

# Fulfilling the Promise of School Choice by Building More Effective Supports for Families

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## **Acknowledgments**

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Independent peer review is an integral part of all CRPE research projects. Prior to publication, this document was subjected to a quality assurance process to ensure that: the problem is well formulated; the research approach is well designed and well executed; the data and assumptions are sound; the findings are useful and advance knowledge; the implications and recommendations follow logically from the findings and are explained thoroughly; the documentation is accurate, understandable, cogent, and balanced in tone; the research demonstrates understanding of related previous studies; and the research is relevant, objective, and independent. Peer review was conducted by research or policy professionals who were not members of the project team.

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## Introduction

School choice was once a privilege enjoyed by families who could buy their way into certain neighborhoods or pay for private school tuition. Today, across 47 states and the District of Columbia, families [can enroll](#) their children in a public school outside their neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> In about 200 school districts across the country, [at least one in ten](#) students in the public school system attend charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately operated. In other cities, magnet schools and selective admission schools offer additional options. Cities where all or many schools are available for families to opt into—whether district options, charter schools, or both—have come to be known as high-choice cities.

School choice is intended to give families without resources to buy a home in the “right neighborhood” the opportunity to enroll their children in desirable schools nonetheless. But this theory ignores practical realities. Like other decisions we face in our lives, the ability to *make* a choice doesn’t mean we *have* a good one to make.

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Are parents aware of their options? Do they have the time and resources to navigate the process to secure their choice? Are there any schools even worth choosing? Without affirmative answers to these questions, school choice is unlikely to have the effects its most ardent supporters hope for.

Realizing these various constraints on choosing, education leaders and philanthropists across the country have invested in policies and programs designed to make it easier for families to exercise choice, including transparent reporting of performance data, streamlined application and enrollment systems, and free transportation. But it remains to be seen whether these systems position families to succeed with school choice, or if instead they simply provide the illusion of a level playing field.

We build upon a three-year partnership with D.C. School Reform Now (DCSRN) to understand effective strategies for enabling all families to find success with school choice. Since 2011 DCSRN has sponsored “parent advocates” who help families apply to high-quality schools of choice. After observing advocates working with families over two enrollment cycles, we learned that:

- **A network of community-connected partners help advocates reach and maintain connections with parents.** Community-connected partners, such as schools and social service organizations, help families and advocates build relationships and stay connected during time-sensitive enrollment deadlines.
- **Supporting families to navigate school choice takes patience and persistence but it’s worth the effort.** Maintaining relationships over the course of school enrollment cycles isn’t easy—families move, change their phone numbers, and face extenuating circumstances that can make them hard to reach. But persistent follow-up pays off in helping families enroll in a school of choice.
- **Flexible, one-on-one support can address the routine and unexpected barriers families confront in choosing a school.** Advocates can customize the services they offer families because they have established relationships and are able to scale their services based on family need. In turn, families can get the help they need, whether that involves just a few reminders or more robust support.

- **Advocates can't solve challenges stemming from too few desirable schools—and those challenges loom large for DCSRN families.** In D.C., like in many cities, families run up against the fact that there are too few openings at the most desirable schools, too few quality options close to home, and a lack of instructional models and extracurricular programming that meet family need. Though advocates work with families to locate good options, they can't change which schools are available or guarantee that families can secure a desirable placement.
- **One-on-one support can improve equity, but sustaining and scaling such supports remains an unresolved question.** To date, DCSRN's parent advocates only reach a small share of the families who might benefit from their support. Expanding service is difficult given the costs associated with providing one-on-one support and the lack of reliable sources of funding.

DCSRN's work with families reveals the continued challenges many families confront, even in a city like D.C. which has invested heavily in improving equity in school choice. Their efforts offer suggestive lessons on how cities can improve underserved families' success.

## Improving Equity in Choice

The last decade saw the highest number of families enrolling in schools via choice. But despite investments in new options, not all families are taking advantage of the schools available to them. Based on the results of two multi-city surveys conducted by CRPE in 2014 and again in 2017, underresourced families are much more likely to enroll in their assigned neighborhood school.<sup>2</sup> These same families are also much more likely to be dissatisfied with their current school assignment.<sup>3</sup>

While many factors shape a family's ability and desire to participate in school choice, ample evidence suggests barriers can limit underresourced families' access. According to CRPE's survey data, families struggle to understand eligibility rules and get basic information on schools. Low-income families are more likely to cite these challenges compared to other families.

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Recognizing the challenges confronting families, district and community-based organizations have invested in systems designed to improve access to information and make enrollment more fair and simpler to complete.<sup>4</sup> While these investments can be important, many families continue to struggle with challenges even in cities that have invested in information guides and streamlined enrollment systems.<sup>5</sup>

Cities have also invested in other informational supports, such as citywide "choice" fairs, advertising, media reporting, hotlines, and information sessions. These are often hosted by school districts, charter authorizers, or city agencies. While these methods are essential for raising awareness about the availability of choice, they are passive methods with limited reach. To address lingering gaps nonprofits have emerged to provide targeted services to families choosing schools. These programs tap a "navigator" model that emphasizes hands-on, personalized assistance for families selecting a new school—either district or charter (see "Navigators" in High-Choice Cities).<sup>6</sup>

## “Navigators” in High-Choice Cities

A growing list of organizations offer navigator services that aim to help families overcome barriers to choice. While their service offerings differ, all provide families with personalized, hands-on help:

- **Children at Risk** (Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth): Helps families choose schools via small groups, information workshops, and one-on-one phone-based support sessions.
- **EdNavigator** (New Orleans, Boston): Uses personal education advisors who support families to choose the right school and advocate for their children.
- **Families Empowered** (Houston, San Antonio, Austin): Connects with families via phone and application events to help them get needed information and support to choose a school.
- **Kids First** (Chicago): Works to improve access to high-quality schools by increasing families' access to digestible information about schools and supports them with one-on-one help to navigate the choice process.
- **Memphis Lift** (Memphis): Provides one-on-one support to engage and empower families in poverty to enroll their children in better performing schools. Parent volunteers also help families effectively advocate for their children's needs within school.
- **Oakland Reach** (Oakland): Mobilizes a grassroots network of parent volunteers to provide outreach and support to families who want to find a new school for their children.
- **Parent Revolution** (Los Angeles): Works one-on-one with families to help them navigate the school choice process, from learning about and applying to schools. Its parent-to-parent network aims to expand the impact of providing hands-on help to families.
- **Parents for Great Camden Schools** (Camden): Provides families with the information they need to find the best school for their children by engaging them on education issues and giving hands-on help with the enrollment system.
- **Transformation Alliance** (Cleveland): Connects local leaders with Cleveland families through its School Quality Ambassador program to provide guidance and information about public school options by distributing resources, including the *School Quality Guide*, and providing hands-on help through in-person visits, small group meetings, and public events.

Navigator organizations typically focus their attention on low-income families, families in neighborhoods with low-performing schools, and families whose first language is not English, although no organization will turn away families who are seeking help. Working with schools, day care centers, and community-based organizations, navigators take an active approach to reaching families. Most organizations couple a partnership model with another way of reaching families, such as advertising through community media or hosting application workshops.

The type of support navigators offer differs based on what kinds of barriers exist in a city. In some cases, they focus on alerting families that they have a choice, while in others they help families navigate complicated application processes. Navigators help families make sense of academic ratings in Camden,

New Jersey, where almost every school is failing. Many organizations focus on families transitioning a child to kindergarten, 6th, or 9th grade because they are more likely to be looking for a new school. However, some organizations focus more heavily on a particular transition point, such as 9th grade in the case of Chicago.

As cities look to increase options for choosing schools, how navigator services shape families' experiences—and what their work reveals about the larger systems that shape access to schools—is more important than ever. We take advantage of a three-year research partnership with DCSRN to surface practical lessons around how to improve equity in school choice.

## DCSRN's High Quality Schools Campaign: Targeted Support for D.C. Families

Washington, D.C., hosts one of the nation's most expansive systems of school choice. Families can choose among district and charter schools or they can participate in the city's publicly funded voucher program for private schools.<sup>7</sup> About half of the city's schools are operated by the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), the vast majority of which are open enrollment that allows students to attend on a space-available basis. The other half of schools in the city are charter schools, authorized by the D.C. Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB). Both sectors offer a variety of models, such as Montessori and STEM, and most schools participate in the city's unified application and lottery, *My School DC*, eliminating the need for families to submit separate applications for every school they consider.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to high-choice cities that lack a unified application and lottery, families in D.C. receive a single match at a preferred school. Students have access to free transportation via public transit to any school in the city, and city agencies host a hotline and annual information sessions about school options.

Since 2011 DCSRN has helped families enroll in a high-quality school of choice through the *High Quality Schools Campaign* (HQSC). DCSRN created the HQSC to help underserved families take advantage of choice. DCSRN targets families with school-age children living in Wards 7 and 8—neighborhoods that are home to many economically disadvantaged families.<sup>9</sup>

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Once families are connected with DCSRN, they are assigned a parent advocate who acts as a case manager to support the family through the school choosing process—from school search and application submissions to enrollment in a matched school. For the 2017–2018 campaign, DCSRN employed eight parent advocates who engaged in outreach with the families of 1,109 students. Each parent advocate supports outreach to a caseload of more than 100 families. Advocates spend on average between two and three hours with each family over the course of the campaign but as described below, what this looks like in practice varies depending on family need.

Because DCSRN focuses on improving families' access to high-quality schools, parent advocates frequently discuss school quality with parents and encourage them to prioritize schools that receive higher ratings. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) recently unveiled a new school report card that rates every public school—district and charter—thereby providing a one-stop shop for data on school quality for advocates and the families they serve.<sup>10</sup> Prior to this change, advocates worked from two rating systems: one produced by OSSE and a second produced by DCPCSB.

Advocates begin reaching out to families in December, when the My School DC lottery application is released. For advocates, these initial calls focus on making the offer of assistance, building rapport, verifying contact and other information, and, through a needs assessment, identifying families' preferences for school selection and degree of advocate support. Once a family consents to receiving support, advocates focus on helping families understand and work through the school report card and rating system to identify schools for inclusion on their My School DC application and completing the application paperwork. Applications are due in February for rising 9th graders and March for students entering pre-kindergarten through 8th grade. Lottery results are released on March 31st, at which point advocates engage in follow-up calls with all families to confirm match and waitlist status. Families who receive a match are offered help with the enrollment process, which includes identifying, gathering, and submitting required paperwork in person to schools. For families with children waitlisted at preferred schools, advocates focus on helping them actively manage their waitlist status, which generally includes applying to additional schools with open seats. All enrollment paperwork must be complete by May 1st, otherwise the child's placement is offered to other children on the waitlist.

Before parent advocates begin working with families, DCSRN supports the advocates with formal training to familiarize them with strategies for communicating with families using local resources (e.g., My School DC and local school ratings) and documenting work in DCSRN's internal tracking database. Advocates also participate in weekly group check-ins, which function as opportunities to gain support from peers about what's working and to celebrate wins along the way.

## Studying DCSRN's High Quality Schools Campaign (HQSC)

With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, DCSRN partnered with CRPE in 2016 to conduct an evaluation of the HQSC. This partnership aims to accomplish two goals: (1) inform DCSRN's ongoing work to expand the HQSC and improve their results, and (2) document best practices that can be used by other organizations to improve families' access to high-quality schools.

CRPE's evaluation is grounded in a mixed-methods research design that aims to document the design, implementation, and impact of the HQSC and offer timely recommendations to support improvement. Over the last two years, CRPE has interviewed DCSRN's leadership team, 12 part-time advocates, and 12 parents. We also collected survey responses from 257 participating families about DCSRN's services over the course of two campaign years. During the campaign we observed advocates' staff meetings, tracked the support that advocates provide families by reviewing advocate logs and notes, and interviewed staff at five of DCSRN's partners who support their work. For more information on data sources, see Appendix A.



## Lessons on Building More Effective Systems of Support for Families Choosing Schools

DCSRN's work with families surfaces important lessons around what it takes to ensure all families can access the opportunities school choice provides. DCSRN's parent advocates are positioned to reach the families most isolated by circumstances and mitigate the key challenges they face. While our study is unable to determine causal impacts, families who work with a parent advocate are more likely to complete enrollment in a quality school compared to other families that participate in the My School DC lottery.<sup>11</sup> But the model is more intensive than the alternatives and, as a result, difficult to scale and sustain. To date, reliance on philanthropic funding and the lack of public financing has limited DCSRN's reach. And, like other tools that aim to help families navigate school choice, parent advocates cannot address access challenges stemming from lack of seats in desirable schools and schools located too far from families' homes and workplaces.

### 1. A network of community-connected partners help advocates reach and maintain connections with parents.

Nearly two-thirds of the families working with DCSRN had never participated in the My School DC application and lottery.<sup>12</sup> And, like families in other cities, they didn't always know what choices were available before being contacted by an advocate. As one parent told us, "I didn't even understand the process of what was going on. I thought my child had to go to the neighborhood school, so I was stuck." Contacting families who lack preexisting knowledge of school choice is one of the most challenging, but important, aspects of DCSRN's model.

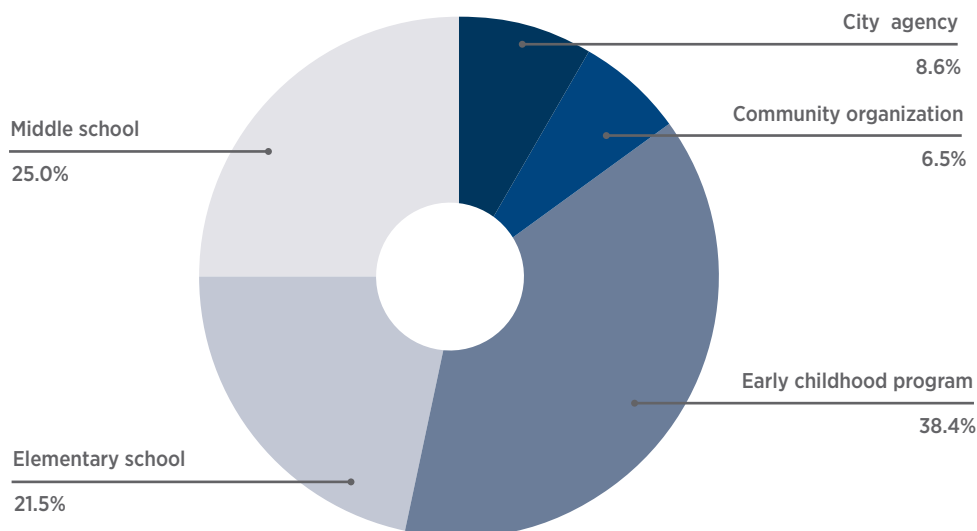
**"I didn't even understand the process of what was going on. I thought my child had to go to the neighborhood school, so I was stuck."**

*—Parent*

When DCSRN began providing navigation services in 2011, its staff contacted families by going door-to-door in Wards 7 and 8—a labor-intensive enterprise. Over time, DCSRN has learned that by strategically targeting and building relationships with partners in the community, they can reach more families and stay connected with those families more effectively than they could without these external relationships.

Partners include schools, community-based organizations, child development centers, and homeless shelters. By leveraging these organizations' existing and ongoing relationships with families, DCSRN is able to reach families regardless of their knowledge of the school choice process. The majority of families become connected with DCSRN through their child's current school (see figure 1), an institution many families already trust.<sup>13</sup>

FIGURE 1. Partners Provide DCSRN with Connections to Families



Source: DCSRN records of parent contacts by provider from the 2017–2018 High Quality Schools Campaign.

Partners also reported benefiting from their relationship with DCSRN since parent advocates could provide families needed services that the partner organization could not provide on its own. A day care provider that DCSRN partners with noted that they didn't have the resources to work with families on school choice applications, even though it is a service they tell families they will provide: "When I was introduced to [DCSRN], I said, 'I could really use you guys as experts to help me.'" A school partner said that since working with DCSRN, more families have submitted applications to the lottery on time. This principal noted, "They bridge the gap between the counselor, the teacher, and the parents."

Schools are invaluable partners because they provide access to families. However, these relationships also come with their own challenges. Schools have their own process for supporting families through the choice process, which sometimes causes confusion and duplicated effort. Secondary schools work directly with students, but parents are not always informed. Sometimes, when a parent advocate attempts to submit an application they developed with a student's parent or guardian, they discover that the student, working through their school, has already submitted another application.

Open communication was identified as an essential ingredient for productive partnerships by both DCSRN staff and partner organizations. DCSRN relies upon partners to maintain connections with families, especially through critical steps—such as just before an application is due. At one of the homeless shelters DCSRN partners with, an advocate shared that the social workers were an important resource: "I couldn't get a hold of [the, family] so [the] social workers were able to facilitate that for me. [The social workers] also sent us families ... that needed assistance."

## 2. Supporting families to navigate school choice takes patience and persistence.

Direct outreach means that advocates do not wait for families to contact them, but this approach requires them to work hard to make the initial contact and to stay in touch with families through the application and enrollment process, which can take three or more months. DCSRN's target families present special challenges in maintaining relationships: they often move to new housing, change their phone numbers,

present with extenuating circumstances such as health issues, and—like many families—have limited time and resources to talk with advocates and review information on school choice.

An advocate's first step is to make a connection, but this is not always easy. As one advocate explained, "I had some families who didn't want to give out information over the phone." Advocates quickly learned that text messages were more effective for initial outreach, given families' reluctance to answer the phone when they do not recognize the caller's number.

Advocates had to become skilled at delivering information quickly and efficiently when they finally reached a parent. Not all advocates could engage in relationship-based, joint searches because parents had limited time. In these cases the advocate collected preferences from parents and later texted or emailed bulleted lists of schools that met the parent's criteria.

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Every advocate said that a combination of persistence and patience is needed for the work of reaching parents. One advocate reflected on her experience during the campaign and said, "The most challenging part in my experience was parents that committed to a date or time [to complete the paperwork] but then you would follow up and a) couldn't reach them or b) the number had changed. You just had to be very persistent ... and not give up." Another advocate reflected on her experience working with a single mother, who she tried unsuccessfully to reach many times: "She [was] going through chemotherapy... It was the last day to submit the application. I was calling her since December almost every day. Literally, on February 28th [the day the application was due] she contacted me late at night... She was like, 'You've been calling me, I'm so sorry I didn't get back to you... I really need your help.'"

Even with persistence, advocates lose touch with families over time as contact information changes. Low-income families commonly use prepaid phones, often changing their phone number as they purchase new phones. As one advocate lamented, "There's a good chunk of parents that I never even got a chance to work with, and that's because they didn't have working numbers."

Despite the challenges, every advocate we spoke with said their persistence paid off. Families' busy schedules, as well as extenuating circumstances, meant that advocates weren't always able to connect the first time they called. But in many cases, continued outreach enabled them to support families who desired help, often connecting just before an application was due or enrollment paperwork needed to be turned in.

### **3. Flexible, one-on-one support can address the routine and unexpected barriers families confront in choosing a school.**

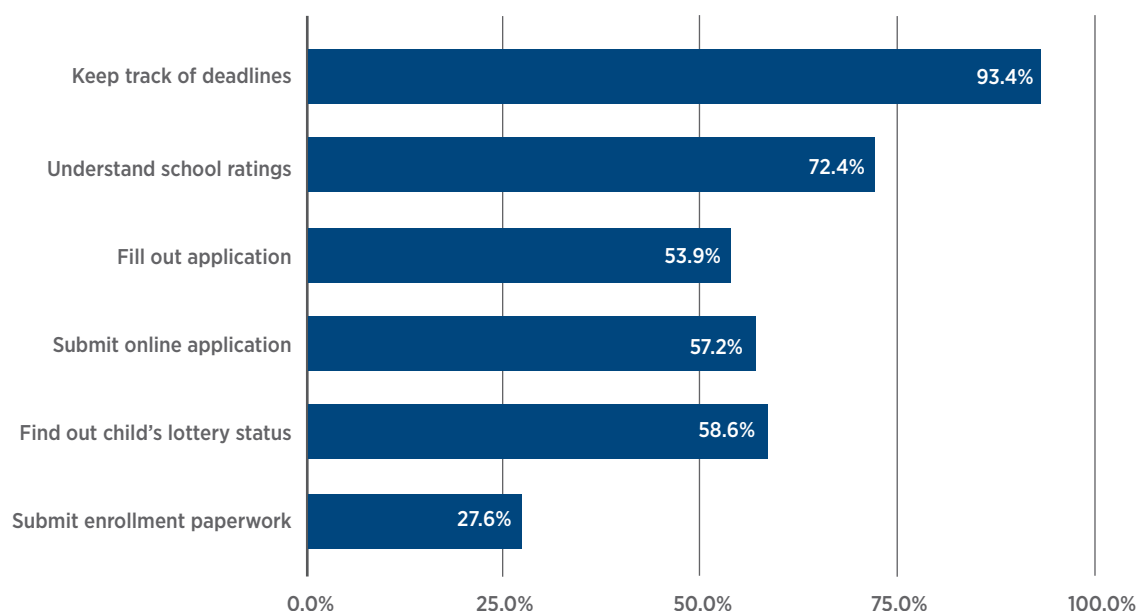
Families enter the choice process with varying knowledge and prior experience, distinctive priorities for schools, and special circumstances that defy simple solutions or easy answers. While advocates provide some common services, such as helping families research schools and submit an application to the My School DC lottery, they tailor their support to meet families' needs and priorities. This helps families who confront unexpected challenges to find success.

DCSRN organizes its services around the process of choosing a school—from engaging in a school search to submitting an application to completing enrollment in a matched school. Families vary in the extent to which they desire support at each stage of the process. For some families, advocates simply offer reminders at key points in the process. Other

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families desire more intensive help. For this group, advocates might research schools, fill out the application on behalf of the family, communicate match results, and work directly with the child’s school and parents to complete enrollment, which could include accompanying the family to the enrollment appointment. Because advocates work one-on-one with each family, they can be responsive to families’ desires for support—whether it involves just a few reminders or more hands-on help.

**FIGURE 2. Partners Take Advantage of a Range of DCSR Services**



*Source:* Post-HQSC survey of participating families. Parents responded to the following survey question: “My parent advocate helped me to: keep track of deadlines, understand school quality ratings, fill out online application, submit online application, find out my child’s lottery results, submit enrollment paperwork in person, provide proof of address, figure out concerns about additional fees (N=158).”

In addition to expressing different needs for support, families also have different desires and constraints that shape whether a school will offer a good fit. A key task for advocates is helping families wade through school information to select one or more schools that meet their priorities. DCSR’s mission is to improve family access to quality schools, which they define through school ratings.<sup>14</sup> But while advocates do recommend schools based on quality, they must balance that with finding a school that is also the right fit—in terms of location, curricular model, programming, and other factors. What that balance looks like will be different for each family. As one advocate described, “I usually narrow it down first by what is feasible... And then based on what they say, I can tailor my recommendations based on any special interest or education tracks... But I always explain that we only recommend high-quality schools.”

And while families face tradeoffs in balancing their priorities for schools, we did not find that DCSR’s emphasis on high-quality schools precluded families from prioritizing schools that met their needs—even if that meant selecting a school that didn’t meet DCSR’s recommendations. Indeed, advocates admitted that at best, they could play only a supporting role: providing information about school quality and guidance about the benefits of enrolling in a quality school.<sup>15</sup>

School guides, like the one offered by My School DC, provide valuable information to families choosing schools but they do not contain all the information families need to make a choice—and they cannot help families overcome all the challenges they may face in the process of choosing a school.

Advocates pick up where informational guides leave off, helping families access or make sense of information that isn't readily available. For example, advocates help families track down information about special education programming and supports for English language learners, which can be difficult to find unless you call individual schools or use informal networks.

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Supporting families with children transitioning to high school brings slightly different and more pronounced challenges in negotiating the choice process. As one advocate reflected, “[For] the ones going into elementary, it was a very basic process of just figuring out what the good schools are in proximity, because for those parents their priority was more about location. But for high school students ... there were a lot more considerations about what specialties the students might be thinking of and what schools would be the best fit.”

And even as advocates offer some services around common touchpoints in the school choice process, they also regularly help families resolve unexpected challenges. As one advocate who served primarily Spanish-speaking families noted, “The biggest problem is the language barrier. A lot of [families] ... didn't know how to read or write [in English].” The parent used the advocate to communicate with school staff because she didn't have anyone else she trusted. For other families, getting to the finish line might mean helping a grandparent establish a child's residency so they can apply on their behalf, or arranging transportation to the school to turn in required enrollment paperwork.

These findings suggest that flexible, one-on-one supports can address the wide variety of challenges families confront in the process of choosing a school. Advocates can customize the services they offer families because they have established relationships and are able to scale their services based on family need. In turn, families can get the help they need, whether that involves just a few reminders or more robust support.

#### **4. Advocates can't solve challenges stemming from too few desirable schools.**

In Wards 7 and 8, where more than 30 percent of school-age children live, just 15 of 39 elementary schools meet DCSRN's quality school guidelines and 8 of those require an application and match through the lottery for admission. The statistics are worse for middle and high school students, with just 6 out of 19 middle schools and 3 of 12 high schools designated as quality schools.

As one advocate lamented, “The challenge came in when you get your results and you're matched to a school that ... wasn't one of your top choices or else you're waitlisted for all schools. It becomes a really difficult situation to be in.” Or as a parent—who did not receive a match to the nearly dozen quality schools she sought out—reflected, “It's kind of hopeless. Because the way the system is set up, [if] you don't have certain money, or you don't live in a certain neighborhood, your child might not be able to be educated appropriately.”

A parent advocate described another challenge: “Transportation was often an issue. A lot of the people that I spoke to didn't drive, and were on the bus, and when we applied for schools, they wanted the best schools on their list, but then it was an issue afterward with work and getting around.” Another told us, “Distance was a huge issue... [T]here are not a lot of high-quality schools [east of the river]. We had a parent who just was like, ‘I can't get my daughter to school. It's too far.’”<sup>16</sup>

Weaknesses in the supply of quality schools was particularly challenging for families with students entering high school. As one advocate explained, “For elementary-age [students], D.C. has a ton of options for quality schools. That number decreases when you talk about middle school and decreases even more when you talk about high school.” A parent of a high school-age student commented, “In high school, there are only three schools that are even worth talking about ... that I would send my child to.”

The availability of extracurricular programs also proved challenging. Nearly half of all families participating in the 2016 needs assessment (N=420) reported desiring a school that offered extracurricular programming. But many of the city’s charter schools do not offer the full range of extracurriculars that families have come to expect, especially at the high school level. According to a 2017 report examining enrichment offerings in three high-choice cities, only about half of schools in D.C. offer any sports program, a significantly smaller share than either Denver or New Orleans.<sup>17</sup> That report also found significant gaps between the sectors in D.C., with charter schools less likely to offer a wide range of enrichment offerings at the high school level. As one advocate reported, “With public charter schools, you don’t often have access to extracurricular activities, sports, things of that nature. You’ve got kids who want to play football, and a lot of these schools don’t have football programs.”

**DCSRN cannot address barriers stemming from too few desirable schools and inadequate programming at existing schools.**

DCSRN cannot address barriers stemming from too few desirable schools and inadequate programming at existing schools. These issues can only be tackled by DCPS, DCPCSB, and other city-level agencies charged with delivering education to the city’s youth.

### **5. One-on-one support can improve inequity, but sustaining and scaling such supports remains an unresolved question.**

DCSRN’s model fills a gap in service for families most in need of support, but the organization only reaches a small share of families who could benefit from support. Expanding service, however, is difficult given the costs associated with providing high-touch support, as well as the lack of public sources of financial support.

DCSRN has been supporting families navigating their school choice options since 2011. Over time, the number of families served has grown—from outreach to 184 families in 2011–12 to more than 1,100 families by 2017–18. But even with that growth, DCSRN only serves a tiny portion of families who might take advantage of their help. In 2018 almost 45,000 children under the age of 18 lived in Wards 7 and 8, and more than one in four of households with children in these neighborhoods lived in poverty.<sup>18</sup>

Estimating the costs associated with providing services or scaling to serve more families is not straightforward. Families vary in the intensity of services they use, changes to the model (for example, lowering advocate caseloads) could increase effectiveness while also increasing costs. Or it could lower costs by improving efficiencies in service delivery. One thing seems clear: reaching more families will require expanding the pool of advocates trained to provide hands-on assistance to families—and securing additional resources to compensate them for their time.

Like similar organizations nationwide, DCSRN is a nonprofit that relies on philanthropic dollars to operate. But while philanthropic support can enable organizations like DCSRN to develop, they can prove more fickle when it comes to scaling and sustaining public service programs over time.

Other organizations providing similar services are looking toward alternative revenue strategies. For example, employers compensate EdNavigator for providing its services as an employment benefit.

EdNavigator currently works with 17 employers in Boston and New Orleans that support more than half of their operating budget (the remainder is supported through philanthropic funds). But this model is limited by the fact that many vulnerable families in need of support may not have regular employment. As a result, serving all families who might benefit from support will require other sources of revenue. Other organizations are hired by schools (or the district) to support families when their school is closing, to help meet enrollment targets, and to involve families in the design and planning for new schools. Another organization is looking to develop a line of paid community engagement services that can support the cost of navigator services.

Other, more sustainable revenue models could capitalize on money already flowing into the K-12 system. Schools and students benefit when families can navigate school choice with confidence. As a testament to this fact, early childhood centers and elementary schools are eager to partner with DCSRN—they recognize the transition is important but lack resources to support counseling through school staff. It remains to be seen whether this interest can translate into public dollars for organizations like DCSRN. Alternately, this could be an opportunity for city agencies to work directly with schools and other nonprofits to improve site-based choice supports. Such an approach could leverage DCSRN’s expertise to build capacity in other organizations through training and workshops.

**More sustainable revenue models could capitalize on money already flowing into the K-12 system. Schools and students benefit when families can navigate school choice with confidence.**

## Conclusion: Improving Equity in School Choice

Organizations like DCSRN have emerged to resolve specific challenges in the school selection process. Even as high-choice cities have invested in strategies to simplify the choice process, too many families still confront challenges that impede their progress and limit their success.

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Perhaps in response to the challenges facing families, the number of organizations like DCSRN has increased in recent years—from three organizations in 2015 to eight organizations across eleven cities by 2019.<sup>19</sup> About half of the expansion has been among existing organizations that have added navigator services.

As organizations like DCSRN reach more cities, an expanded evidence base is needed. What outreach strategies are most effective at reaching families isolated by circumstance? How should these services be organized to maximize effectiveness? And perhaps most importantly, do these supports improve students’ success in school?

While nonprofit navigators are increasingly common in high-choice cities, there may be other types of organizations that can perform this work, thereby expanding the reach of existing resources. Schools employ guidance counselors whose caseloads are typically too large to enable more intensive supports for families choosing schools. School staff might also be reluctant to support families in leaving institutions that they are connected to and support. Whether additional training and support could overcome these challenges remains to be seen and should be a priority for future research.<sup>20</sup>

DCSRN's parent advocates are uniquely positioned to contribute solutions to the challenges emerging in high-choice cities. Unlike school districts and other government agencies, advocates have firsthand accounts of how school choice is playing out on the ground. Leveraging their experience—as well as the experiences of other navigator organizations around the nation—should be a priority for city agencies charged with regulating the system of schools.

Our results also call into question the role choice tools have in improving equity in school choice. Like a number of other high-choice cities around the country, Washington, D.C., has invested in tools that aim to make the process of choosing a school easier and more equitable, such as parent guides and a common application and lottery for district and charter schools. But as DCSRN's work with families suggests, these tools cannot provide a full resolution to the challenges families confront and as a result may work better with the hands-on help parent advocates provide.

Education and civic leaders committed to ensuring all families can benefit from the expansion of school choice must do more to level the playing field. This includes:

**1. Providing public support for navigator services.** The need is clear: cities cannot expect self-serve resources such as information guides to reach all families or resolve all the challenges they may confront in the school choosing process. School systems and cities should actively support navigator services with resources for families in need. This could include public investments in financially supporting these services through outside organizations, or efforts to leverage case managers, social workers, and guidance counselors in existing social service and education agencies.

**2. Working with parent support organizations to identify and address problems in the school system.** DCSRN's work with families exposes the barriers families confront and the gaps in existing systems that limit families' success. What do families most want to know about schools? What barriers are families running into when searching for information, applying to schools, or completing enrollment? Organizations that support families in the school choice process, like DCSRN, are in a position to be conduits of information between families and city agencies on emerging challenges. They are also uniquely poised to contribute solutions to these challenges and pressure-test ideas with families. But making good on any of these possibilities requires greater collaboration between the nonprofit and city, as well as a willingness on the part of agencies to investigate the concerns that are raised. This requires routinizing communication between organizations and making sure nonprofits that work directly with families participate in advisory boards or committees that shape city education policy. In building space for these organizations to contribute, city leaders can create opportunities to be more responsive to families' challenges, an area of weakness in many places.

**3. Incorporating activities from navigator services into other, less high-touch informational supports.** Most cities with a larger share of charter schools or district schools of choice host choice fairs, hotlines, or workshops. School systems could expand these services based on lessons learned from organizations like DCSRN. For example, DCSRN has helped hundreds of families to complete the online application process simply by hosting evening events staffed with advocates and computers—districts and schools could easily do the same. School districts could automatically share information about school applications with all families and provide text and email reminders about application deadlines.



Leaders from organizations like DCSRN have key roles to play in resolving the challenges families experience with choice. To be effective, they must:

**1. Cultivate relationships with partner organizations.** Partner organizations can provide a critical conduit to reach and maintain connections with families and can serve as resources: connecting families with information that supports their success with school choice. To support families in navigating school choice, leaders should look to partner with organizations that families are already connected with. DCSRN and its partners identified greater success when the two organizations shared a common vision and established clear norms for engagement.

**2. Build evidence and work toward continuous improvement.** The work of organizations like DCSRN is still relatively new. We do not yet know what outreach or service strategies are most effective, but this information is critical as funders and the public look to build upon this work and reach more families. Organizations should focus on collecting data and evidence to understand effectiveness and impact, especially as it relates to strategies for reaching and supporting the families furthest from opportunity. Some of this work is internal but navigator organizations must also work toward partnerships with researchers who can rigorously assess program impacts.

**3. Assess costs and plan for sustainability.** Most of the organizations doing this work rely upon philanthropic support to offer services. If this is to change, the first step is to understand how much it costs to support families toward success with school choice. This may differ based on family need and circumstance, but without a better idea of what it costs to provide higher-touch support, we cannot identify strategies to financially sustain the work in the years ahead. It is also important to identify efficiencies in service, which will likely differ from city to city. These include identifying partner organizations that already work well with families, selecting methods of contact that work best—for example, texting versus making calls—and identifying the right window of time to be in touch with families. Navigator tools may also improve efficiency, such as matrices with school information that navigators can use to advise families.

DCSRN's work with families provides powerful evidence about both the opportunities and challenges that come with navigating school choice. Families we spoke with celebrated their success in securing a place at a school that they felt would improve their children's chances later in life. But they also lamented the dearth of quality options and struggled to navigate a process perceived to be full of stumbling blocks. Whether these issues can be addressed will ultimately shape whether school choice lives up to its promise.

## Appendix A. Description of Major Data Sources

Data Source	Description
Weekly staff meetings with advocates (N=31)	Observations of weekly staff meetings with advocates during campaign. Observations recorded in semi-structured summary sheet focused on identifying successes, challenges, and resources related to advocates work with families.
Interviews with advocates (N=12)	Semi-structured interviews with advocates in 2016-17 and 2017-18 campaigns. Each interview analyzed to understand both the families' and the advocates' experiences with the HQSC.
Interviews with participating parents (N=12)	Semi-structured interviews with participating parents. Each interview analyzed to understand how the HQSC shaped families' experiences with choice.
Interviews with partners (N=5)	Semi-structured interviews with key staff at partner organizations that work with DCSRN on the HQSC. Each interview analyzed to understand the costs and benefits of partnering and opportunities to strengthen partnerships.
Program data	Program data on participating families collected by parent advocates.
Needs Assessment (N=420)	Pre-campaign survey of participating families administered and recorded by advocates in 2016-17 campaign year. Questions focused on families' priorities for schools and needs for support. Complete needs assessments available for 420 out of 808 families in the HQSC network.
Post-HQSC Survey (N=257)	Post-campaign survey of participating families delivered via text message in 2016-17 and 2017-18 campaign years. Questions focused on family satisfaction and experience with HQSC. 2016-17 response rate (N=158): 49.7%. 2017-18 response rate (N=99): 33%.

## Endnotes

1. This may include nonassigned schools within the district or schools located outside the district.
2. In 2014 these cities were Baltimore, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Oakland, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C. In 2017 Baltimore and Philadelphia were replaced with Memphis and Oakland.
3. In 2017 we did a crosstabs analysis of families who enrolled their children in an assigned school despite being dissatisfied with it. While this only applied to 41 percent of families making \$75,000 or more, nearly three in four (72 percent) families making below \$35,000 enrolled in assigned schools even when they were not satisfied with that school.
4. Christine Campbell, Georgia Heyward, and Betheny Gross, *Stepping up: How Are American Cities Delivering on the Promise of School Choice?* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017); Betheny Gross and Christine Campbell, *A Guide to Unifying Enrollment: The What, Why, and How for Those Considering It* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).
5. Christine Campbell et al., *Unifying Enrollment in Camden: How Families Experienced the New Enrollment System* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2016); Ashley Jochim et al., *How Parents Experience Public School Choice*, (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2014).
6. The groups are: Children First (Chicago), EdNavigator (Boston, New Orleans), Families Empowered (Austin, Houston, San Antonio), Oakland Reach, Memphis Lift, Parents for Great Camden Schools (Camden, NJ), Parent Revolution (Los Angeles), and the Transformation Alliance (Cleveland).
7. DCSRN only supports families participating in public school choice and does not assist families with voucher applications.
8. Steven Glazerman and Dallas Dotter, “Market Signals: Evidence on the Determinants and Consequences of School Choice from a Citywide Lottery,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 39 no. 4 (December 2017): 593–619.
9. According to an Urban Institute study, the vast majority of D.C.’s economically disadvantaged residents are located east of Anacostia River (Wards 7 and 8). A variety of factors were considered in the study’s assessment of economic disadvantage, including the unemployment rate, share of residents with less than a high school diploma, and percentage of households headed by a single mother. See Jonathan Schwabish and Gregory Acs, “Mapping economic challenges in DC,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, April 13, 2015.
10. In December 2018 the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) in D.C. unveiled a new school report card that rates all public schools, district and charter. Under this system, DCSRN encourages families to prioritize schools that are rated with 3 stars or above. OSSE, “Mayor Bowser Unveils New School Report Card and STAR Rating System, Giving Families Easy Access to Reliable and Common Information about All Public Schools,” news release, December 7, 2018.
11. Match-to-enrollment rate in the 2016 enrollment cycle, author’s personal communication with My School DC official, September 21st, 2017.
12. According to DCSRN’s internal tracking database of program participants (N=808) in the 2016–2017 school year.
13. One way that DCSRN manages its school-based partnerships is by agreeing to provide services only to those families in transition grades.
14. School ratings in D.C. are based on the STAR framework, which includes data points on student achievement, student growth, English language proficiency, school environment metrics, and graduation rate for high schools.
15. One concern with DCSRN’s focus on quality schools is the possibility that advocates will steer families toward high-quality schools that may not meet other family needs and priorities. We leveraged our interviews to assess whether this tension shaped advocates’ work or parents’ experiences. While interviewees could speak to the tension, none suggested that it resulted in families being pressured into suboptimal school choice decisions.

16. For an exploration of the possibilities—and limitations—of improving access through transportation policy in Denver, see: Betheny Gross and Patrick Denise, *Can Public Transportation Improve Students' Access to Denver's Best Schools of Choice?* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).
17. Betheny Gross et al., *Are City Schools Becoming Monolithic? Analyzing the Diversity of Options in Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).
18. "2019 Demographics, Summary Data for City: District of Columbia," DC Health Matters website, last modified January 2019.
19. Based on author scan of high choice cities. See Campbell, Heyward, and Gross, *Stepping Up*.
20. For a look at how school counselors shape the implementation of school choice, see Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj et al., "Surviving at the Street Level: How Counselors' Implementation of School Choice Policy Shapes Students' High School Destinations," *Sociology of Education* 91, no. 1 (January 2018): 46-71.