

## Context, Conditions, and Consequences: Freshman Year Transition in Philadelphia

The transition to high school has a strong effect on student outcomes, especially for those students who lack robust support systems outside of school. In the past several years, the School District of Philadelphia (the District) has instituted a number of initiatives designed to address the challenges faced by students transitioning to high school. We found that important contextual factors—specifically, the District’s tiered system of selective, nonselective, and charter high schools, and the high school “choice” process—create real variation in the degree to which high schools can successfully meet the needs of ninth graders (see **Table 1** for a description of the tiered system). Large, nonselective neighborhood high schools are at a distinct disadvantage when compared to small, charter, and selective high schools. This suggests that the debate between incremental school “improvement” and individual school “turnaround” strategies<sup>1</sup> is too narrowly conceived to result in the dramatic change that is needed and desired by education reformers, political and civic leaders, students, and families alike. Improving the freshman year experience, and ultimately student outcomes, requires an examination of the broader systems of district policy and practice in which they function.

Improving the freshman year experience—and student outcomes—depends on examining schools in the context of the systems in which they function.

**Table 1** Tiered System of High Schools

School Type	District-Managed Schools
Most Selective	<b>Special admission schools</b> are the <i>most</i> selective. Students must meet their unique admissions criteria requiring strong grades, behavior, attendance, and test scores. Some also require an interview, portfolio, or audition.
Selective	Most <b>citywide admission schools</b> require that students attend an interview, meet three of four criteria related to grades, attendance, lateness, and behavior, and are then selected by computerized lottery.
Not Selective	<b>Neighborhood schools</b> admit all students within their feeder area. Using a lottery, additional applicants are sometime accepted from outside their feeder area, as space allows.

School Type	Non District-Managed Schools
Not Selective	<b>Charter schools</b> have their own admissions processes; interested students must contact a school directly. Charter schools are often designed around a theme and attract students who fit their focus, but they may not exclude students based on merit. Students are selected by computerized lottery from a pool of applicants.

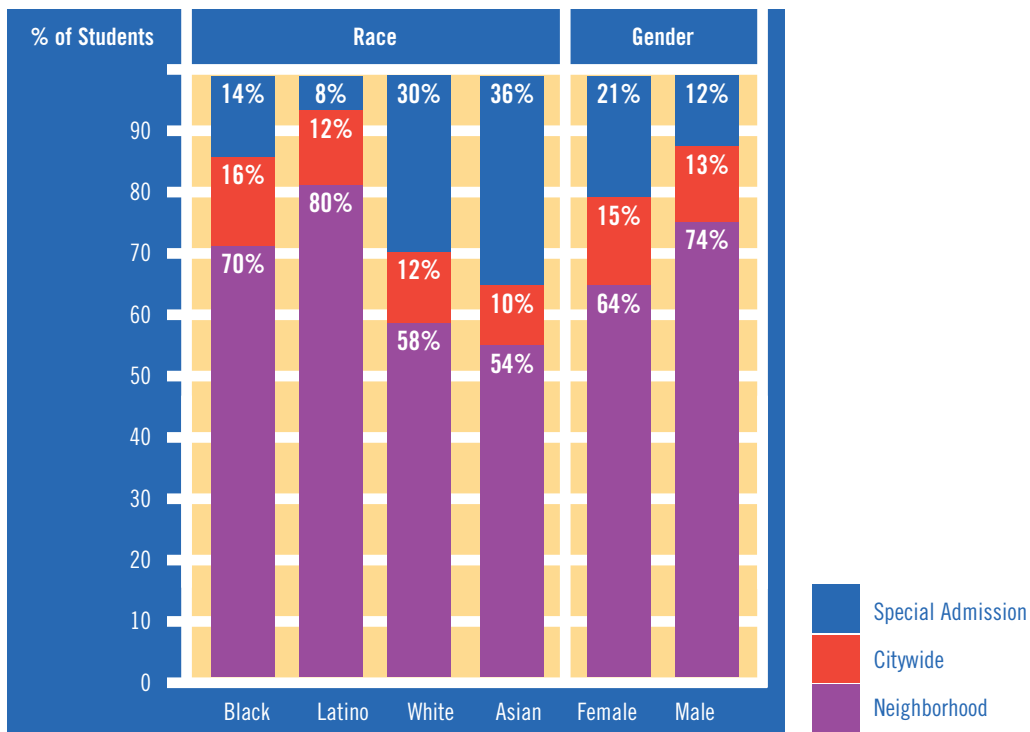
<sup>1</sup>“School turnaround work involves quick, dramatic improvement within three years . . . while school improvement is marked by steady, incremental improvement over a longer period of time.” From a guide published by the U.S. Education Department’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES), cited in Viadero, D. (2009). “Research does not offer much guidance on turnarounds.” *Education Week*, 28(37), 10.

This policy brief is based on a mixed method study of high school choice and freshman year in Philadelphia, conducted during the 2007-08 school year. Data sources included eighth grade students’ applications to high school in fall 2006, enrollments in District high schools for fall 2007, as well as student-level demographic and achievement data for the 2007-08 school year. Field interviews and observations, as well as responses to a districtwide teacher and student survey, were used to assess the conditions for the freshman year transition. Interviews and observations took place across the full range of selective and nonselective high schools that comprise the District’s tiered high school system, including four charter schools. We interviewed parents and community-based organization leaders and held student focus groups to help assess the ways in which students and families decided where to apply.

### High School “Choice” and the Impact on Neighborhood High Schools

The high school selection process is rarely a topic of discussion within the Philadelphia education reform community, but we recommend that it should be. It results in a number of conditions that make it difficult for the nonselective neighborhood high schools to support incoming ninth graders through the high school transition. We identified three factors that disadvantage neighborhood schools: system stratification, late enrollment, and teacher turnover.

**Table 2** Where Students Enroll, by Race and Gender, by School Type



Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Administrative Data  
 N=14,274 first-time ninth graders

### System Stratification

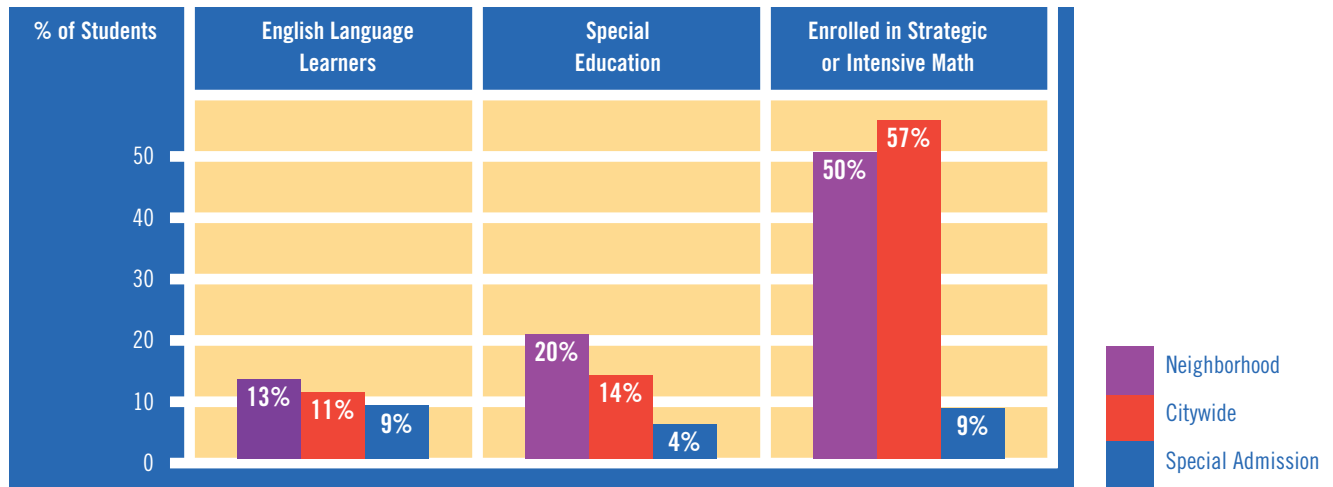
**Too Few Seats:** In fall 2006, 70% of District eighth graders participated in the application process to begin ninth grade in fall 2007. However, when the dust settled, only 45% of these applicants were enrolled at any District school to which they applied. In other words, there are not enough “seats” in schools of choice for the number of students trying to choose. This means that, in most cases, high schools are selecting students rather than students choosing schools, robbing students and families of the agency that school choice is supposed to provide.

**Clear Sorting Patterns:** Moreover, clear sorting patterns emerged. As **Table 2** illustrates, Black and Latino ninth graders, as well as freshman boys, enrolled in the nonselective neighborhood high schools at higher rates than Whites, Asians and girls.

Neighborhood and citywide high schools also enrolled a higher concentration of students needing special services, when compared to special admission high schools, which are the most selective (see **Tables 3** and **4**).

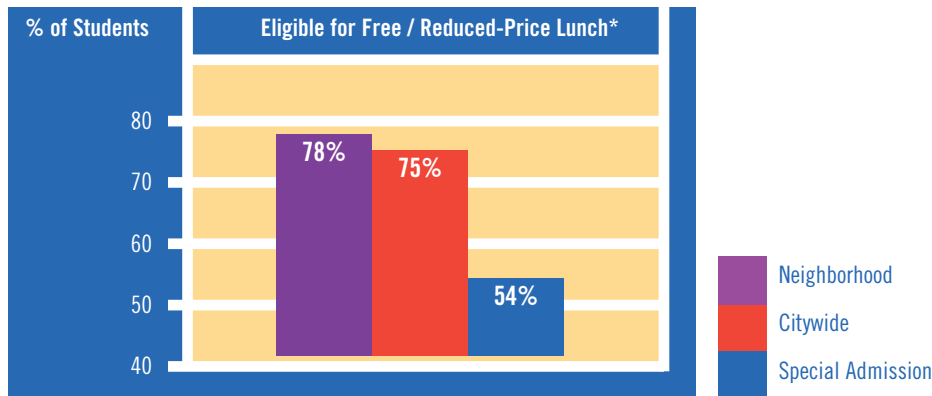
**Too few “seats” in schools of choice can rob students of the agency that choice is designed to provide them.**

**Table 3** Students Needing Special Services, by School Type



Source: 2007–08 School District of Philadelphia Administrative Data  
 For ELL, N=12,184 first-time ninth graders; for special education and math, N=14,274 first-time ninth graders

**Table 4** Students Eligible for Free/Reduced-Priced Lunch, by School Type



Source: 2008-09 School District of Philadelphia Administrative Data.

\* The School District of Philadelphia uses the “Yancey Index” to measure free or reduced-price lunch eligibility. See: The Reinvestment Fund. (2007). Estimating the percentage of students income eligible for free and reduced lunch. Philadelphia: Author.

**Incomplete Information:** Inequities in school “choice” are exacerbated by the fact that the School District of Philadelphia provides scant information on its high schools in its annual *Directory of High Schools* compared to other large districts with school choice, as shown in **Table 5**. While some students whose parents or other relations know how to navigate the system can obtain adequate information to make informed choices—and even “game” the system—the lack of information from the District shortchanges more disadvantaged students. For example, often there are “late” admissions to selective schools when parents or influential advocates pressure for admittance. Avenues for this kind of advocacy are not identified in the *Directory*, so such privilege is accessible primarily to those who know it is possible or have contacts that can assist them in gaining entry to a school of their choosing.

**Table 5** Information Included in 2008 High School Directories

	Philadelphia	New York City	Chicago
Location	✓	✓ @	✓
Admissions criteria	✓	✓ @	✓
Contact information	✓	✓ @	✓
Admission rates		✓ @	
Graduation rates			✓
College-going rates			✓
% ELL students		@	✓
% Special education		@	✓
Attendance rates		@	✓
Survey data			✓

✓ - Available in printed directory @ - Available in online high school choice resource center

**Chicago Public Schools.** (2007). *High School Directory*. [Electronic version]. Retrieved September 10, 2008, from [http://www.cps.k12.il.us/Schools/hsdirectory/HS\\_Directory.pdf](http://www.cps.k12.il.us/Schools/hsdirectory/HS_Directory.pdf); **New York City Department of Education.** (2007). Online high school directory. Retrieved September 10, 2008, from <http://schools.nyc.gov/choicesenrollment/high/directory/search/default.htm>; **The School District of Philadelphia.** (2007). *A Directory of High Schools for 2008 Admissions*. Philadelphia: Author. All three cities have added new content to, and changed the design of, their high school directories and web resources since the time of the study.

**Late Enrollment**

Nonselective neighborhood high schools, because they have no admissions process, can never be certain who will arrive at their door in September. Although many of their students come from feeder middle schools, neighborhood high schools do not know who has applied and been accepted to other schools. Enrollment at neighborhood high schools does not settle until the acceptance process for selective and charter schools is over, which can extend well into the summer. Furthermore, in contrast to the selective and charter schools, there is continuous admittance of ninth graders to neighborhood high schools due to geographic mobility or returns from the juvenile justice system or other schools. **Table 6** illustrates the difference in the pattern of late enrollments across selective and nonselective District schools.<sup>2</sup>

Late ninth grade enrollment in neighborhood high schools creates barriers to a successful transition experience.

**Table 6** Late Ninth Grade Enrollment

	Neighborhood	Citywide Admission	Special Admission
Ninth graders who start on the first day of school	83%	98%	99%
Ninth graders who start after the first day	17%	2%	1%

Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Administrative Data N=14,209 ninth graders

Due to uncertain enrollment, large neighborhood high schools wait until the beginning of the school year, and beyond, before becoming familiar with the incoming class. This creates a number of barriers to creating a successful high school transition experience. Specifically:

- **Delay in building relationships with students and their families.** The uncertain and continuous enrollment of ninth grade students, in combination with large incoming classes, discouraged large neighborhood high schools from building relationships with the students and families of incoming classes. When freshman year orientation was a large group activity, often the case in neighborhood high schools, it did not seem to compensate. Personalization and relationship-building appeared to be facilitated by the presence of an admissions process in selective and charter high schools, and, in one neighborhood school, by small school size.
- **Delay in assessing student needs.** Simply put, when schools do not know which students will be enrolling, they cannot prepare for them. Uncertainty about which students will be enrolling in large neighborhood high schools persists throughout the summer. As a result, neighborhood high schools cannot assess students’ past performance and academic or behavioral needs before the school year begins. In contrast, selective and charter schools review performance data prior to admission, and often conduct assessments well before the beginning of the school year. Even though school staff in neighborhood high schools could access SchoolNet to obtain student data, uncertainty about which students would attend large neighborhood high schools discouraged use of this resource, particularly before school began.

<sup>2</sup> This information is not available for charter schools through District data sources.

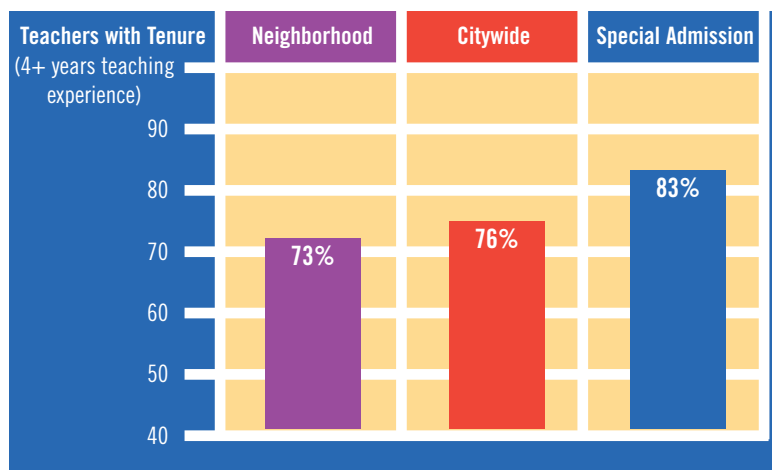
Because the nonselective neighborhood high schools are at the bottom of the tiered admissions system, they are low-status schools, and therefore are schools that both students and teachers often seek to avoid.

- **Delay in setting student course enrollment.** Freshman year student churn in neighborhood schools contributed to the need to re-roster classes. As a result, in the first weeks of school, teachers and students in nonselective neighborhood schools can find that student rosters have been changed to create relatively uniform class sizes. This means that several weeks into the school year students are placed in new classrooms and teachers often are teaching almost wholly new classes, with the result being a loss of valuable instructional time. In addition, teachers may find themselves distracted as they work to accommodate those who have entered their class mid-semester and missed initial instruction.

**Teacher Turnover**

Our data suggest that factors related to the high school selection process contribute to high teacher turnover in neighborhood high schools (See **Table 7** for percentage of teachers with at least 4 years teaching experience by school type). Sometimes this is due to direct District action, such as when “leveling” occurs and teachers are transferred and reassigned after enrollment settles—often as late as mid-October in many neighborhood high schools. Teachers often opt out of these schools voluntarily as well. Because the nonselective neighborhood high schools are at the bottom of the tiered admissions system, they are low-status schools, and therefore are schools that both students and teachers often seek to avoid. Exacerbating their low status is their reputation for being unsafe. Furthermore, the ninth grade in large neighborhood high schools is generally considered to be the least attractive teaching assignment and can be a revolving door of substitutes and new teachers, as experienced teachers take advantage of their veteran standing to opt out of teaching the ninth grade, and principals place more experienced teachers in the critical eleventh grade testing year.

**Table 7** Percentage of Tenured District High School Teachers by Admissions Type



Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Teacher Survey N=1,778 high school teachers

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The spotlight that political, civic, community, and foundation leaders, locally and nationally, have put on chronically underperforming schools—which include many of the nation’s urban high schools—makes this a timely examination of the transition to high school in Philadelphia and its implications for students’ school success. It is good news for Philadelphia that over the past several years there have been some gains in the overall graduation rate. Building on this improvement—and strengthening the freshman year experience—will be an important task in the coming years, especially if the city is to meet Mayor Nutter’s goal of cutting the rate of student dropout in half by 2014.

**The high school selection process must be improved in ways that contribute to making neighborhood high schools better options for students.** This means that the ways in which neighborhood high schools are systemically disadvantaged must be openly discussed and political will must exist to explore and implement new approaches. We believe that the mobilization of the District, city, and public around the student dropout problem creates the right political moment to open up conversation about how to change the high school selection process so that it offers more students real options, and contributes to, rather than minimizes, the opportunities for real reform of the neighborhood high schools.

**The School District of Philadelphia can begin now to implement some basic but important reforms that will improve the high school selection process and mitigate its negative effects on neighborhood schools. In fact, it has already begun some of this work. We urge the District to continue this important work and recommend that it implement the following changes in time for the beginning of the 2010/2011 school year:**

- 1 Shorten the school choice and admissions timeline so that students and families know which schools they will be attending earlier.** It does not seem unreasonable to complete the selection and choice process by March of the 8th grade year.
- 2 Ensure that student performance data arrives at neighborhood high schools well before school begins.** A shortened admissions timeline should enable the District to provide student data to schools well in advance of a new school year. In addition, having an “admissions process,” even if not for selection purposes, in which students and their parents/guardians interview and bring report cards and PSSA results to the neighborhood high schools might help establish an early relationship and further ensure student data arrives in time to make appropriate academic placements. This could also make freshman orientations more meaningful to students and their parents/guardians.
- 3 Secure student and teacher stability so that leveling and re-rostering are avoided.** Distributing new students across a broader range of schools might help to alleviate this problem. Work with the city to ensure that students who move during the school year can obtain free or low-cost transportation, allowing them to stay in their schools of origin. End the transfer of teachers once the school year has begun. Curtail expulsions from charter and selective schools; require that these schools keep their students, at least until the end of a school year.
- 4 Make neighborhood high schools more appealing and supportive work environments and create incentives to attract and retain effective teachers in the ninth grade.** Robust incentives, strong leadership, mentoring, and professional communities might attract and retain

effective teachers in neighborhood high schools. Making a strong ninth grade teacher corps a strategic goal of the entire school would make strengthening the freshman year a priority.

**5 Increase the information available about Philadelphia high schools and the choice process.**

Expanding the District *Directory* to include additional important information about high schools, such as admissions, graduation, college-going, and attendance rates, and percentages of ELL and special education students, could help more students make more informed choices. The *Directory* should also provide a clear map of the application process for each category of public high school, including what students can do to obtain reconsideration of their application when they have been rejected at a choice school. Accessibility of this information could be enhanced if advocacy and community groups working with high school students and/or their parents were also prepared to provide similar information.

**6 Maintain a focus on ways in which greater personalization can be incorporated into the ninth grade transition, including small learning communities, small schools and ninth grade academies.** Such arrangements typically foster closer relationships between students and the adults in the school, thereby easing the transition process.

A final, but important reform will require additional time and discussion to determine the best way to move forward. We recommend that an SRC Commission, including District and city leaders, educators, students, and parents be established to explore how to achieve the following by the 2012-2013 school year:

**7 Distribute students with different achievement levels and different learning needs across a broader range of schools.** Other cities, such as New York City, are also grappling with this problem, and looking to other locales might offer ideas for Philadelphia.

Philadelphia, like so many other urban areas, cannot afford to falter in its efforts to address problems that contribute to student dropout. Much is at stake—for children and families, and for the future of the nation's cities. The experience, resources, and knowledge that exist in the city around the issue of dropout makes Philadelphia well-poised to mobilize to make the kind of system and school-level changes needed to improve outcomes for the city's youth.

## 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 forthcoming policy briefs are available for free on the RFA website.

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