

# IMAGINE ONE PARK HILL

Imagine One Park Hill is a project to engage the community in understanding and developing solutions to a serious challenge facing our neighborhood:

**How will the Greater Park Hill neighborhood (GPH) celebrate diversity and create equity and inclusion throughout the neighborhood's elementary schools?**



This brief and accompanying video, prepared by Park Hill Neighbors for Equity in Education (PHNEE), describe how enrollment at the four ECE-5 schools in GPH – Hallett Academy, Park Hill Elementary,

Smith Elementary and Stedman Elementary – is a major driver of inequity due to school boundaries and capacity, school choice, the school rating system and student-based budgeting.

## What is Equity?

Equity is not the same as equality. Whereas equality means treating everyone the same, equity ensures that students have the support they need to be successful, depending on their own unique circumstances. Inclusion demands that schools are welcoming environments for all students and their families and that curriculum and instruction is culturally responsive to the students in the classroom.

PHNEE, formed in August 2017, is a group of engaged parents and community members working to ensure that all students attending our neighborhood's elementary schools get a quality education and an equitable opportunity to thrive. Our goal is for each of our neighborhood schools to provide a high quality, equitable and inclusive education imbued with our historical neighborhood values of fairness, respect for diversity, and social justice for all. PHNEE invites the community's feedback and ideas through in-person engagement sessions and online at [www.phnee.org](http://www.phnee.org).

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## Background and History

In the years immediately after World War II, African Americans began to purchase homes in what was then an almost exclusively white Park Hill neighborhood. As happened in similar communities throughout the country, realtors and banks resisted the change through blockbusting, redlining and racist lending practices. In 1960, a coalition of Park Hill churches and other neighborhood residents established the Park Hill Action Committee, later renamed Greater Park Hill Community (GPHC), to work toward integration of the community and fair housing practices.

GPHC organized neighborhood events to foster awareness and address issues that threatened to divide the community, including school segregation. In the mid-1960's, Rachel Noel, a Park Hill resident, became the first African American to serve on the Denver school board. Noel's 1968 resolution, calling for a plan to integrate Denver's schools, initially carried the board, only to lose support after a subsequent election. That reversal precipitated a lawsuit, *Keyes vs. School District No. 1*, that resulted in court-ordered desegregation throughout DPS, including through the use of busing.

After the case was terminated in 1995, the district moved to a student assignment system based on neighborhood schools and choice. Given the lack of integration in the city's neighborhoods, and the inequitable access to choice without transportation, Denver's schools today, including here in GPH, are more segregated than they were before the *Keyes* case.

In March 2017, the DPS Board of Education unanimously passed The Resolution for Strengthening Neighborhoods, affirming its commitment to "operating and maintaining high-quality, socio-economically integrated schools" and its belief that "high-quality, integrated schools not only offer the best educational outcomes for our children but also serve a vital function in promoting and sustaining vibrant neighborhoods."

Achieving equitable, integrated, inclusive schools in GPH has become more difficult in recent years due to rapidly changing demographics, rising home prices, and the lack of a systematic approach to affordable housing and inclusive economic development. In addition, our neighborhood is affected by the increasing impact of racial divisiveness on our society as a whole. GPH is still a naturally diverse neighborhood, with about half students of color and half low-income students, and yet most elementary schools are segregated by race and socio-economic status.

PHNEE believes that our schools offer one of the best ways to revitalize our neighborhood. Research indicates that children who grow up in diverse, inclusive and equitable environments, including their schools, are more successful, exhibit less bias, and are more effective as adults and community leaders.

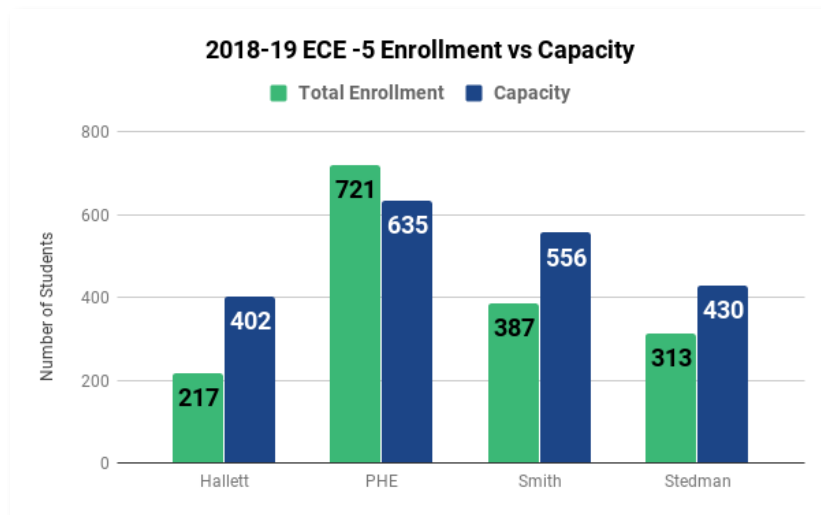
**Now, more than ever, we need such leaders.**

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## School Capacity & Boundaries

In GPH, as throughout DPS, students are guaranteed enrollment at a neighborhood school (or enrollment zone) based on their home address. These boundary assignments have not been changed in many years and, as shown in the chart below, three of our schools have greater capacity than enrollment and one is over-enrolled. Small schools can offer small class sizes and more personalized instruction but struggle with resources. Large schools may be well-resourced but class sizes are larger and space for special programs is limited.

Hallett Academy became the most seriously under-enrolled school in GPH through a series of programmatic and leadership changes. The school was closed along with 7 others in 2007 due to enrollment declines and its boundary was distributed to Smith and Stedman. Then, in 2009, the district moved the Fundamental magnet school, previously housed at Knight Academy in Belcaro, into Hallett. Magnet schools are intended to attract students from across the district and, therefore, have no boundaries.

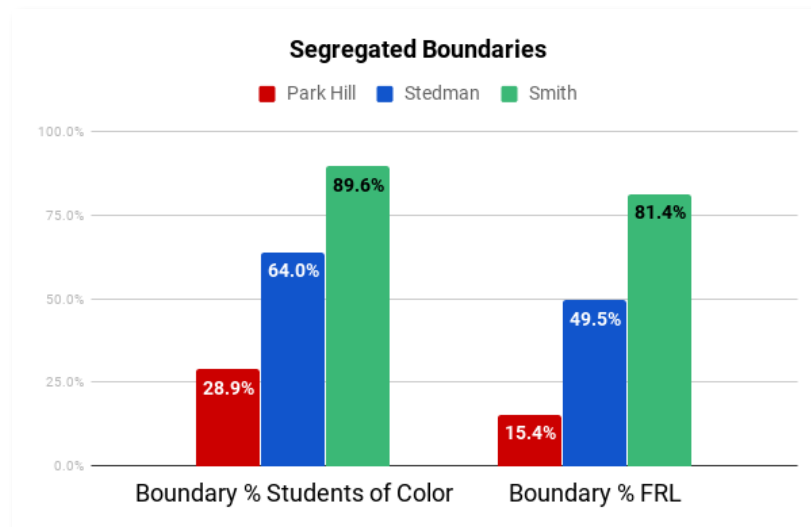


Over the years, the magnet program became less popular and, in 2017, the current principal took over a seriously under-enrolled and under-performing school with the intent to revitalize it. Today, with no students assigned to the school, Hallett is at a disadvantage when it comes to generating sufficient enrollment. The school is required to spend a significant share of its resources (already limited due to its small enrollment) simply encouraging children to enroll.

Meanwhile, Park Hill Elementary's (PHE) boundary was expanded in 2010 when Phillips Elementary was closed to make way for a charter school, Odyssey School of Denver. Now serving a boundary with over 800 elementary-aged DPS students, nearly 200 students above its capacity, PHE is over-enrolled, with average class sizes of nearly 30 students, space constraints, and a significant portion of its larger

budget spent on paraprofessionals and other staff to reduce the student-to-staff ratio. As time goes on, if class size should exceed 35, the district can implement its "overflow procedures" and deny a new student moving into the boundary admission to the school.

Under court-ordered desegregation between 1973 and 1995, schools were required to maintain balance between students of color and white students. Following termination of the case, the district returned to a system of neighborhood schools and began the school choice process in place today. Then, as now, neighborhoods were segregated and the district did not impose any racial or socio-economic requirements for enrollment in the choice process, nor did it provide universally accessible transportation.



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## School Choice

Although students are guaranteed a seat in a neighborhood school, they may also choose any other school in the district, including a charter school, an innovation school, or simply a different neighborhood school, assuming there is space and they can provide their own transportation. In the 2018-19 school year, 662 GPH elementary-aged students chose a DPS school outside of the neighborhood. And 279 students from outside GPH chose to attend one of the neighborhood schools here.

School choice as a method of school assignment was popularized beginning in the 1990s as part of an education reform movement promising to improve the system through free-market approaches. Although it is hard to argue with the concept of allowing parents to choose the right educational environment for their child, choice, especially when it isn't universally accessible, comes with consequences to individual schools and to the system as a whole.

School choice favors wealthier families due to the need for internet access and extra time to research and visit schools. And because transportation to and from school is not universally provided, school choice limits options for many families who can't drive their children on a daily basis.

Additionally, while school choice is promoted as a way to opt-in to a school that a family might prefer, it is often used as a way to opt-out of the neighborhood school because families believe the school is "bad" or "underperforming". The problem is that families are often basing these decisions on misleading and incomplete information as described below.

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## School Rating System

Although some parents tour multiple schools, talk to teachers and administrators, and other parents, many parents rely heavily on the district's school rating system known as the School Performance Framework (SPF) when choosing a school. Unfortunately, the SPF is based largely on the results of standardized tests which correlate tightly with wealth and whiteness. So, while the SPF can tell you something about the overall student demographics at a school, it tells you very little about how any individual student will perform on state tests.

Furthermore, there are many aspects of an education that are not captured in a standardized test including factors such as culturally responsive curriculum, school climate, authentic and empowered parent involvement, teacher-to-student ratio, and racial and ethnic representation of teachers. This information is neither part of the SPF nor easy to find. This results in parents opting out of a school without an accurate picture of how that school might serve their child.

Given that those with more existing advantage are more likely to make use of school choice, the incomplete nature of the school rating system may result in more of those students leaving lower rated schools, often leaving behind the most vulnerable and marginalized students, resulting in even greater inequity for them.

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## Student Based Budgeting

DPS allocates funding to schools according to a policy known as "Student Based Budgeting" (SBB). This means that schools receive funding based on the number of students enrolled; the more students, the more dollars a school receives to pay for teachers, support staff, technology, and so forth.

The district's SBB formula recognizes that providing an equitable education to all kids requires different investments based on the needs of the students and allocates more funding for low-income students (those qualifying for free-or-reduced price lunch, or FRL), those with special learning needs, English language learners, or students identified as gifted and talented. Additionally, the district provides budgetary supplements for small schools, an acknowledgement of the challenge of fully staffing a school with low enrollment.

This approach to funding schools may seem fair – more kids require more funding and kids whom our educational system has traditionally struggled to serve need and deserve even more funding. But, in reality, the extra funds, largely allocated on a per-student basis, do not cover the actual need and the lack of economies of scale facing small schools is not mitigated by the small school supplements provided.



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## Putting It All Together

School enrollment policies create a vicious cycle for schools serving our most disadvantaged students in GPH. Fueled by outdated school boundaries and a flawed school rating system, these schools lose enrollment and the associated resources that come with each student, making it even harder for them to meet the educational needs of each child, leading to lower scores on the school rating system and further eroding enrollment and funding.

As a community, we can break this cycle and ensure that each of our schools is fully enrolled with a student body that reflects the entire neighborhood and that benefits all kids, regardless of race or income level.



Third-graders from all 4 GPH elementary schools enjoyed One Park Hill Day in May 2019.

Please join in this effort by going to [PHNEE.org](http://PHNEE.org) to provide feedback or to request facilitation for your own community engagement session in your school, office, church, or other organization.