. How often did you spend time at home immediately after school?
- d. What was the effect of living so far from school?
 - i. How often would you have wanted to?
 - ii. Did this affect your schoolwork?
 - iii. Did this affect your participation in afterschool activities?
 - iv. Did this affect your social life?

VII. Suburban Social Experience

- a. In high school, were more of your friends from Lansing, or East Lansing, or did you have about the same number of friends from both?
 - i. What about the friends you have now?
- b. In high school, were most of your friends from school?
 - i. In high school, were you friends with anyone from your neighborhood?

- ii. If you were friends with people from your neighborhood, do you think they thought anything about the fact that you went to school in Lansing?
- c. In high school, to what extent did you feel like part of the East Lansing High School community? To what extent do you feel like part of the East Lansing community in general?
 - i. What makes you say that?
 - ii. Having graduated, do you still feel like part of this way?
 - iii. In high school, were there any instances where you were treated differently because of where you're from?
- d. In high school, to what extent did you feel like part of the Lansing community?
 - i. Having graduated, do you still feel this way?

VIII. Post-Graduate Experience

- a. How have you spent your time since graduating from high school?
- b. Looking back, did your time attending high school in East Lansing shape what you wanted to do after graduation at all?
- c. Did East Lansing prepare you for what you wanted to do after high school? Would Lansing have done the same?

IX. Reflections

- a. Looking at the experience of transferring now, are you glad you transferred, or do you think you should have stayed? What makes you say that? Knowing what you know now, would you make the same decision again?
 - i. Did transferring schools give you any opportunities that you might not have had in Lansing/what were the

- ii. Did transferring take away any opportunities that you might have had in Lansing/what were they?
- b. Looking back, would you have changed anything about your experience with Schools of Choice?
 - i. Do you feel like the school district you graduated from was supportive of you? Is there anything they could have done to make you feel more supported?

Appendix B: Non-transfer Student Interview Guide

I. Educational Background

- a. What school system did you finish high school in and were you enrolled in a different system at any time during your K-12 education?
- b. Throughout your K-12 education, did you attend any districts other than the one from which you graduated?

II. School District Academic Experience

- a. What do you remember most about your classroom experiences in the Lansing schools?
 - i. What do you remember most about your teachers?
 - ii. What did you like/not like about them?
- b. What types of classes did you take? Were you in anything like AP programs, remedial courses, gifted and talented programs, or specialized support programs?
- c. How do you feel you compared to your classmates?
 - i. Academically? Did you ever feel like you were falling behind in school or that you were waiting for the rest of class to catch up to you?
- d. How do you feel about the quality of education you received?

III. School District Social Experience

- a. How well do you feel you fit in to the student body and the school environment?
- b. Was there anything in particular about you or your classmates that made you feel different or that you didn't belong?

- c. Where were most of your close friends from (how did you get to know them)?
Where did you spend the most time with them? What were they like—
academically, what activities did they do, where were they from?

IV. Experiences Thinking about Mobility

- a. What, if anything, do you feel sets the Lansing School District apart from other schools in the area?
 - i. Can you give an example of this? (Make a direct comparison)
- b. How do you feel Lansing schools compare to other schools in the area?
- c. Did you or your family ever considering in a school system other than Lansing?
 - i. When and how did that decision making process unfold?
 - ii. Where did you considering transferring to?
- d. Did you ever want to transfer to another district? How come?
 - i. Looking back, if you had ended up attending a different set of schools in the Lansing area, what schools would you want to attend? How come?
- e. What are some of the reasons you ended up staying in Lansing schools until the end of your high school experience?
- f. Are you familiar with the Schools of Choice program?
 - i. If no, do you know anyone who lives in Lansing but goes to a different public school district (list Holt, East Lansing, Waverly, Okemos, etc.)?
- g. Did you ever consider participating in Schools of Choice?
 - i. If yes, did you apply to transfer? To where?
 - 1. If yes, tell me what you remember about the application process?
Did you ever end up attending a school through the program?

2. If you chose to stay in Lansing schools after being given the choice to transfer, what influenced your decision to stay?
- h. Looking back on your academic experiences now, are you glad you attended schools in Lansing, or would you have rather attended schools elsewhere? What makes you say that?
 - i. What are some opportunities that you had in Lansing that you feel you might not have had in other districts?
 - ii. Do you feel that attending schools in Lansing prevent you from accessing opportunities that other districts might have allowed you to?
- V. Post-Graduate Experience
- a. How have you spent your time since leaving high school?
 - b. Looking back, how did your time attending school in Lansing shape what you wanted to do doing after high school?
 - c. Did Lansing prepare you for what you wanted to do after high school? How has your time there it affected what you ended up doing?
- VI. Community Belonging/Dynamics
- a. In high school, were most of your friends from your school?
 - b. In high school, did you remain friends with anyone who you knew that transferred schools to a different district? (applicable for people who said they knew someone who attended schools outside of Lansing)
 - i. In high school, how do you feel about the fact that they went to a different school?
 - c. In high school, did you feel like part of your high school community?

- i. What makes you say that?
 - ii. Having graduated, do you still feel like part of that community?
 - iii. In high school, do you remember there any instances where you've been treated differently from your classmates? What for?
- d. In high school, did you feel like part of the Lansing community?
- i. Having graduated, do you still feel like part of the Lansing community?