



# THE NYC HIGH SCHOOL ADMISSIONS STUDY

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## Background

School choice policies aim to reduce inequality in educational outcomes by allowing families to access schools outside their own neighborhood. For this potential to be realized, however, families need information and resources to identify, apply, and gain admission to high-performing schools. Prior research has found that disadvantaged families are more likely to lack these resources and fare worse in the school choice process than their more advantaged counterparts. Our work has found this to be true in New York City, which operates the largest public high school choice program in the country.

## High School Choice in NYC

In New York City, every 8<sup>th</sup> grader is required to submit an application ranking up to 12 high school choices. The sheer number of options—more than 750 academic programs in 440 high schools citywide—is daunting. Adding another layer of complexity, programs vary in their admissions methods and priorities, which affect a student's odds of admission to each school. Academically screened programs consider grades, test scores, attendance, and other criteria, while non-screened programs prioritize residential location or attendance at a school fair or open house.

Our analysis of high school applications in NYC finds that disadvantaged students—including free lunch eligible, black and Hispanic, and students who do not speak English at home—are more likely to choose and subsequently match (be assigned) to high schools with lower graduation rates. This pattern partly reflects residential segregation, geographic accessibility to quality schools, and gaps in prior achievement which differentially affect access to screened schools. However, if system complexity and lack of information are part of the explanation for the gaps we observe, simple and customized information about how the process works and available choices may help level the playing field.

## The NYC High School Admissions Study

Since 2014-15, our team has been developing, implementing, and evaluating a range of informational interventions designed to help disadvantaged students in NYC make more informed high school choices. The aim of these interventions is for students to choose and enroll in higher-performing schools that help them succeed, reducing educational inequality and the impact of family background on life outcomes. This work, funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, Spencer Foundation, Smith Richardson Foundation, and Heckscher Foundation for Children, has involved analyses of historical data on high school choices in NYC, surveys and interviews with guidance counselors, parents, and middle schoolers, and field experiments in over 400 middle schools.

## Our Informational Interventions

Following a pilot study in 2014-15, we conducted a randomized experiment in 165 high-poverty NYC middle schools during the 2015-16 school year. These schools collectively serve nearly 20,000 8<sup>th</sup> graders. The experiment assigned participating schools to a control group or to one of three intervention groups. All intervention groups received a custom list (called "Fast Facts") of 30 high schools with a graduation rate of 70% or higher and within 45 minutes by public transportation from the middle school. Two of the groups also received supplemental lists highlighting academically non-selective high schools or high schools organized by interest area. The former was invited to sign up for text message reminders of open houses and information sessions where attendance would provide admissions priority to the student.

In 2016-17 and 2017-18, we expanded the experiment to more than 400 NYC middle schools. In this case, we delivered toolkits to school counselors that included variations on Fast Facts, links to web resources, as well as printed materials for counselors and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and their parents. Participating schools were randomly assigned to a control group or

to one of several intervention groups. The primary aims of the “scale up” study were: (1) to examine the effects of our interventions at scale; (2) to test our interventions with a broader population of students from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds; (3) to assess whether informational interventions are as effective when delivered through guidance counselors rather than to students themselves; and (4) to test the relative efficacy of paper versus digital delivery of information. Districts offering school choice typically provide information about school options to students and their families, but we know little about how this information should be presented, or whether disadvantaged families will access and use web-based tools. To address this question, we provided Fast Facts in two formats: printed sheets and a website customized for the middle school. In lieu of Fast Facts, two intervention groups received guided introductions to one of two other digital resources: the NYC DOEs “School Finder” website and the NYC High School Admissions Guide, a smartphone and web-based app developed jointly by the Heckscher Foundation for Children and our team.

### FAST FACTS

ABOUT YOUR NEARBY HIGH SCHOOL CHOICE OPTIONS

This table shows 4-year graduation rates, admissions methods, and page number in the 2014-15 Directory of NYC Public High Schools for 30 high schools that are a short trip from your middle school on public transportation:

School Name	Borough	Grad. Rate	Minutes by MTA	Page #	Admission Methods
Bronx Early College Academy for Teaching & Learning	Bronx	93.6	21	36	Screened
The Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science	Bronx	88.5	24	135	Limited unscreened
Bronx High School for Medical Science	Bronx	87.7	12	42	Screened

**12** You may list up to 12 schools on your High School Application form.

For more details about these schools and programs, and other schools and programs not on this list, see the New York City High School Directory and <http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/High/Resources/default.htm>

### ADMISSIONS METHODS

METHOD	DESCRIPTION	WHAT DO I NEED TO DO?
<b>AUDITION</b>	Students are ranked by the school based on an audition (for example, art, design, and performing arts programs) and a review of their academic record.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compare your grades and test scores to those used by the school to rank students.</li> <li>Schedule an audition!</li> <li>Find out what else is required to apply, if anything (essay, interview, etc.).</li> </ul>
<b>SCREENED</b>	Students are ranked by the school based on their 7th grade math and ELA test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compare your grades and test scores to those used by the school to rank students.</li> </ul>

## Evidence of Impact

Results from our 2015-16 study (forthcoming) show that:

- 1) Students who received our custom lists used them when making choices. On average, they were more likely to apply to our specific high school recommendations than students who did not receive our lists.
- 2) Students who received our custom lists were more likely to receive their first-choice high school and were less likely to match to a high school with a graduation rate below 70%. Rather than applying to higher graduation rate schools, students were more likely to apply to higher-performing schools where their odds of admission were higher, and to avoid lower-performing schools.
- 3) Both disadvantaged and advantaged students used our lists to make choices. However, in some cases, advantaged students saw greater benefits from them, by applying and matching to more schools on our custom lists.

## Early Lessons

Taken together, our findings demonstrate that providing simplified and customized information to middle school students can increase the quality of schools to which they match. Beyond simply inducing students to apply to higher-performing schools, these supports should help students identify schools where their odds of admission are higher. They should also focus students' attention toward higher graduation rate schools and away from very low-performing schools. At the same time, broad-based informational interventions will not necessarily reduce educational inequality, since both disadvantaged and advantaged students respond and benefit from them.