

## Uneven Playing Field: Demographic Differences and High School “Choice” in Philadelphia

Every fall, eighth graders participate in the School District of Philadelphia’s high school application and admissions process, vying for spots in a tiered system of public high schools across the city comprised of three basic school types: non-selective **neighborhood** high schools; somewhat selective **citywide admission** high schools; and most selective **special admission** high schools. Given the real differences in the quality and resources that exist between these three types of schools, the District’s high school selection system can seriously influence a student’s future educational trajectory—including the likelihood of graduation and future academic and career opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

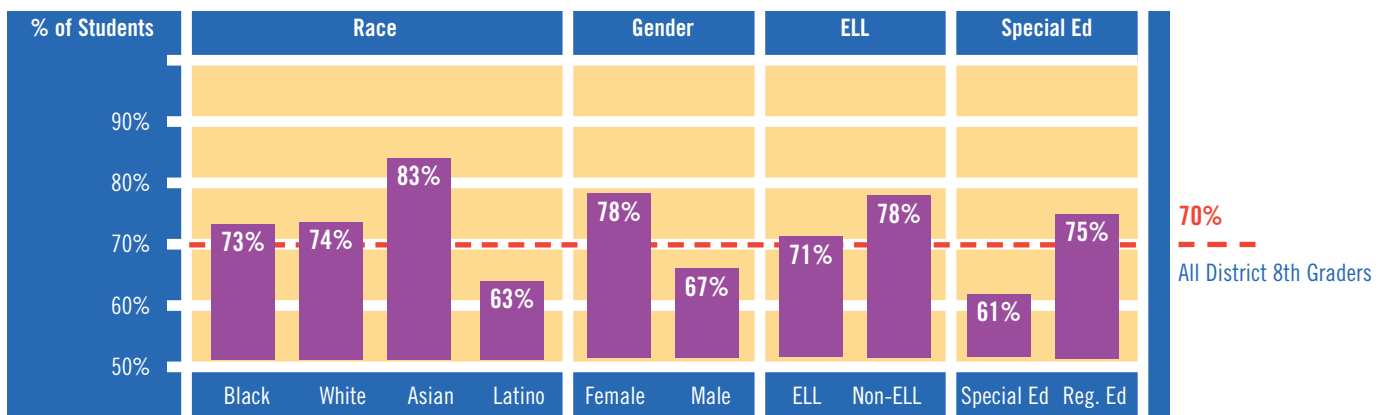
### 1. Who participates in the high school selection process?

Completing a District high school application during the fall of the eighth grade year is the first necessary step in Philadelphia’s high school selection process. According to District data, 70 percent of District eighth graders completed applications in the fall of 2006.

*But some students were more likely than others to take this step.*

- **Latinos** were significantly less likely to participate in the choice process than other racial and ethnic groups.
- **Males** were considerably less likely than **females** to complete high school applications.
- **Special education** students participated in the choice process at lower rates than did their peers, as did **English language learners (ELLs)** when compared to non-ELL students.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1** Demographics of Students Participating in the Selection Process



Source: 2006-07 School District of Philadelphia Application Data

N=15,172 District eighth graders; for ELL, N=10,359; for all other demographic variables, N=12,371

<sup>1</sup> This brief draws on a mixed-method study conducted by Research for Action. The study’s data were from 2007 and 2008, including District data sets and interviews with students, parents, and school and central office staff. The full report, *Transition to High School: School “Choice” and Freshman Year in Philadelphia*, and related policy briefs are available at [www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org).

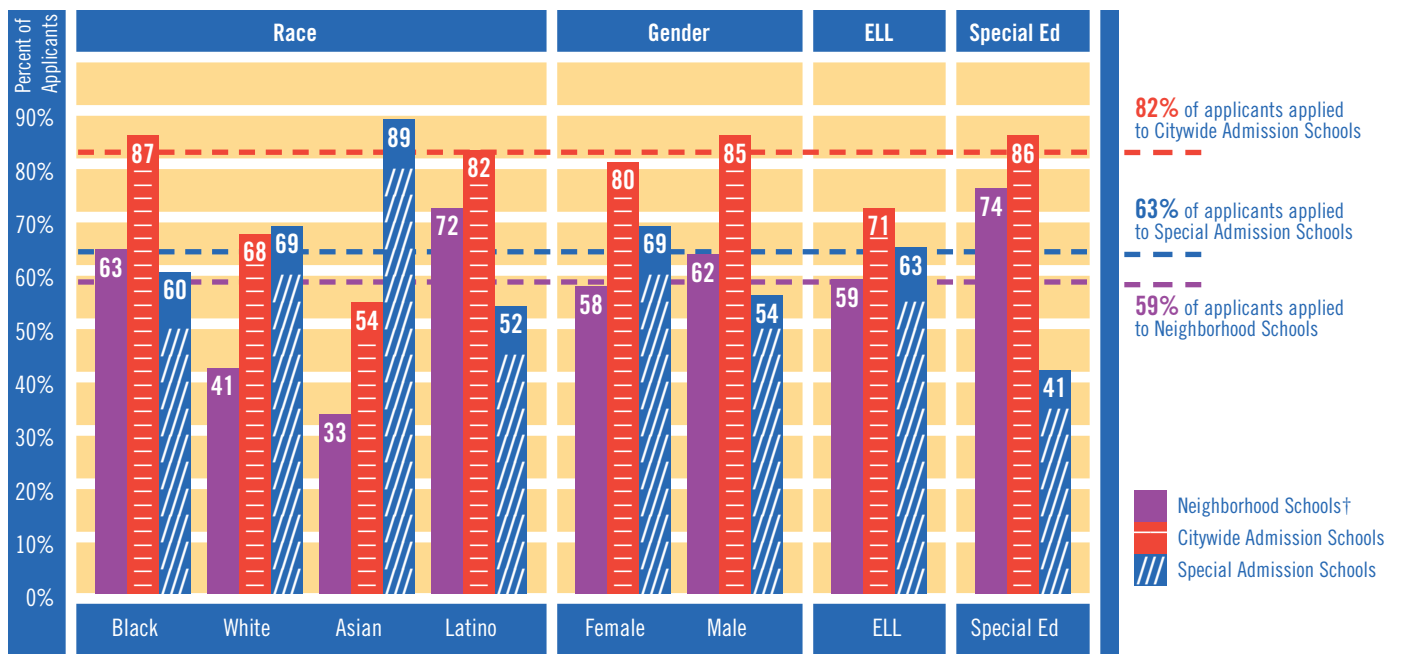
<sup>2</sup> District data did not specify ELL status for all eighth graders. Consequently, the N size for the ELL analyses, noted below the graphs, was significantly smaller than for all District eighth graders and for other demographic groups. This may compromise the validity of ELL and non-ELL subgroup analyses.

## 2. Where do applicants apply?

Eighth graders may rank up to five high schools where they would like to be considered for admission in Philadelphia’s high school selection process. These can be any combination of special admission, citywide admission, and neighborhood high schools, other than their assigned school. *There were demographic differences in the types of high schools applicants included in their list of “choice” schools.*

- **Asians** were far more likely to apply to highly selective special admission high schools—and far less likely to apply to neighborhood high schools—than any other ethnic or racial group.
- **Latinos** displayed the opposite pattern. They were far less likely to apply to special admission high schools, and far more likely to apply to neighborhood high schools than any other racial/ethnic group.
- **Girls** were more likely than **boys** to apply to special admission high schools, while boys were more likely than girls to apply to citywide and neighborhood high schools.
- Of all groups, **special education** students were least likely to apply to special admission high schools.

**Figure 2 Rates of Application by High School Type\***



Source: 2006-07 School District of Philadelphia Application Data  
 N=10,522 District eighth grade applicants; for ELL, N=7,976; for all other demographic variables, N=8,943

\* This table reflects percentages of eighth grade applicants who applied to different school types. The breakdown of applicants by school type does not sum to 100% because each student could apply to up to five schools, including any combination of school types.

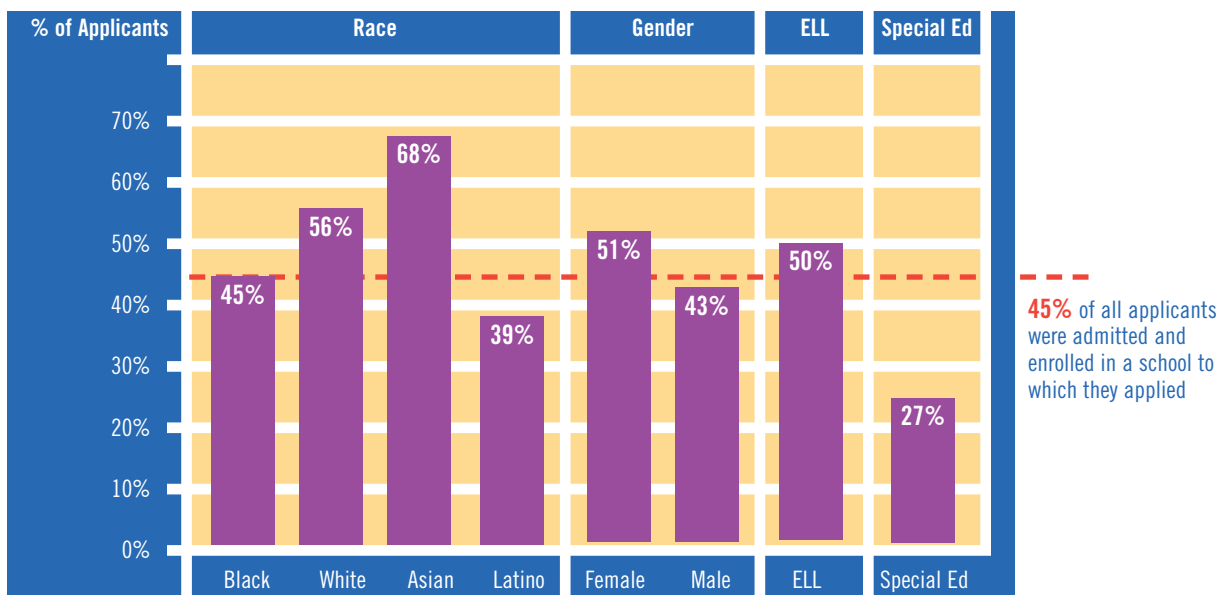
† Although students are guaranteed a spot in their zoned neighborhood high school, these percentages represent those applicants who applied to attend a neighborhood high school outside of their neighborhood or middle school feeder pattern.

### 3. Which applicants enrolled in a school of choice?

Filling out an application is only the first step. Students must be selected and admitted in order to attend a school other than their assigned neighborhood high school. The District does not retain a record of schools where students were accepted but chose not to enroll. We therefore use enrollment rather than acceptance rates to reflect whether students were successful in exercising their choice of high school. **Fewer than half (45%) of District eighth graders who completed applications in the fall of 2006 ultimately enrolled into any District school to which they had applied.** *Enrollment was more likely for some students than for others.*

- **Asians** were most likely—and **Latinos** were least likely—to be enrolled at any school to which they applied.
- While Whites and Blacks applied at similar rates (Figure 1), **Whites** were far more likely than **Blacks** to be enrolled at any school to which they applied.
- **Female** applicants were more likely than **male** applicants to be enrolled into one of their “chosen” schools.
- Only one in four **special education** applicants were enrolled at a school to which they applied.

**Figure 3** Rates at Which Applicants were Admitted and Enrolled in a school to which they applied



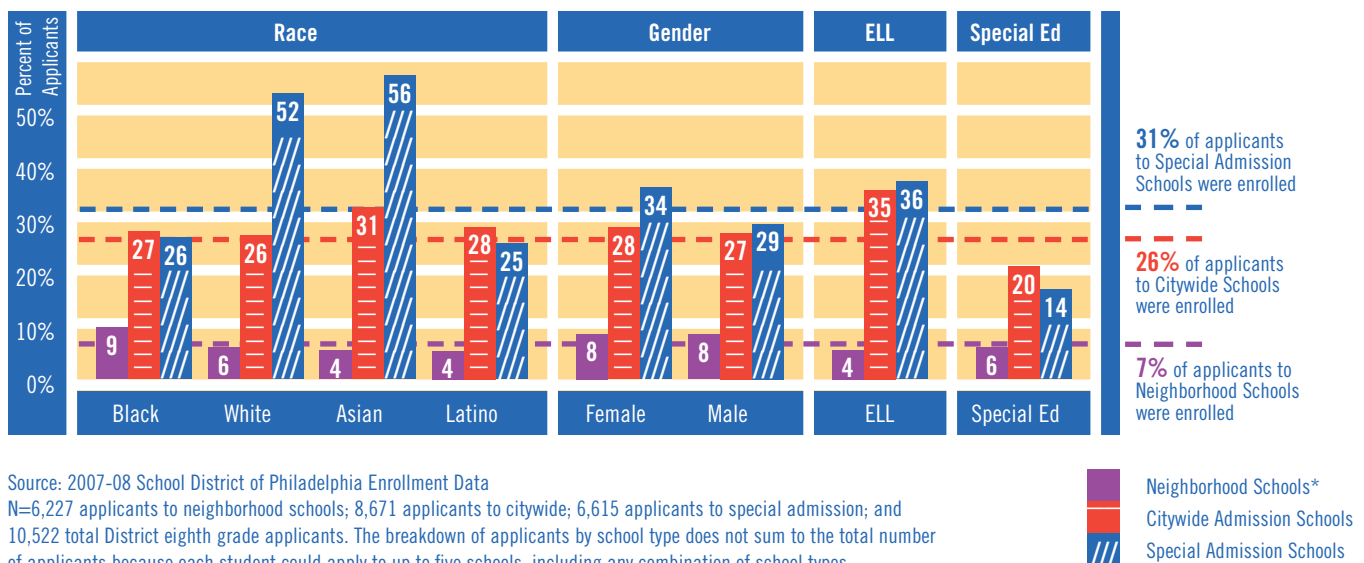
Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Enrollment Data  
 N=10,522 District eighth grade applicants; for ELL, N=7,976; for all other demographic variables, N=8,943

#### 4. What types of schools enrolled what types of students?

Disparities existed not only in who was enrolled at *any* school to which they applied, but also in enrollment rates at the different school *types*. The disparities were greatest at special admission high schools, the most selective of Philadelphia’s high schools. To gain admission, students must meet a special admission high school’s unique admissions criteria and, at some schools, complete an interview, portfolio, or audition. Unlike the somewhat selective citywide admission high schools, which admit qualified students by computerized lottery, admissions decisions at special admission high schools are made at the school level. According to District data, *a clear sorting pattern emerged—most starkly with regard to special admission high schools*. For example:

- **Whites** and **Asians** who applied to special admission high schools were twice as likely as **Black** and **Latino** applicants to be enrolled.
- **Males** were less likely than **females** to be enrolled at special admission high schools.
- Of all students applying to special admission high schools, **special education** students were the least likely to be enrolled.

**Figure 4 Rates at Which Applicants Were Enrolled into Selected High Schools**



Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Enrollment Data  
 N=6,227 applicants to neighborhood schools; 8,671 applicants to citywide; 6,615 applicants to special admission; and 10,522 total District eighth grade applicants. The breakdown of applicants by school type does not sum to the total number of applicants because each student could apply to up to five schools, including any combination of school types.

\* These bars reflect the percentages of applicants who were accepted and enrolled through a computerized lottery into a neighborhood high school outside of their neighborhood or middle school feeder pattern.

## What should be done?

There is little question that there are winners and losers in Philadelphia’s high school selection process. At every stage of the process, Blacks, Latinos, males, and special education students fared far worse than other groups. Some of the problems inherent in the system can be addressed now; others will require additional research to identify the root causes of the inequities that exist. Real change will require a commitment from policymakers and researchers alike. We recommend:

- 1 **Reforms to ensure that accurate and complete information about the high school selection system is available to all families.** Inadequate *formal* channels for good information and support disadvantage students with weak out-of-school supports. To begin to level the playing field, we recommend improving the quality and accessibility of information that is publicly available; targeting information sessions to families who most need them; increasing the number of highly trained eighth grade counselors; and clarifying options for students who wish to have their applications re-considered after not getting into their chosen schools.
- 2 **Further research examining the root causes of existing differences in high school application and enrollment patterns in Philadelphia—and whether changes in District policy would affect these disparities. We recommend:**
  - **Longitudinal research** that compares the current level of stratification to past levels, and that tracks changes into the future. This kind of research is critically important in understanding whether, and how, changes in District policy (e.g., the reduction in student-to-counselor ratios) affect the high school application and enrollment patterns across the District.
  - An examination of how the expanding number of **charter high schools** in Philadelphia has impacted student choice, as well as the demographic make-up and conditions of neighborhood high schools.
  - An analysis of student **acceptance data** and school-level acceptance rates to inform a more complete understanding of the decisions students and their families are making about where to attend high school. This will require that the District and all charter schools maintain records of acceptances in addition to enrollment.
  - A **qualitative study** focused on uncovering the reasons for the large disparities in who participates in the high school application process, and why similar disparities exist in the enrollment patterns among students who do participate in the application process.
- 3 **A public process focused on lessening the stratification occurring in our high schools.** We recommend that the School Reform Commission establish a committee of District and city leaders, educators, students, and parents to explore how to distribute students with different achievement levels and different learning needs across a broader range of schools by the 2012-13 school year.

The national debate over high school choice policies often pits equity concerns against the need to attract and retain middle-class families in urban school districts, and we heard both of these objectives echoed in our interviews with Philadelphia’s central office staff. The city’s mayor campaigned on the importance of bridging middle-class concerns and equity issues, and forging a public education system that meets the needs of *all* children. Finding ways to lessen the stratification that is occurring in our high schools would be a major step in this direction. Other cities are also struggling to reduce school system stratification, and it is critical that Philadelphia join them in taking this on.

## Acknowledgements

This policy brief draws on a larger RFA study, *The Transition to High School: School “Choice” and Freshman Year in Philadelphia*. The final report is available for free on the RFA website—[www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org)—or in hard copy, \$5 per copy shipping and handling. It is part of a series of studies conducted by RFA on high school reform in Philadelphia. This brief and two related policy briefs are available for free on the RFA website.

We want to thank all the central office, regional and school leaders who allowed us to interview them and observe their schools. We also want to express our appreciation to the School District of Philadelphia’s accountability and research offices for providing us with district data sets important to this study. This research was made possible through a grant from the William Penn Foundation.

Three anonymous external reviewers contributed significantly to refining and clarifying the findings in the full report. The authors, alone, however, are responsible for any shortcomings in the report and policy briefs.



3701 Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19104  
Tel.: (215) 823-2500  
Fax: (215) 823-2510  
E-mail: [info@researchforaction.org](mailto:info@researchforaction.org)  
Web: [www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org)