

Administrative complexity as a barrier to school choice

Jennifer Jennings

Jennifer Jennings is Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University.

Many school districts are now offering public school choice programs, where students rank schools in their district, and placement is determined by lottery. Multiple studies have found large positive effects of winning public school choice lotteries on longer-run outcomes, indicating that this strategy could potentially improve the outcomes of low-income students. However, my colleagues and I have found that disadvantaged students in New York City choose schools that are lower-performing than other schools that require comparable travel times from their home. This is partly because they are less likely to apply to higher-performing schools, and partly because even when they do apply, they often have limited access to crucial information and their strategies for navigating the process are less effective than those of their higher-income peers. In this article, I look at how administrative features of the New York City school choice system may constrain choices for lower-income students, and suggest some policy changes that may ameliorate this.

School effects, school choice, and inequality

For a long time, the conventional wisdom has been that schools play a very limited role in transmitting inequality across generations, accounting for only 8 to 17 percent of the variation in achievement by socioeconomic status.¹ However, more recent evidence has found large school effects on long-term outcomes, even where there were no short-term effects on test scores.² In this context, school choice becomes quite important.

School choice has expanded greatly in recent years, particularly in urban school districts. With colleagues Sean Corcoran, Sam Dinger, Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, Sarah Cohodes, and Christy Baker-Smith, I am exploring whether family background limits access to higher-quality schools in New York City, and if so, how that could be changed.³ In particular, we are looking at how administrative system complexity affects access for disadvantaged students.

High school choice and disadvantage in New York City

New York City has the largest district choice program in the country, with 769 programs available at over 437 schools.

Every eighth grader is required to rank up to 12 programs, and a computer algorithm assigns each student to a school. The high school programs from which New York City eighth graders can choose vary in their admissions methods and priorities. In this study, we looked specifically at “limited unscreened” schools, which accounted for more than one-third of all New York City high school slots in the 2015–2016 school year. These schools are not academically selective, but many of them are high-performing; over one-quarter of them have graduation rates that exceed 80 percent. Over half of all schools in the Bronx with graduation rates above 80 percent are limited unscreened schools. (This group of schools also includes almost all the new small schools to which George Farkas refers in his article.)

While limited unscreened schools do not take academic achievement into account, they do give admission priority to students who attend an open house, information session, or school fair. In order to obtain priority status, students are required to sign in at these events, and each school is required to track and enter the names of these students into the application system.

New York City public high school students come from a diverse set of backgrounds, with about half of all families speaking a language other than English at home, and about 80 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch. There is also considerable diversity by ethnicity and race, with 40 percent of students Hispanic, 27 percent black, 16 percent Asian, and 15 percent white.⁴ For our study, we used student-level administrative data, combined with data collected directly from individual schools on their open house dates, and interviews with school representatives at open houses on their admission process.

As expected, we found that information session priority increased the probability that a student was admitted to one of their preferred schools. Overall, there was a 77 percent chance of being admitted to a school with priority status, and a 29 percent chance without. Unsurprisingly, the extent to which information session priority affected admission varied greatly across schools; for schools in the top quartile by high school graduation rate, it was highly unlikely to be admitted without priority status. We found that students qualifying for free lunch, English language learners, and black and Hispanic students were much less likely than their peers to get session priority.⁵

Since higher graduation rate schools are in higher demand, and since session priority is particularly crucial to admission to these schools, one might reasonably expect that students would be more likely to get priority at schools with higher

graduation rates.⁶ What we found, however, was that students are actually less likely to get priority status at high-performing schools. Again, disadvantaged students are even less likely than average to get priority status at these schools.

Barriers to access

There are a number of possible barriers to obtaining priority status, including lack of information or misleading information about open houses, and income and language-related barriers. As part of our study, we spoke to school representatives (often current students) at school fairs, and found that provided information on how to gain priority status did not always match up with published information, and different representatives from the same school often gave different information. For example, only 43 percent of school representatives reported that sign-in at a school fair was sufficient for priority without also attending an open house, although this should have been true in every case. Some representatives also cited other admission criteria, such as minimum grades, that were not in fact required.

We also found that information about open houses is very difficult to obtain. The dates and times of open houses are not widely publicized. In the year we studied, only about 20 percent of open houses were listed in a school directory, and nearly 20 percent of those changed after they were posted. Just over one-quarter of open houses were identified on the central Department of Education calendar. Many schools provided no open house details on their website beyond an instruction (in English only) directing people to contact the school for more information; this may represent a particular hurdle for non-English speaking families.

Reducing income and racial disparities in school access

While our study does not address the question of whether the information session policy improves student outcomes by placing students at their “best fit” schools, it is clear the policy acts as a barrier to some students, with consequences for access to higher-quality schools. The second phase of this study is a randomized controlled trial that, in part, aims to increase attendance at open houses and fairs. This intervention (1) gave students a 40-minute lesson about the process; (2) provided each participating student with a list of 30 schools with graduation rates above 70 percent that were within reasonable travel time of their home; and (3) gave parents and students the opportunity to opt-in to receive text message reminders about upcoming open houses. Results of this trial are still forthcoming, but we are hopeful that it will help reduce income and racial disparities in access to high-performing schools. ■

²See, for example, A. Abdulkadiroğlu, W. Hu, and P. A. Pathak, “Small High Schools and Student Achievement: Lottery-Based Evidence from New York City,” NBER Working Paper No. 19576, National Bureau of Economic Research, October 2013.

³Our study is part of a larger project, a 170-school randomized control trial in New York City testing three informational interventions intended to help disadvantaged students to access high-performing high schools.

⁴New York City Department of Education, <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>.

⁵These income and racial disparities in information session priority did persist after controlling for multiple student characteristics.

⁶Since there is no limit on the number of students who can sign in, there should be no capacity constraint.

¹J. S. Coleman, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1966.