

EDUCATION POLICY FOR ACTION SERIES

EDUCATION CHALLENGES FACING NEW YORK CITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Do New York City's New Small Schools Enroll Students with Different Characteristics from Other NYC Schools?

Jennifer L. Jennings
Aaron M. Pallas

*in collaboration with
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Institute for
School Reform

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The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a national policy-research and reform-support organization, affiliated with Brown University, that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes for all students in urban public schools, especially those serving disadvantaged children. The Institute's vision is the transformation of traditional school systems into "smart education systems" that develop and integrate high-quality learning opportunities in all areas of students' lives – at school, at home, and in the community.

The Institute conducts research; works with a variety of partners committed to educational improvement to build capacity in school districts and communities; and shares its work through print and Web publications. Rather than providing a specific reform design or model to be implemented, the Institute's approach is to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts and communities strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.

A goal of the Institute is to stimulate debate in the field on matters of important consequence for national education policy. This report provides one such perspective but it does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

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About the Series

Education Policy for Action: Education Challenges Facing New York City is a series of research and policy analyses by scholars in fields such as education, economics, public policy, and child welfare in collaboration with staff from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and members of a broadly defined education community. Papers in this series are the product of research based on the Institute's large library of local and national public education databases; work with the Institute's data analysis team; and questions raised and conclusions drawn during a public presentation and conversation with university and public school students, teachers, foundation representatives, policy advocates, education reporters, news analysts, parents, youth, and community leaders.

Among the issues that the series addresses are several pressing topics that have emerged from the Institute's research and organizing efforts. Some of the topics covered in the series are:

- Confronting the impending graduation crisis
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Many thanks to the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation for its support of the public conversations from which this report and the other publications in the series grew.

For a downloadable version of this report and more information about the series, please visit www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/NYC_Conversations.php.

Acknowledgments

We thank Deinya Phenix and the staff of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform for their support and research assistance; the New York City Department of Education and Tom Gold for providing access to the 2007–2009 data; and John White for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this report.

This Executive Summary briefly describes the findings presented in the full report *Do New York City's New Small Schools Enroll Students with Different Characteristics from Other NYC Schools?* Data from the study and more detailed findings are provided in the full report. For more information about the study and to download the full report or the Executive Summary, please visit <www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/JenningsPallas.php>.

Introduction

Over the course of the past decade, the New York City public school system has sought to reform high school education. Central to this reform agenda has been a conscious effort to close or downsize large comprehensive high schools viewed as failing and, in their stead, to open new small high schools.

Supported by investments by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other philanthropies, over 200 new small high schools have been founded in New York City. Conversely, since 2001-2002, twenty-seven large comprehensive high schools have been closed or downsized, then reopened as campuses housing some of these new small schools.

The changes in the number and character of New York City public high schools over this period were accompanied by a new system of high school choice, which, in its current form, allows eighth-grade students to rank up to twelve high schools in order of preference. Then students participating in the choice process are assigned to a single high school.

These reforms created the possibility of a redistribution of students among New York City's high schools. The choice process was designed to create opportunities for students to enroll in a more diverse set of schools across the city, rather than the default choice of a large comprehensive high school in their neighborhood. Moreover, one of the goals behind the replacement of large comprehensive high schools with small schools was to lower the concentration of high-needs students enrolled in these large schools.

Nearly a decade later, it is now time to assess whether these intentions have been realized.

Many large comprehensive high schools have been closed. Nearly two hundred small high schools have been opened. What do we now know about which high schools New York City's eighth-graders enroll in? In this study, we examined the demographic characteristics of students entering the new small high schools in New York City and contrasted them with the characteristics of students entering the large high schools that closed.

We also determined whether these high school reforms altered how different types of students are distributed across schools.

We addressed four research questions in our study:

- Are the students who enroll in new small schools similar to students enrolling in other New York City high schools in their boroughs?
- Do the characteristics of students enrolling in new small high schools change over time?
- Are the students enrolling in new small schools sited in former large comprehensive high school buildings similar to the students who previously attended the large schools?
- Have New York City's high school reforms altered the distribution of students across schools?

To address these questions, we examined a variety of characteristics of the students entering New York City high schools from 1999-2000 through 2008-2009: the percentage of

The new system of high school choice created the possibility of a redistribution of students among New York City's high schools.

entering students who were classified as proficient on the statewide eighth-grade English language arts assessment; the percentage of entering students who were classified as proficient on the statewide eighth-grade mathematics assessment; the average percentage of days in the semester prior to entering a high school that incoming students attended school; the percentage of entering students who were classified as over-age for their grade; the percentage of entering students who were male; the percentage of entering students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; the percentage of entering students who were classified as English language learners (ELLs); the percentage of entering students who were classified as entitled to full-time special education services, based on the presence of a disability (available from 1999-2000 through 2005-2006); the percentage of entering students who were classified as entitled to part-time special education services (available from 1999-2000 through 2005-2006); and the percentage of entering students who were classified as entitled to full-time or part-time special education.

Findings

Are the students who enroll in new small schools similar to students enrolling in other New York City high schools in their boroughs?

Our results indicate that over the years 2002-2003 through 2008-2009, new small high schools enrolled students who were similar to students enrolled in other high schools in their boroughs on some of the criteria we examined but who differed in some important respects.

Overall, new small schools operating between 2002-2003 and 2008-2009 did not enroll incoming students with better records of standardized test performance than students entering existing high schools. The rates of proficiency in English language arts are about the same, and students entering new small schools have worse performance on the statewide eighth-grade math test. The percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch who enrolled in new small high schools also exceeded the percentage for students enrolling in existing schools.

Conversely, the new small schools were significantly less likely to enroll full-time special education students for the years that we have data on that characteristic. New small schools enrolled a smaller proportion of male students than existing schools, and those new small schools serving both ELL and non-ELL students were less likely to enroll ELL students than other high schools.

Do the characteristics of students enrolling in new small high schools change over time?

We found two distinct trends in the characteristics of students enrolling in new small schools between 2002-2003 and 2008-2009. The students enrolling in new small schools in 2002-2003 were in many respects similar to students enrolling in other New York City high schools, with the exception that they enrolled fewer male students than other schools. But in 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, small schools enrolled a progressively more advantaged population, with higher concentrations of students proficient in reading and mathematics and students with better middle-school attendance records than the students entering other schools. Small schools also were less likely to enroll over-age, ELL, and special education students than were other schools in 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. After 2004-2005, the trend reversed, with small schools enrolling increasing numbers of academically challenging students. We interpret this as evidence that during the first wave of large high school closings, students who would have attended these large schools initially did not attend the new small schools. During subsequent waves of phasing out large comprehensive high schools, academically challenged students have increasingly enrolled in the new small high schools.

Are the students enrolling in new small schools sited in former large comprehensive high school buildings similar to the students who previously attended the large schools?

We found strong evidence that the new small high schools on the campuses of the large comprehensive schools they replaced enrolled ninth-grade students who were much less disadvantaged than the students who were previously enrolled in the large comprehensive schools. The students in the new small schools on the same campus as the large comprehensive schools they replaced were 9 to 10 percentage points more likely to be proficient in reading and math; 15 percentage points less likely to be over-age for grade; had better prior attendance; and were substantially less likely to be male, ELL, or entitled to special education services.

The students enrolled in new small schools were, however, more likely to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, which may reflect differences in the ways in which small and large schools collect the forms that establish eligibility. As the new small schools have matured over time, they have retained their advantages over the large comprehensive schools they replaced.

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Have New York City's high school reforms altered the distribution of students across schools?

We measured the amount of segregation of higher-achieving, male, free or reduced-price lunch, ELL, and special education eligible students by establishing what fraction of students in each group would need to switch schools to evenly distribute each type of student across schools. In 1999-2000 there was a moderate amount of segregation among students entering New York City high schools, with the greatest segregation observed for eighth-grade math and reading proficiency and the least segregation found for the distribution of male and female students across high schools, both for New York City overall and within each of the five boroughs.

Although there are some increases or decreases over time in the segregation of students within boroughs for a particular student characteristic, for the most part students were distributed

The closing of large schools affects the population of other large schools, particularly those nearby.

similarly across the new small schools and existing schools still operating after the period of expansion of

new small high schools and phasing out of large comprehensive high schools. The only notable departures from this pattern are an increase in student segregation by free or reduced-price lunch status in every borough over the past five years; a slight increase in gender segregation in the Bronx and Brooklyn, the boroughs responsible for most new small school foundings; and an increase in special education segregation in the Bronx.

The community response to our findings, presented at a community forum sponsored by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform on September 23, 2009, emphasized the ways in which community members, including principals, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders, experienced the pattern of school closings and openings.

Some participants drew attention to the process by which the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) closed large comprehensive schools. One recurring concern is that the closing of large schools affects the population of other large schools, particularly those nearby. Other participants suggested that how the NYCDOE handles the closing process and communicates information to the communities served by large high schools influences where the students who previously would have been likely to attend a large comprehensive high school eventually enroll.

Other participants emphasized the distinctive challenges facing new small schools. Many participants stated that new small schools face challenges in serving ELL and special education students; they need additional resources and support from the NYCDOE to serve these students successfully. Others expressed concern that as new small schools become more stratified through the forces of the market, some small schools will increasingly resemble failing large schools.

Our recommendations speak to the importance of ongoing monitoring and assessment of the consequences of closing large schools and opening new small schools. We suggest that the population of high schools be viewed as a system in which the fortunes of one school can influence what happens to other schools.

Acknowledging that school foundings and closings have consequences for other schools can help policy-makers design policies and practices that have a better chance of providing all students with access to the educational services and opportunities they need in order to succeed.



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