



# Moving to Educational Opportunity: A Housing Demonstration to Improve School Outcomes

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November 2013



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COLLABORATIVE

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for Housing & Urban Policy

## *Acknowledgements*

This work was funded by the Ford Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Open Society Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Surdna Foundation. The authors are grateful to the advisory group for its contributions to the review of this paper and the design of this pilot demonstration. The advisory group consists of Stefanie DeLuca (Johns Hopkins University), Ingrid Gould Ellen (New York University), Jennifer O’Neil (Quadel Consulting), Barbara Sard (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities), Heather Schwartz (RAND Corporation), Phil Tegeler (Poverty & Race Research Action Council), and Paul Teske (University of Colorado). The authors would also like to thank Mary Cunningham for her thoughtful review of this paper; Erika Poethig and Chantal Hailey for participating in the advisory group meeting on May 9, 2013; and Graham MacDonald and Pamela Lee for contributing feedback and background research.

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The *What Works Collaborative* is a foundation-supported research partnership that conducts timely research and analysis to help inform the implementation of an evidence-based housing and urban policy agenda. The collaborative consists of researchers from the Brookings Institution’s Metropolitan Policy Program, Harvard University’s Joint Center for Housing Studies, New York University’s Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, and the Urban Institute’s Center for Metropolitan Housing and Communities, as well as other experts from practice, policy, and academia. Support for the collaborative comes from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ford Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Surdna Foundation, and the Open Society Institute.

*The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of those funders listed above or of the organizations participating in the What Works Collaborative. All errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.*

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## Introduction

The United States faces long-standing economic and racial achievement gaps in education (Barton and Coley 2010; Reardon 2012). Over the past two decades, attempts to narrow these gaps have prompted expansions in school choice policies. Open enrollment, school vouchers, and charter school options have all been implemented to create more options for children to attend high-quality schools. For low-income and minority populations living in neighborhoods with weak schools, these policies have been viewed as tools to break the link between residential location and school access.

Despite the rapid expansion of these policies, the majority of students still attend schools zoned based on their residence (National Center for Education Statistics 2009). Moreover, a substantial body of research suggests that low-income and minority households do not take advantage of school choice policies in the way policymakers expect and that these policies accordingly do little to reduce school segregation (Briggs 2005; Sohoni and Saporito 2009). As a result, low-income and minority students remain concentrated in low-quality schools (Orfield and Lee 2005; Rothwell 2012).

Given the persisting connection between residential location and school attendance for low-income and minority children, housing policy still matters greatly in shaping educational trajectories and outcomes. One housing policy tool with the potential to increase access to high-quality schools is the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, a tenant-based federal rental assistance program that helps families with limited resources afford decent housing in the private market.

While the HCV program holds promise for securing better educational outcomes for disadvantaged students, earlier housing mobility demonstrations have suggested that merely giving low-income families the opportunity to move does not guarantee access to improved neighborhoods and schools (Ellen and Horn 2012; McClure 2010). The most rigorously studied housing mobility program, the Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing (or MTO) demonstration, showed that moving low-income families to lower-poverty neighborhoods does not translate into families accessing and benefitting from improved schools.

This paper presents a housing search assistance pilot program aimed at helping voucher-holder households access high-quality, low-poverty schools. The proposed pilot tackles two broad challenges—how to narrow the achievement gap and how to maximize the returns of housing assistance—confronting education and housing policy, respectively. Drawing on lessons learned from earlier housing demonstrations and education research, this paper identifies a set of promising strategies that the housing community can adopt to reduce barriers and improve information about housing and schools to boost the academic prospects of children in subsidized housing.

In the following section, we present research on the educational outcomes of low-income children in high-quality, low-poverty schools. Next, we present findings about the educational outcomes of children whose families use subsidies as part of the HCV program as well as experimental housing demonstrations that have made economic or racial neighborhood integration an explicit goal. Since decisions about housing and schools are intertwined with household constraints, lived experience, and structural challenges, we examine how parents make decisions about where to live and send their

children to school. Finally, we use this information to develop a pilot demonstration that addresses key barriers and encourages low-income families to enroll their children in high-performing, low-poverty schools.

## **Background and Literature Review**

### *High-quality, low-poverty schools improve educational outcomes*

Children and youth from families with limited means disproportionately attend weaker schools. Low-income students attend, on average, schools at the 42nd percentile on state proficiency exams, while their middle- and high-income peers attend schools at the 61st percentile (Rothwell 2012). Within the context of high residential segregation in the United States, low-income students also tend to attend schools that are even more economically segregated than the neighborhoods in which they reside (Sohoni and Saporito 2009). Moreover, double segregation, by race and income, is also on the rise (Orfield et al. 2012). While in the early 2000s, Latino and black students on average attended schools where little over half the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches (an indication of poverty level), by 2009–10, Latino and black students attended schools where low-income students accounted for nearly two-thirds of their classmates.

Closing the achievement gap will require enrolling low-income and minority students in stronger schools. Education reform efforts to improve existing district schools and open high-performing charter schools where these students live have yielded some promising results that suggest good schools, even in segregated communities, can contribute to improved educational outcomes (Abdulkadiroglu et al. 2009; Angrist et al. 2010; Dobbie and Fryer 2011). However, strong district reforms and successful charter school organizations are far from pervasive; the bulk of the literature finds only modest, often uneven improvements to student outcomes (Fryer 2011; Gleason et al. 2010).

While efforts to strengthen struggling schools and open higher-quality schools in poor and minority neighborhoods certainly hold value, these efforts may benefit from working in tandem with efforts to increase access to already high-performing, low-poverty schools. Emerging research has suggested that enrolling disadvantaged students in such schools can help boost their educational outcomes, narrowing the achievement gap (Schwartz 2010).

Some researchers argue that expanding access to low-poverty schools can be even more effective than directing additional resources to high-poverty schools to implement the types of reforms championed by the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top Program (Kahlenberg 2012; Rusk 2011). Research suggests that lower-poverty schools have characteristics that are typically absent in high-poverty schools and cannot be readily duplicated in such settings. High-quality, low-poverty schools benefit from strong parental involvement to promote quality and accountability (Brantlinger 2003), more highly skilled teachers with elevated expectations (Clotfelter et al. 2013; Rumberger and Palardy 2005; Wells and Crain 1997), and positive peer effects (Burke and Sass 2008; Hanushek and Rivkin 2009; Hoxby and Weingarth 2006; Kahlenberg 2001).

Spurred by James Coleman's controversial 1966 report on the relationships between school context and a student's individual characteristics, researchers have debated the extent to which low-income and

minority students are affected by the socioeconomic status of their school peers. While the research has been mixed and plagued with methodological challenges (Jencks and Mayer 1990; Rumberger and Palardy 2005; Schofield 1995), new research offers compelling evidence of what can happen when poor and minority students gain access to low-poverty schools (Schwartz 2010).

Studying low-income students randomly assigned to deeply subsidized units and neighborhood schools in Maryland's suburban Montgomery County through the county's inclusionary zoning policy, Schwartz (2010) found that poor elementary school students achieved significant academic gains in low-poverty schools. While students in subsidized housing entered elementary school behind their middle-class peers, by the end of elementary school, they cut the achievement gap in math by half and in reading by a third. Schwartz further found that, comparing across public housing students, those randomly assigned to attend low-poverty schools did better than those assigned to schools with poverty rates above 20 percent; public housing students in low-poverty schools scored eight points higher in math and five points higher in reading than their counterparts at higher-poverty schools did. These findings are particularly striking considering the county's policy to direct extra resources to "red-lined" schools, those identified as the neediest in the district. Despite the introduction of full-day kindergarten, smaller class sizes, and greater professional development at red-lined schools, public housing students at these schools still lagged behind their peers at low-poverty schools that did not receive additional investment.

Montgomery County's experience suggests that helping families relocate to access low-poverty schools is a promising approach, one in which effective housing policy can play a pivotal role. Of course, it is critical to note that school changes and residential relocation have been linked to a host of negative outcomes for children (Scanlon and Devine 2001). For a move to a new school to be worth the cost, it must place the student in a significantly improved school setting. The move destination matters: a recent study of 10 cities found that students only demonstrated reliable gains in school quality when their families relocated to a different school district (Theodos et al. forthcoming). Moreover, as studies like Schwartz (2010) suggest, the key to improved educational outcomes is not getting students into slightly lower-poverty schools, but getting them into schools with very low poverty rates. Schools appear to exhibit a tipping point at which poverty rates are high enough that students no longer benefit from socioeconomic integration (Kahlenberg 2001). As poverty levels rise, the academic returns to low-income students diminish (Schwartz 2010). Unfortunately, low-income students rarely move to schools with such characteristics (Crowley 2003; Theodos et al. forthcoming). Thus, any pilot project aiming to substantially boost the educational outcomes of low-income students is challenged to promote the kinds of school changes that, at present, occur infrequently.

### ***Housing policies have had limited success in desegregating and improving access to high-quality schools***

Various housing policies hold potential to break the link between economic status and educational opportunity. "Supply-side" housing policies including inclusionary zoning, low-income housing tax

credits, and public housing, increase the supply of affordable housing units in lower-poverty neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>

Increasingly, however, housing policy has shifted toward “demand-side” policies like HCVs, which help families with limited financial resources rent in the private market. HCVs are not tied to specific residential developments and can be used with landlords that accept the voucher and have housing that meets HCV program requirements.

Although HCVs have helped make housing more affordable for low-income families, they have not served as an effective mechanism for deconcentrating poverty and promoting greater integration. McClure (2010) found that the HCV program has not been effective at moving families into demonstrably better neighborhoods despite a number of policy changes implemented starting in the 1990s (including mobility counseling) that sought to promote moves away from poor neighborhoods (Covington et al. 2011). Galvez (2010) reached similar conclusions and found this pattern particularly true for minority families compared to white families using HCVs.

It is no surprise, then, that Ellen, O’Regan, and Voicu (2012) found that, nationwide, families with HCVs do not typically gain access to high-performing schools. Instead, they tend to relocate to the catchment areas of high-poverty, low-performing public schools. In fact, subsidized households tend to move to locations where the nearest school was actually higher-poverty and lower-performing than the schools nearest to the general population of poor households. Among subsidized households, HCV participants did especially poorly, moving to neighborhoods with worse schools than traditional public housing and project-based Section 8 housing tenants.

### *Housing mobility demonstrations yield limited improvements to educational outcomes*

In the past few decades, policymakers designed and implemented two major housing mobility interventions to test the effects of living in low-poverty neighborhoods: the Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program and the MTO demonstration. These programs tested whether families from some of the most distressed public and project-based housing that move to low-poverty neighborhoods experience changes in living conditions and, in turn, behavior and well-being. Both programs provided families with housing vouchers that had to be used in either low-poverty or majority-white neighborhoods. Research on whether living in these neighborhoods resulted in strong or lasting educational improvements has yielded mixed results. A third demonstration, Baltimore’s Thompson Replacement Housing Program, began in 2003. Research on its impact is ongoing.

***Gautreaux Assisted Housing Program (1976–98).*** Gautreaux was a court-ordered solution to remedy past segregation by offering families living in Chicago public housing an opportunity to find housing in less-segregated areas in the region. Families that volunteered to participate were required to move to neighborhoods that were less than 30 percent African American. Gautreaux studies suggest that moving families out of poor, segregated neighborhoods into higher-income, majority-white

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<sup>1</sup> Supply-side housing programs have produced mixed results. See Newman and Schnare (1997); Galvez (2010); and Ellen et al. (2009) on HUD-assisted and Low-Income Housing Tax Credit residential pattern results. See Schwartz et al. (2012) on the quality of schools accessed by inclusionary zoning households.

neighborhoods can have positive effects on children but that self-selection may explain improved outcomes for youth.

***MTO Demonstration (1994–98).*** MTO was a random-assignment social experiment that tested whether families that relocated to low-poverty neighborhoods (as opposed to majority-white neighborhoods) experienced better outcomes compared with families that had received a regular voucher without a low-poverty requirement and with a control group that did not receive an HCV at the time of the demonstration.<sup>2</sup> The MTO evaluation found that, approximately 10 to 15 years after the start of the demonstration, the treatment-group families lived in higher-quality housing, safer neighborhoods and experienced better physical and mental health outcomes than the control group. Treatment-group children attended schools that had slightly higher test scores than control group children. But their schools were still mostly composed of minority students with average test scores in the bottom one-fourth of the statewide performance distribution (Gennetian et al. 2012). In fact, many children in the treatment group did not change schools at all (Briggs et al. 2008). MTO studies suggest that marginal improvements in school characteristics are not enough to make a measureable impact in individual educational outcomes.

***Baltimore’s Thomson Replacement Housing Program (2003–present).*** More recently, the Thomson Replacement Housing program in Baltimore has built upon the earlier demonstrations by offering vouchers along with employment, transportation, and school supports. Thomson was created in response to a 1995 lawsuit brought by Baltimore City public housing residents against the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the city’s public housing authority. Residents argued that both agencies failed to dismantle the city’s racially segregated public housing system. In 1996, 2,000 special housing vouchers were issued to plaintiff class members (current and former public housing residents) to create housing opportunity in middle-class, majority-white areas of Baltimore and adjacent counties. The vouchers can be used in census tracts that are less than 30 percent black, less than 10 percent poor, and with less than 5 percent of residents receiving subsidies. Early research on 1,200 early movers suggests that moves with Thomson vouchers are improving the quality of schools that children are eligible to attend, but little is known about whether Thomson moves have affected individual-level youth outcomes.

### ***Many factors influence residential and school selection***

Absent from much of the earlier housing mobility literature is a concerted effort to understand how residential decisions interact with school choice decisions. Many housing and neighborhood policymakers assume that if an opportunity exists to move to a neighborhood with strong schools, parents will take advantage of the opportunity. However, while white middle- and upper-class families consider school quality a key factor in their decisions about where to move (Bayoh et al. 2006; Holme 2002), low-income and minority families are more likely to decouple school selection and residential selection (Rhodes and DeLuca 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> See Briggs, Popkin, and Goering (2010) for an in-depth description on the development of the MTO demonstration.

Low-income and minority households move frequently, but they typically cycle through neighborhoods with high poverty rates (Bruch and Mare 2006; Galvez 2010; Sampson and Sharkey 2008). Moreover, low-income families rarely enroll their children in high-performing and integrated schools after relocating (Theodos et al. forthcoming). Poor families often make multiple short-distance moves, enrolling their children in schools with characteristics similar to the schools where they started (i.e., in highly segregated, minority-majority schools with high free and reduced-price meal receipt). Theodos and colleagues (forthcoming) found that families only ended up in high-quality schools when they moved longer distances and left their political jurisdiction altogether, such as when they moved out of the city and into the suburbs or across county lines.

To encourage voucher-holder families to move to neighborhoods with strong, low-poverty schools and enroll their children in these schools, it is important to address a broad variety of factors that shape how low-income families make decisions about where to live and send their children to school. Interventions must address the constraints that limit the ability of low-income parents to act on their expressed preference for higher-performing schools (Hastings and Weinstein 2008). They must also be sensitive to the unique experiential circumstances and household dynamics that shape how disadvantaged families approach residential and school decisions (DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010; Rhodes and DeLuca 2014, Condliffe et al. forthcoming). Below we outline some of these key factors.

### ***Resource Constraints***

Because low-income families have fewer resources, not all potential school and neighborhood options are viable in practice (Bell 2005). One key factor that may limit the effective choice set of low-income parents is transportation. Low-income families tend to prioritize housing that is close to child care, jobs, and family, which may lead them to neighborhoods without strong schools (Clampet-Lundquist 2004; DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010). Further, lack of access to transportation leads families to assign greater weights to school proximity, lowering their willingness to travel long distances to access academically stronger schools (DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010; Hastings et al. 2007; Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan 2007; Teske, Fitzpatrick, and O'Brien 2009). One survey found that 45 percent of families earning less than \$20,000 did not own cars (Teske et al. 2009). Asked about the impact of their lack of access to transportation, 36 percent of study participants indicated that they would have selected a different school if better or free transportation were available.

Resource constraints influence not only where families end up relocating but also how they search for housing. Interviews with MTO participants revealed that they were often priced out of communities in outlying areas (DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010). Lack of resources for transportation and child care coverage may make it more difficult for families to shop around extensively to find the best housing options, especially given federally prescribed guidelines that families have at most 60 days to find housing with a voucher (DeLuca et al. 2013; Popkin and Cunningham 2000). Low-income families are also concerned about affording utilities, security deposits, and moving costs (Galvez 2010). This may lead voucher recipients to narrow their choice sets as they seek housing with utilities included in the rent (Popkin and Cunningham 2000).

### ***Information Constraints***

Low-income parents are further constrained by limited access to reliable information to help them identify and locate high-performing schools. Poor families and minority families, for example, are less likely to be aware of magnet school options (Henig 1995), effectively limiting their range of high-quality schools. They may also be less aware of the performance and conditions of the schools that their children currently attend (DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010). That is, low-income parents are less likely to know when their child's school is performing poorly and are, as a result, less likely to move their child to a better school.

Research suggests that social network differences between low- and higher-income parents shape what information parents have available about schools and, in turn, where parents send their children. Studies suggest social networks and word of mouth are the most important sources of information (Bell 2005; Teske and Schneider 2001; Teske et al. 2007). Bell (2005) found that social networks accounted for 77 percent of schools in parents' choice sets. Indeed, Teske and colleagues (2007) found that across all social classes, parents trust word-of-mouth networks more than formal documentation and rely more on other parents than on teachers and administrators for school choice information.

Higher-income parents have better access to large networks of friends and peers that may offer advice (Teske et al. 2007). These parents often find their way to "market mavens"—a small group of well-informed parents who are willing and eager to share information. Lower-income parents, by contrast, have smaller, lower-quality social networks (Schneider et al. 1998). They rely on friends and family members whose networks are similarly limited in access to information on better schools (Briggs 1998; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003).

### ***Preferences and Lived Experience***

Research has found that low-income families frequently prioritize quality and size of their housing unit over other factors like neighborhood quality and the quality of the schools their children would attend (Briggs et al. 2010; Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012). This prioritization reflects a history of experiences churning through the same types of high-poverty neighborhoods that has led families to adapt their expectations and develop coping strategies when faced with a bounded set of residential options.

Owing to their repeated exposure to high-poverty schools rife with safety issues and substandard achievement, low-income and minority parents may have low expectations for what schools can accomplish and sense that all the school options available to them are similar in academic quality (DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Rhodes and DeLuca 2014). Where parents perceive a difference is in the behavioral environment of a school, and low-income parents are accordingly more likely to weigh such factors as uniforms, school discipline, and teacher attitudes in judging schools (DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010). Thus, low-income parents take advantage of opportunities differently than do higher-income parents. Low-income and minority parents may be less inclined to think that schools can significantly alter the educational outcomes of their children, even if they express considerable interest in their children's education.

### ***Housing Voucher Regulations, Administration, and Structural Constraints***

Low-income and minority families are further constrained in where they can use a Housing Choice Voucher. These constraints may include a dearth of affordable units in low-poverty areas (McClure 2010) and discrimination by race and source of income (Popkin and Cunningham 2000), the latter of which is legal in many jurisdictions (Poverty & Race Research Action Council 2013).

Other constraints relate to housing voucher regulations and the particularities of how housing voucher programs are administered. To set a limit on the maximum size of a housing voucher subsidy in a given area, HUD calculates the area's fair market rent (FMR) limit. This limit is typically a market rental price at the 40th percentile of all standard rental prices (HUD 2007). Although nearly all census tracts include units that fulfill the local FMR limit (Devine et al. 2003; Pendall 2000), such units are more plentiful in low-income areas. This makes it more difficult for families to find housing in the types of low-poverty neighborhoods that are more likely to be home to high-performing schools. Public housing authorities (PHAs), however, may have significant flexibility to set different standards in higher-cost areas, allowing for expanded access.

As noted earlier, significant increases in school quality occur most often when families move across school district lines (Theodos et al. forthcoming). Given that most school segregation occurs between different school districts (Reardon et al. 2000), it is desirable for voucher-holder families seeking educational opportunity to move across jurisdictions. However, these kinds of moves run up against the challenges of voucher portability, moving with a housing voucher from the jurisdiction of one public housing authority or administrating entity to another. Currently, there is little incentive and capacity for most PHAs to provide extensive support to families seeking to execute their portability option (HUD 2001). PHAs must face capacity-taxing reporting and coordination requirements in an environment of severe resource competition and minimal communication across PHAs (Greenlee 2011; Katz and Turner 2001). Even when families are sufficiently well-informed about the possibility of porting out, it remains challenging to ensure families fulfill the requirements of both the sending and receiving PHAs, leaving the option difficult to navigate and enact (DeLuca et al. 2013). Recently, however, HUD proposed rule changes that might help streamline the portability process and expand choices for families in the future (77 FR 18731).<sup>3</sup>

### **Recommended Pilot Program to Help Housing Voucher Families Enroll Their Children in High-Quality, Low-Poverty Schools**

From prior research, we know that a typical family using a Housing Choice Voucher does not relocate to a neighborhood with high-quality, low-poverty schools. Voucher households face various structural barriers, including housing market dynamics, that make it challenging to move to safe, low-poverty neighborhoods, and voucher administration rules and practices that further constrain choice sets. Unlike households with greater resources, voucher households often disentangle school considerations from residential decisions. Considerations such as proximity to transportation, family networks, jobs, and child care assume immediate practical importance. The contexts in which voucher-holder families make decisions also influence what they decide. Histories of cycling through the same unsafe, poor

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<sup>3</sup> Comments on the proposed rule change were completed in May 2012. A final rule is expected in 2014.

neighborhoods and interacting with weak educational institutions shape, in the eyes of voucher holders, what characteristics in communities and schools actually make a difference. Together with lack of access to high-quality information about what neighborhoods and schools are strong, this broad set of factors contributes to the residential patterns commonly observed among voucher holders.

In this section, we present a school-focused housing search assistance pilot demonstration that tests whether improved access and targeted information will encourage HCV households to lease-up in target neighborhoods and enroll their children in better schools. Unlike the Thomson Replacement Housing program, which couples housing assistance with other services to improve access to high-quality neighborhoods and schools, this demonstration tests whether families are more likely to lease-up in housing units served by good schools if targeted information is provided and key barriers to leasing-up are removed.

The following decisions need to be considered when designing a housing mobility and school information demonstration:

1. What are the demonstration treatment interventions? What is the theory of change?
2. What types of sites should participate in the demonstration, and how should target neighborhoods and schools be identified?
3. What will be the criteria for participant eligibility?
4. What are the key performance measures that the sites and housing authorities track?
5. How should the success of the demonstration be evaluated?
6. What is the cost of such a demonstration?

We address each of these questions below.

### ***1. Demonstration interventions and theory of change***

This demonstration project is informed by an integration of housing and education research. It aims to reduce key barriers for voucher households and improve information about housing and schools so families can improve their children's educational outcomes. Since opportunity neighborhoods are more likely to be distant and unfamiliar to voucher households, extensive information may be needed to help households select and relocate to such areas.

Moving to an improved neighborhood and attending a high-quality school are near-term changes that will theoretically improve a variety of outcomes in the short- and long-term for the entire family. Our goal is to increase the likelihood that demonstration participants will make those near-term changes. Longer-term outcomes, like improved academic outcomes, will be the subject of longer-term study.

Below is a tabular representation of our theory of change.

**Table 1: Theory of Change**

Intervention	Hypothesized outcomes (near term to longer term)			
<b>Expand Access</b>	Increased supply of landlords in neighborhoods with high-quality schools			
Perform outreach to landlords in target areas				
<b>Improve Information</b>	Increased information about available units in opportunity areas with high-quality schools	Increased lease-up rates in high-opportunity neighborhoods	Increased enrollment in high-quality schools	Improved academic outcomes for children
Provide information about the benefits of improved schools and neighborhoods				
Provide prescreened list of rental housing units (where the landlord has agreed to rent to voucher holders) in target neighborhoods				
Provide families with access to the prescreened list for any subsequent moves				

The treatment strategies fall into two main categories:

***Expanding Access***

To expand access to high-opportunity neighborhoods, the demonstration must tackle some of the structural barriers voucher holders face in finding units in neighborhoods with strong schools. The first strategy of this demonstration is landlord recruitment. The demonstration program will develop a list of rental units in the catchment areas of high-quality, low-poverty schools (specific criteria are detailed in subsequent sections) using data from major Internet sources, including Craigslist, SocialServe.com, and GoSection8.com. This list will be used to identify and reach out to property owners and managers who may or may not be aware of the HCV program. The demonstration will educate potential landlords about the benefits of participating in the HCV program—for example, that Housing Choice Vouchers provide a guaranteed funding stream. We believe that this step of landlord recruitment will be crucial to increase the supply of units in high-opportunity areas where landlords may be less informed about the HCV program or more resistant to leasing to voucher holders.

***Improving Information***

The second key strategy of this demonstration is the development and distribution of a structured package of information (an “opportunity package”) about units that fall in target areas served by high-performing, low-poverty schools. These packages will help marry residential and school decisions. Some housing authorities provide a list of vacant rental units that HCV participants can use as a basis for their housing search. Sometimes these lists are carefully vetted, with a focus on units in high-opportunity neighborhoods, but school information is rarely included, and the lists often include units in neighborhoods served by low-performing schools. This strategy will allow us to explore whether this

type of structured information on housing and schools together will help encourage voucher holders to relocate to higher-opportunity neighborhoods.

The package will include detailed information about the housing unit, the surrounding neighborhood, and the neighborhood schools, including images of the units and schools to make the differences between choices clearer. Engdahl (2009) recommends that school profiles include information about racial composition, test scores, free/reduced-price lunch participation, and an inventory of key resources, such as jobs programs, academic support programs, and scholarship opportunities.

The package will further provide general information about the benefits of improved schools on educational outcomes. It will also help address practical resource-related concerns that influence residential decisions, like transportation, child care, youth programs, grocery stores, and other important supports and amenities to assuage potential fears about moving to a new neighborhood.

To sustain participants' access to high-quality, low-poverty schools, the demonstration will provide families with access to the information package for any subsequent moves. This will increase the likelihood that their subsequent unit is in a target area.

## ***2. Potential sites and criteria for target opportunity neighborhoods***

This demonstration will select sites based on the following criteria:

- Local school enrollment policies based primarily on neighborhood boundaries, so residence would guarantee enrollment.
- Area public housing authorities or voucher administrating entities have the following characteristics:
  - *Run at the regional or state level* to avoid portability issues or *maintain agreements with neighboring PHAs* to lower portability barriers. This is necessary to facilitate moves across school district lines and/or jurisdictional boundaries (i.e., from urban to suburban communities).
  - *Set higher payment standards* or *willing to adopt higher payment standards* for high-cost areas, so families can have expanded access to opportunity neighborhoods.
  - *Large*, so they have the resources and capacity to implement this demonstration.
  - *Creative and flexible*, so they can work with landlords and collaborate with researchers
- Contains multiple neighborhoods that qualify as “high-opportunity” (criteria specified below).
- *Bonus*: Landlord discrimination on source of income is illegal.<sup>4</sup>

***Criteria for Target Neighborhoods.*** In other housing demonstration programs, high-opportunity neighborhoods have been identified using thresholds for race or poverty rate (i.e., no greater than 10 percent living in poverty or no more than 30 percent African American). Turner and colleagues (2012) have pointed to a broader set of criteria, including high labor force participation and high educational attainment.

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<sup>4</sup> The Poverty & Race Research Action Council maintains a list of state, local, and federal laws barring source of income discrimination. See <http://www.prrac.org/pdf/AppendixB.pdf> (updated April 2013).

While these criteria certainly point to important factors that shape or reflect neighborhood quality, this demonstration will employ the characteristics of a neighborhood’s school(s) as the foremost consideration in determining if a neighborhood is high-opportunity. Given the goal of this demonstration—to attract disadvantaged students to high-quality, low-poverty schools—we recommend two school-based criteria for eligibility:

1. The neighborhood school’s combined English language arts (ELA) and math proficiency rate on statewide standardized tests should be above the state median.
2. The Free and Reduced Meal (FARM) rate of the student body in the neighborhood school should also be used, as it is a proxy for poverty. Although our advisory panel was not in agreement on exactly how low the FARM rate of the school should be, a ceiling of 20 to 50 percent was recommended. It is important that the proportion of poor students be small enough to ensure that we are guiding families to high-performing, low-poverty schools. However, a too-low threshold could eliminate too many potential schools, neighborhoods, and housing units from consideration.

We recommend only using these criteria to simplify identifying neighborhoods and to zero in on neighborhoods with high-quality, low-poverty schools. High-opportunity neighborhoods, as operationalized in this demonstration, are the catchment areas (enrollment areas) corresponding to schools that meet these criteria.

We recognize that the chosen criteria are imperfect. Schwartz and colleagues (2011), for example, advocate expanding measures of school performance to go beyond standardized test scores, such as advanced course-taking, rate of being on track for graduation, satisfaction, academic challenge, and safety, along with adjusted indicators of performance based on student and school resources. However, the indicators that we are recommending are used across much of the existing literature and the data are widely available, reducing the implementation burden of identifying qualifying neighborhoods and schools. Depending on the sites that are ultimately selected for this study, we may recommend adding additional criteria based on the availability of more nuanced metrics at the local level.

### **3. Participant eligibility**

Any household with at least one elementary school–age child (age 5 to 10) that qualifies for an HCV would qualify to participate in the demonstration. Since older low-income youth are more likely to be decisionmakers on their schooling and often deprioritize a school’s academic performance (Condliffe et al. forthcoming) this demonstration will target households with children young enough for parents to remain the primary decisionmakers.

Participants will be selected from one of the following three sources, depending on whether new vouchers can be funded for this pilot demonstration.

**Voucher Waiting List.** Many housing authorities across the country report having long waiting lists of households that have applied and qualified for housing assistance but have not yet obtained it. Some have been on a waiting list for a long time, while others have priority standing due to acute and immediate needs as a result of homelessness, domestic violence, or mental or physical illness. If new

vouchers are funded for this pilot demonstration, households with elementary school–age children will be selected from the waiting list and assigned to a treatment or control group. The benefit of selecting participants from this list is that the selection could be randomized within the subset of the waiting list. The downside of drawing participants from this population is the added cost associated with funding and administering more vouchers.

***Voucher Transfer List.*** Some housing authorities report large numbers of existing voucher holders requesting transfers to live in different units or different neighborhoods. These households currently rent their homes with vouchers but seek to change their current arrangement. If new vouchers are not funded for this pilot demonstration, households with elementary school–age children with existing vouchers will be selected from the transfer list and randomly assigned to a treatment or control group. The benefit of selecting participants from this pool would be that eligible households are already familiar with how the voucher program operates and have shown that they are capable of leasing-up. With this population, the likelihood of success may be higher. Of course, this positive may also be considered a negative; households on the voucher transfer list may constitute a self-selected group of more highly motivated or discerning households, generating a sample that is not representative of the general pool of voucher households. People may also enter the transfer list with a unit already in mind. If this is the case, the interventions may be less effective because voucher holders may have already made up their minds about where to move.

***Recertification.*** Another potential group from which demonstration participants may be drawn is voucher households that are about to be up for their annual recertification or that are currently going through recertification. Some of these families may be interested in moving but not ready to request a transfer until they have identified a new unit. The benefit of this source is that families will already be accustomed to leasing with a voucher, and they may be more open to moving to prescreened units than had they already started looking on their own. On the other hand, this source would also yield many families content with their current living situations. Not only would exploring changes in school and neighborhood quality with these families make them potentially uneasy, the demonstration would also likely need to expend more resources to secure a large enough sample to complete an effective outcome evaluation.

#### ***4. Key performance measures***

We propose the following key performance measures to track the implementation and success of the demonstration:

- Proportion of families leasing-up in a target neighborhood
- Proportion of families enrolling their children in high-quality, low-poverty schools
- Proportion of children in high-quality, low-poverty schools after two years

The following student-level outcomes should be the subject of longer-term research:

- Growth in test scores
- High school completion
- Decrease in truancy, suspension, and expulsion

## ***5. Evaluation methodology***

We recommend a multistage evaluation that focuses first on how well sites are able to implement the demonstration through a process study. A rigorous outcome evaluation should follow, testing if the interventions improved student outcomes. The demonstration will be a randomized control trial, with a treatment group that receives the prescreened list of “opportunity packages” and a control group that either receives no guidance or receives the regular list of available rental units (following the local PHA’s standard practice).

The process study will examine how successful housing authorities are in enrolling children in the treatment group in high-quality, low-poverty schools. Its primary aim will be to determine if the interventions promote moves to higher-opportunity neighborhoods. It will include stakeholder interviews with public housing authority officials and staff, landlords, and school officials; observations of the housing authority staff working with demonstration participants; and in-depth interviews with a sample of participating families. It will also rely on administrative data collected by the housing authority and the relevant school district(s) to assess how many families are leased-up in opportunity neighborhoods and enrolled in strong schools. We will analyze the costs associated with achieving the key outcomes outlined earlier.

The outcome evaluation will examine the effect of attending a high-quality, low-poverty school on a range of academic and behavioral outcomes. School districts will collect identified individual-level student administrative data to track school enrollment, attendance, and academic outcomes over time.

## ***6. Cost of implementing the demonstration for the public housing authority or voucher administrating entity***

The costs of implementing the demonstration include the following:

1. Landlord outreach specialist (\$100k)
  - a. Communicates the advantages of participating in the HCV Program to individual landlords, property managers, and other interested parties in target areas
  - b. Attends meetings and visits apartment complexes in target areas
  - c. Facilitates the listing/registration of new properties in target areas
2. Resource specialist (\$50k x 2 = \$100k)  
Creates “opportunity packages” for HCV participants, including
  - a. Photographs of rental units and schools
  - b. Data on rental units, schools, and neighborhoods from data analyst
3. Data analyst (\$40–50k)  
Links school and neighborhood data to rental units obtained from landlord outreach specialist and GreatSchools.com
4. Administrative support (\$50k)  
Compensation for public housing authorities or voucher administrating entities for administrative costs that they might incur from participating in the demonstration
5. Technical assistance (\$75k)
  - a. Provides neighborhood and school data

- b. Develops data systems to track demonstration participants; tracking software may cost an additional \$35–50k
- 6. Supplemental funding for vouchers in target areas (amount to be determined)  
New vouchers are not required for this demonstration; however, security deposits or last month's rent may increase landlord participation

## Next Steps

We recommend that this demonstration be developed in at least three stages:

**Stage 1:** Identify specific places that meet the site selection criteria. The aim is to identify places with neighborhood-based school assignment policies and large HCV programs that serve both cities and suburbs. We have identified some existing resources that will be helpful for this task, including the Brookings Education Choice and Competition Index.

We will also determine the maximum FARM rate (between 20 and 50 percent) that will be used to identify low-poverty schools. The goal is to identify schools that exhibit higher levels of parental involvement, highly skilled teaching, and positive peer effects. We will scan the literature for suggested thresholds and determine an appropriate threshold based on local context.

**Stage 2:** Conduct a feasibility assessment to explore the possibility of implementing the demonstration in one or two of the sites identified in stage 1. This would involve developing a relationship with the local housing authority or voucher implementation entity; compiling school and neighborhood data; and learning about current housing counseling practices, including examining what resources are available to HCV participants, what the process for transfers looks like, and what landlord recruitment strategies already exist.

**Stage 3:** Fully develop the demonstration and evaluation with a randomized control trial design in one of the sites studied in stage 2. Information gathered from the feasibility study will be incorporated into the study design.

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