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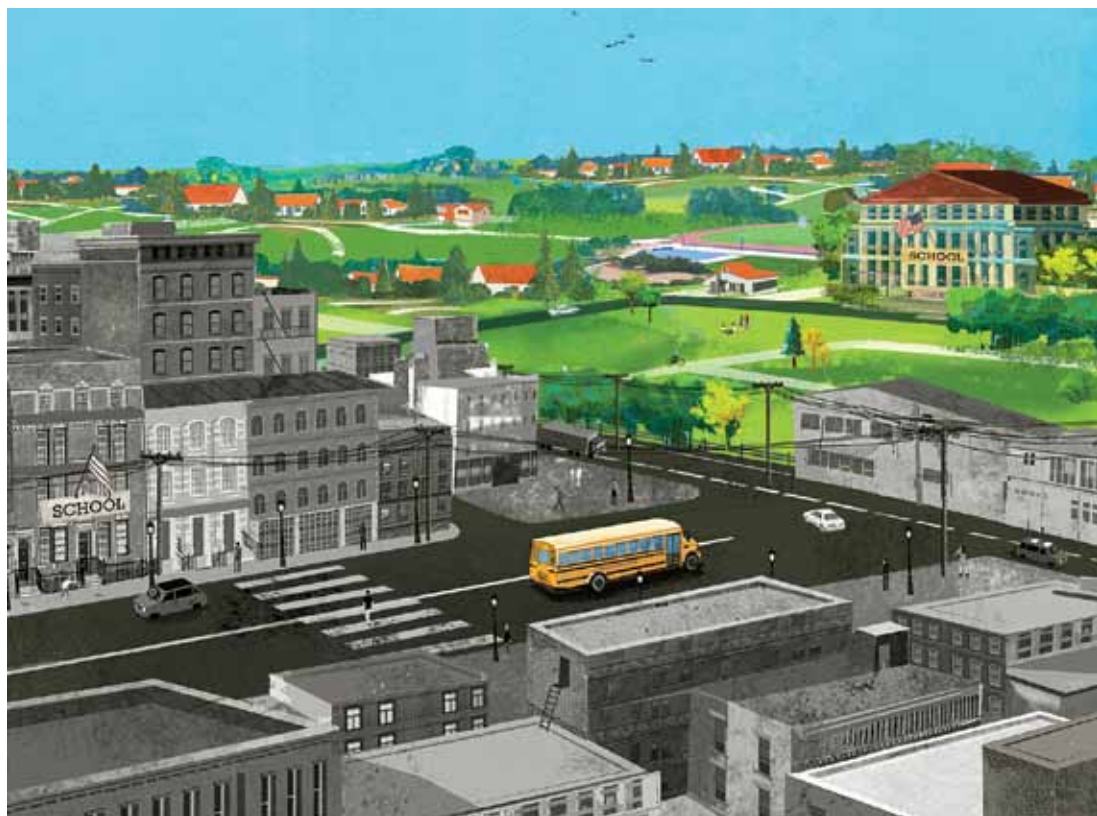
Debating School Choice

DURING THE U.S. Bicentennial in 1976, *Boston Herald American* photographer Stanley Forman, NF '80, snapped a spot photo of a white man assailing a black man with a pole bearing the American flag. While the nation celebrated its founding revolution, Boston in the 1970s was undergoing a different kind of revolution. "The Soiling of Old Glory," as the image was later titled when submitted for the Pulitzer Prize, shocked Bostonians: the African American was Ted Landsmark, a civil-rights attorney, and his attacker, Joseph Rakes, a protester against the court-ordered desegregation of Boston public schools, which sparked years of racially motivated violence across the city. The desegregation plan eventually proved very successful at busing students across the city, but measuring busing's success in improving educational outcomes for students is not as simple.

One goal of social science is to inject rationality into public debates, like the school-choice question, that have been animated by particularist passions

and untested social theories. Evidence-based research has produced divergent data on the effectiveness of school-choice systems (which aim to equalize education access by allowing families to choose among schools in their district) over neighborhood-based schools. Under choice systems, families typically compete for seats at the best schools through a lottery, an admissions test, or some other

mechanism. Boston's busing system shared the same goal: delink children's neighborhoods from the quality of their education and integrate the schools. (The city abandoned much of the system in favor of more neighborhood-based school assignment in 2013.) Choice's success depends heavily on the characteristics of the cities where it's implemented and the mechanics of each system—and a good deal more on factors that researchers don't yet understand. Recent contributions by visiting professor of economics Parag Pathak and Larsen professor of public policy Christopher Avery suggest that even if school choice could work exactly as intended, the policy may



harm the disadvantaged students whom it's designed to help.

A recent paper models a choice system that assigns schools according to families' preferences, allotting seats at more sought-after schools by lottery. Parents would compete for access to the best schools, so that each school would not only reflect the socioeconomic mix of the community but also become perfectly equal—and average—in quality, Avery explains. But such a

Even if school choice could work exactly as intended, it might harm the very students it's designed to help.

result, the model shows, would encourage wealthy families to abandon the system for better-than-average schools that are either private or in another district—a “flight” phenomenon widely documented already.

Pathak and Avery also show a second mechanism—the effect of school quality on home prices—that forces flight not by wealthy families, but by the poor. “When you introduce school choice, school quality compresses...so the house-price distribution compresses as well,” Pathak says, meaning that low-income families are priced out of their own neighborhoods as the schools in their community improve. Home values reflect differences in school quality so faithfully that prices spike and fall along district boundaries. “You see this at the border between [the Boston public school system] and Brookline...if the houses are almost identical, they're still very different prices because people perceive the schools to be much higher quality in Brookline,” he explains.

In reality, though, researchers know that school choice hasn't worked this way. Because of variation in families' school preferences, imperfect information, test-based admissions systems that favor advantaged students, and other frictions, cities that have embraced choice systems are very far from producing perfectly equal schools. In some cases, school lotteries *do* help underserved students gain access to top schools. What, then, of the model? “What happens in practice is, we think,



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some combination of things,” Avery suggests. Real-life choice systems resemble something between neighborhood schools and a perfect-competition choice system. If schools remain sufficiently unequal, then people can afford to continue to live where they’re living. Says Avery, “It’s sort of a paradox.”

Still, the model suggests that the assumptions driving the rationale for school choice may be wrong, given a private housing market where home prices are tied to perceived school quality. Even in a best-case scenario that assumes away the other logistical frictions of school choice, the home-price force still produces unequal outcomes. “The most surprising thing coming out of that analysis,” Pathak

explains, “is the possibility that—even though you have made the lowest-quality school better—you actually haven’t helped the intended beneficiary,” whose family is priced out of that school’s district.

Perhaps this shouldn’t be surprising, because the school-choice movement treats high-quality education as a scarce resource best allocated by a free market. If good schools are a scarce resource, then only some children can access them—and they tend to come from wealthy families who find ways to game the system in their favor. “If left unchecked,” Avery says, “natural forces seem to run in the direction of making [good] schools more accessible to the wealthy.”

One reading of the busing riots that

erupted in Boston four decades ago might be as a conflict over scarce resources. Rather than ask how to distribute high-quality schools equitably, the researchers suggest, the better question may be how to create more very good schools, so that a good education isn’t a scarce resource at all. “However we do it,” Avery says, “we have to get to a point where *where* you live isn’t so connected to the quality of your school.”

—MARINA BOLOTNIKOVA

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PEDAGOGY MEETS PRACTICE

Fighting for Veterans, Learning the Law

THE LETTER ARRIVED right on time—and for Wilson Ausmer Jr., that turned out to be a very bad thing. It was 2011, and Ausmer, a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, was in Afghanistan, serving his second tour of duty overseas. The decorated soldier had already paid a personal price to serve his country: he suffered from headaches, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to his time on the battlefield, and had incurred a significant foot injury as well.

The letter, mailed to his home in Missouri, contained invaluable information on how he could file an appeal for military disability compensation. It also stated that he had to respond within 120 days of receipt.

Ausmer wouldn’t return home for another five months. By the time

Daniel Nagin, faculty director of the clinic (right), and Andrew Roach, J.D. ’13, meet with a veteran in Jamaica Plain.

he read the letter, he’d lost his one chance to appeal his benefits case. The Veterans Benefits Administration wasn’t going to help him—but a trio of Harvard Law School (HLS) students did. Bradley Hinshelwood, J.D. ’14, Juan Arguello, J.D. ’15, and Christopher Melendez, J.D. ’15, took up Ausmer’s case, arguing, among other things, that the clock on an appeals claim should start only after a veteran has returned home, rather

than when a letter arrives in his or her hometown mailbox.

The student lawyers became involved in Ausmer’s case in 2013, while interning at the HLS Veterans Law and Disability Benefits Clinic, within the school’s WilmerHale Legal Services Center (LSC). Each semester since 2012, when the clinic was established in Boston’s Jamaica Plain neighborhood, about 30 students have assisted veterans with legal cases, winning verdicts of local and national importance.

Ausmer’s student defenders presented their case to a panel of three judges from the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims who were visiting Harvard as part of its annual educational outreach. The panel’s January 2014 ruling in the students’ favor marked a landmark victory. It allowed recently discharged veterans like Ausmer, whose ability to file an appeal is “materially affected”

