

## Cover Letter

Most changes in this policy memo were very superficial. I think that I had all the ideas in my head writing this memo initially but failed to translate them to the page. Reading Ms. Lemma's feedback was very useful as it not only told me what failed to translate but also how to re-iterate what I was saying into the context of this PPL class. This included rephrasing the criteria to be in terms of effectiveness and optics, criteria "types" that were emphasized in Pennock's guide. Further, I wrote more explicitly on the trade-offs and comparisons between the policy alternatives.

Most of the changes I made were in the scope of what Ms. Lemma suggested so I think I should score significantly higher with this one. Especially with the problem statement, honing it down and adding some good statistics to it made me feel better. Also, the constructive power of just putting these ideas into words was amazing. Consolidating and re-stating my ideas was very powerful in aligning the spine of my memo so that the solutions I suggested were in-line with the problems I identified.

My only wish is that I could write more on this topic. Like ~5 pages would be good just so I could drum up the implications of what I'm writing about. It's a weighty topic that I don't do justice to in the pittance of space I have. The intertwining between American socioeconomics and the system built to segregate it is a long, arduous unwinding.

I think the memo is still weak in focusing on the stakeholders. A lot of the stakeholders are implied with only an explicit mention in the background. Loudoun County residents and other constituencies that are familiar with this problem and encounter this memo will have a good understanding of the underlying implications in the problem. Additionally, focusing on such a tight subset of the parties is advantageous to me because of the lack of space I have here. If I were to carve out space for each party, my underlying argument would be degraded.

TO: Ian Jeffrey Serotkin, Vice-Chair Loudoun County School Board  
FROM: Sidhardh Burre, Policy Analyst  
DATE: 2/13/2022  
RE: Selection Procedure for the Academies of Loudoun

### Executive Summary

After an NAACP investigation on the Academies of Loudoun (ACL) admissions process found discriminatory bias, the LCPS board implemented a new admissions process. This change resulted in a degradation of the ACL student experience and no meaningful positive effect for the discriminatees. Policy criteria on solutions to this issue include the effectiveness in improving K-12 outcomes for disadvantaged students across the county, the ability for ACL to maintain its education value, and whether the solution maintains good optics with civil groups. The alternative solutions include maintaining the status quo; reverting to the legacy admissions process, class size, and diverting excess funds to under-performing schools; and providing extra-curricular support to all ACL students. The recommended policy alternative is to revert to the legacy admissions process and provide additional funding for schools that serve minority students. This option has the potential to organically improve the situations of said students (satisfying the first criterion), maintaining optics with civil groups (third criterion), as well as the ability to fix the ACL admissions issue without degrading ACL's cohort strength (the second criterion).

### Background Problem Statement

As Loudoun County has grown, non-white students have grown from 42% approximately 20 years ago to nearly 56% (Loudoun County Public Schools, 2022). This has left LCPS amid a racially charged maelstrom concerning educational outcomes for minority students (Blitz, n.d.). Specifically, this issue came to head when the **Loudoun County NAACP requested an investigation into the admissions processes within the ACL.**

Historically, minorities have been under-represented in the ACL student body. In the 2018-19 application cycle, **only one African American applicant out of 65 total applicants were accepted** (Cline, 2019). This issue is of great interest to Civil Action groups, Loudoun County residents, and students, an interest only piqued by the expense that ACL presents. **Per student, magnet schools pay an extra \$5,000 dollars**, elevating this issue into the purview of many civil groups (Brabrand, 2020). Despite community push-back, the LCPS board decided to change the Academy's admissions procedure due to the NAACP findings.

In the new admissions system, students that exceed a pre-determined test score are placed into a pool. **Finalists are randomly selected** from the pool based on quotas allotted to individual high schools. This change has improved representation **at the cost of increased drop-out rates and a slower pace of teaching for teachers.** Failing to help the same students this change was intended to help. With the difference in SAT scores between schools serving poor Hispanic students and better off Asian students increasing ~4% points post admissions change, the LCPS school board's approach to assisting minority students (by changing ACL admissions processes) is still too cursory in nature creating a large differential in performance across demographic boundaries.

## Criteria

Each policy will be evaluated based on three criteria:

1. Effectiveness of improving post K-12 outcomes for disadvantaged students across Loudoun County in the long term as measured by standardized test scores. Alternatives with high potential effectiveness in standardized test score improvements will be ranked highly.
2. The ability for ACL to continue to maintain a high cohort caliber as measured by dropout rates. Alternatives that mitigate dropout rates and prepare students sufficiently for upper-level courses will be highly ranked.
3. Whether the selected policy alternative provides good optics in the view of the NAACP and other civil groups. Alternatives that could potentially come under fire from civil groups will be ranked lowly.

## Policy Alternatives

### Alternative 1:

**This alternative would maintain the status quo and make no changes to the current admissions process, maintaining the policies set as a response to the NAACP investigation.**

After the admissions process change, the difference in average SAT scores increased between the best and worst performing schools by ~4%, a trend that has only continued to persist (LCPS Dashboards, n.d.). Ranking low on the first criteria. Further, according to teachers interviewed at the school, after the admissions process change, there was an increased rate of hemorrhage in the student body >8 students a year (formerly <1) as well as a decreased teaching rate. With the current cohort, the same material took 1.5x longer to cover as with prior cohorts (Anonymous Teacher, 2022). Forcing a poor score on the second criterion. But, in terms of the third criterion, this alternative scores highly simply because neither the NAACP nor other civil groups have raised an issue to the change and seem to be content with the current policy.

### Alternative 2:

**Reverting to the prior admissions process and class size as well as divert the added funds to the feeder schools of the worst-performing high schools.** This entails reverting to the pre-2021 admissions cycle process, featuring SAT score, teacher recommendations, essays, and portfolio review by ACL faculty. Further, this includes reverting the class size and diverting excess funds to low-level schools that serve disadvantaged populations. This solution is the highest ranked in the first criteria. If funds were diverted to the elementary schools that feed into lower performing high schools, each dollar invested has the potential to generate between \$4-\$12 in return as opposed to \$2-\$6 if the same value were invested at the high-school level (The Center for High Impact Philanthropy, 2015). By targeting the lowest level of education, this diversion of funds could improve post K-12 outcomes and as a byproduct improve ACL admissions competitiveness permanently. This outcome is highly favorable as it nearly-ensures that a greater number of lower-income disadvantaged students will be able to benefit as opposed to the very few disadvantaged students that are admitted to the ACL and may or may not benefit, forcing the

highest ranking in terms of the first criterion. In terms of the second criterion, historically, ACL, other magnet schools (TJHSST), and colleges maintained a consistent track-record of minimal dropout rates using the legacy admissions system. This suggests that this alternative scores well in the second criterion. This alternative could come under fire depending on how the newly reallocated funds are used. Depending on their effectiveness in addressing the socioeconomic performance disparities, civil groups and LC residents may have a range of reactions. Producing a variable score in the third criterion.

Alternative 3:

**Provide greater funding to ACL to improve the student-faculty ratio and provide greater support to ACL students such as extra-curricular support and dedicated counselors.** By increasing funding to the academies, to accommodate more faculty and staff, the student-faculty ratio that fell with the admissions change can be improved. This alternative only has a middling score in the first criterion because it does not address the needs of under-privileged students across the county, focusing only on students already in ACL. While this alternative could provide a “trickle-down” effect ACL students return to their home-schools and elevate the performances of their peers, this effect seems unlikely, leading to a low score in the first criterion. For the second criterion, this alternative is scores highly, because by providing greater support for ACL students, students are less likely to dropout even when these students are disadvantaged (Fitzpatrick & Schneider, 2016). Further, by providing strong support for such students, the LCPS board demonstrates a reaffirmation of their determination in assisting disadvantaged students, potentially gaining superior optics in the view of civil rights groups compared to even alternative 1.

Recommendation

Of these alternatives, considering the given criteria, **the second policy alternative seems most favorable.** Although this alternative concedes a high ranking in the third criterion to both other alternatives in the short-term, this alternative is the only alternative that works to ensure that no recurring investigations will require drastic changes to ACL admissions on the part of the LCPS board. Further, while alternative 3 may possess the greatest potential to address criterion two, the second alternative is a tried-and-true method of ensuring that each ACL cohort is up to snuff. Finally, in terms of the first criteria, this alternative most directly addresses the fundamental socio-economic disparities that have plagued LCPS, providing a silver bullet instead of a band-aid solution (alternative 1) or an uncertain effect (alternative 2).

To implement the second alternative, civil groups and other coalitions must be convinced that the selected alternative is the optimal course of action. Further, if LCPS and other magnet school counties were to conduct research and pursue a similar course of action, it may be possible to add greater weight to the recommendation. The premise of this solution is that it supports students before they come to ACL. To be more specific, **ACL admissions would be inherently more well-distributed and fairer if the students who applied were better prepared for the admissions process.** By improving the K-8 education experience, via increased funding directed towards higher teacher salaries to attract more capable teachers, this would enable ACL admissions to continue to be highly selective without being racially biased.

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