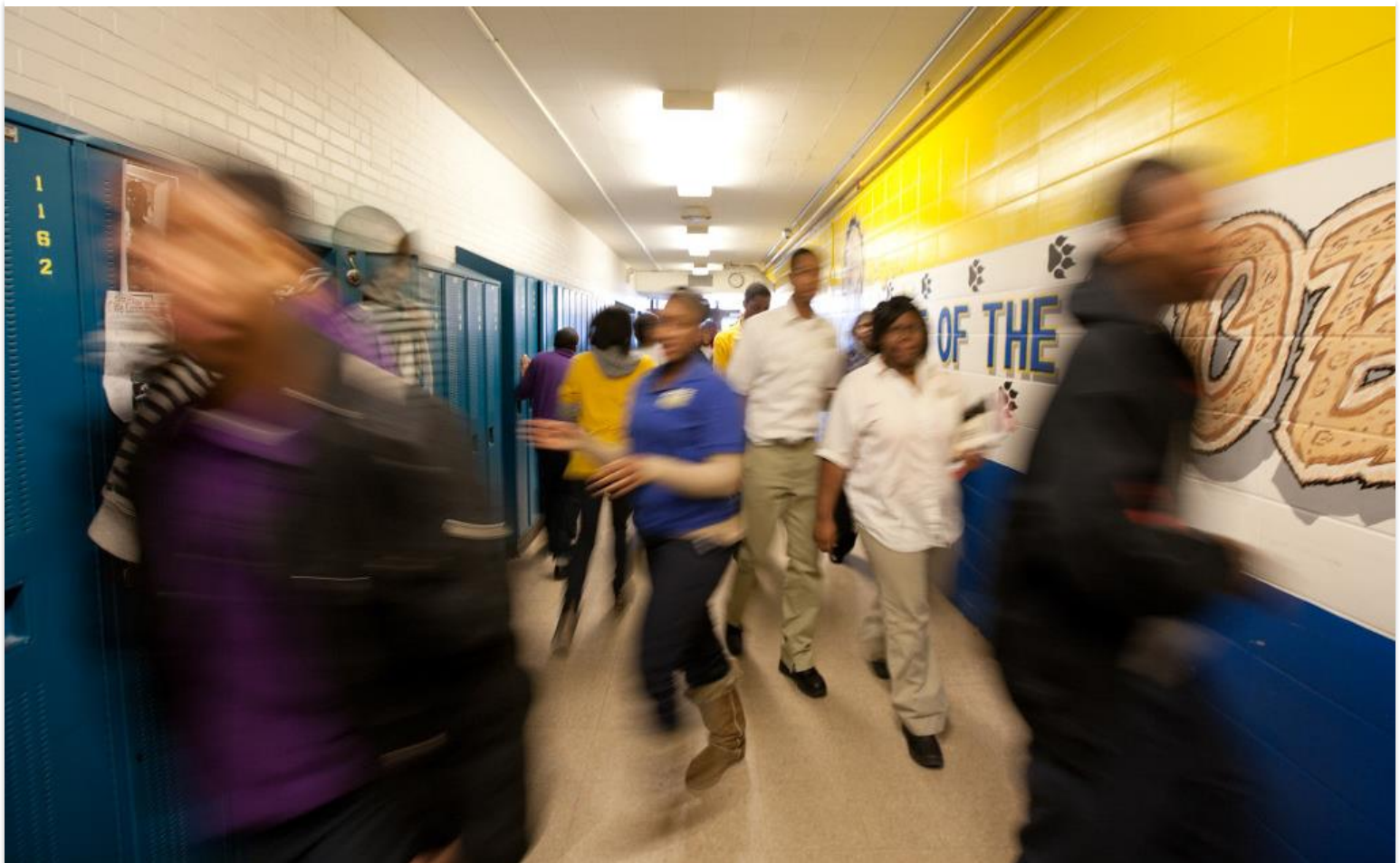


RESEARCH BRIEF JULY 2021

Student Experience with the High School Choice Process in Chicago Public Schools



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Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the staff from Chicago Public Schools and the Academy for Urban School Leadership for their willingness to share data and their openness to years of research partnerships. The current report built on the work of research teams who undertook the evaluation in earlier years. The University of Chicago Urban Labs commenced the evaluation at the start of the initiative and provided interim reports on the first two years of the initiative, with a team that included Lisa Barrow, Valerie Michelman, Maddy Aden, and Sarah Emmons. This brief benefited from the initial leadership of Jennie Jiang and communications support from Jessica Puller, Alida Mitau, and Lisa Sall. I also received essential support and critical feedback from Elaine Allensworth. I also thank Consortium colleagues who provided feedback on the content of this report, including Marisa de la Torre, Nicole Williams Beechum, John Easton, David Stevens, and Jessica Tansey. Thank you to Consortium Steering Committee member Shazia Miller and Urban Education Institute’s Ashley Leonard and Jennifer Ciok who provided feedback to the penultimate draft report.

This study was supported by the Crown Family Philanthropies. I thank them for their support and collaboration with this project.

The UChicago Consortium greatly appreciates support from the Consortium Investor Council that funds critical work beyond the initial research: putting the research to work, refreshing the data archive, seeding new studies, and replicating previous studies. Members include: Brinson Family Foundation, CME Group Foundation, Crown Family Philanthropies, Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Lewis-Sebring Family Foundation, McCormick Foundation, McDougal Family Foundation, Osa Family Foundation, Polk Bros. Foundation, Spencer Foundation, Steans Family Foundation, and The Chicago Public Education Fund.

Introduction

Students and families in Chicago are increasingly taking up school choice options offered by the school district. In the last five years, about 75 percent of eighth-grade students have decided to attend a high school other than the one designated by their neighborhood of residence.¹ Prospective high school students and their families have 160 high schools to choose from. These options include a broad variety of schools in governance, size, academic approach, and programs offered. To streamline the school application process, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) launched GoCPS, an online application platform for high schools, in the fall of 2017.² Though some schools and programs may have specific application requirements with differing admission parameters, students apply to all schools through the same application system. Students are able to apply to selective enrollment high schools (SEHS) and other choice programs and schools including charters, Career and Technical education programs (CTE), military and arts programs, as well as neighborhood high schools outside a students' attendance areas all using the GoCPS platform.³

Studies of school choice have largely been outcomes-focused—using quantitative data to show how choice policies expand educational opportunities for students or assess how they have influenced student outcomes.⁴ While qualitative investigations of school choice have typically focused on how parents choose a school for their children.⁵ For older students, the process may become a joint endeavor for a student and their family. This is especially true of adolescents who have been found to take an active role in the process as they mature.⁶ Therefore, if we hope to understand the process of high school choice, it is essential to include student voices and experiences.

In 2018 and 2019, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) released two studies that described the GoCPS process in detail, and showed patterns in applications, offers, and resulting enrollments in high schools.⁷ Those studies found the GoCPS system worked as intended, in terms of its technical specifications, and that almost all students received an offer to one of their top school choices. But the GoCPS system did not improve equity in the types of schools in which students enrolled, even though this was one of the goals of district leaders. The studies also showed that Black students and students from neighborhoods with the lowest incomes were least likely to put highly-rated schools at the top of their application list, even as they were most likely to apply to a large number of schools. It also found that many students were ineligible for programs to which they applied because they did not complete extra requirements, such as an informational meeting. These studies used data on

¹ Chicago Public Schools (n.d.b.).

² Barrow & Sartain (2017).

³ Barrow & Sartain (2019).

⁴ Beets & Tang (2016).

⁵ Bell (2009a); Bell (2009b); Hamilton & Guin (2005).

⁶ Phillippo, Griffin, Del Dotto, Castro, & Nagi (2019).

⁷ Barrow, Sartain, & de la Torre (2018); Barrow & Sartain (2019).

applications and enrollment to evaluate GoCPS as an application system, but did not (and could not, based on the data and methods used) answer questions that arose about why students made decisions about which schools to apply to and attend, and how students experienced the search and application process.

At the same time, the UChicago Consortium was conducting an evaluation of the North Lawndale Cluster Initiative (NLCI)—a strategy to improve outcomes in neighborhood schools in the North Lawndale area, run for CPS by the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL).⁸ This study included focus groups with eighth-grade students about their experiences in the high school search and application process.

This brief offers key insights from that qualitative study and illuminates how eighth-grade students in three CPS elementary/middle schools experienced the school choice process in Chicago, shortly after GoCPS was implemented. These student experiences offer important considerations about school choice policies and practices for educators, policymakers, and researchers.

Specifically, this brief addresses how students navigated the school choice process, including their experiences researching, applying to, and selecting a school, and addresses the following research questions:

- 1.** Choice Factors: What factors did students consider when choosing which high schools to apply to?
- 2.** School Exploration: How and from what sources did students learn about potential high schools?
- 3.** Application Process: How did students experience the application process using GoCPS?

⁸ Allensworth & Zou (2020).

An Overview

- GoCPS offer online and paper applications in English & Spanish
- Guaranteed admission to general education program at neighborhood school
- Two rounds of application and admissions

Learn, Search & Explore

- Programs vs. Schools—applications to schools other than the designated neighborhood school will primarily be applications to specific programs within a school rather than the school itself
- Programs: Selective Enrollment vs. Choice
 - Choice programs: includes International Baccalaureate (IB), military, arts and CTE programs as well as charter schools
 - Selective Enrollment programs: includes academic programs at SEHS
- Eligibility requirements: students may apply to any school for which they meet the basic eligibility requirements. GoCPS online platform will show students programs to which they are eligible to apply.

Rank schools in order of true preference

- Select and rank up to 20 “Choice Programs”
- Select and rank up to 6 Selective Enrollment Programs

Admission Factors

- Rank order of programs on application
- Seats available in each program
- Program admission process
 - Lottery-based admission for charter and CTE schools
 - Points-based admission for SEHS and International Baccalaureate (IB), military and arts programs
- Applicable priority preferences (siblings, proximity)
- Supplementary admission requirements or screening results

Acceptance notifications

- Single best offer
 - Choice Program
 - Selective Enrollment Program
- Waitlist—for Choice Programs for which there were limited seats

Study Background

The North Lawndale Cluster Initiative Context

The student experiences described in this brief come from one area of the city—North Lawndale, in schools that were part of an initiative that provided resources to four elementary (Pre-K–8) schools and one high school for a range of supports from pre-k through high school, including funding for full day pre-k, teacher professional development, social-emotional learning programs, and advising to apply to, and prepare for, high school and college.⁹ Though this is a case study that may not be generalizable to all students in other schools, it would be imprudent to write off the insights raised by this qualitative study as it sheds light on the student experience using their own voices.

NLCI schools serve very specific populations of students; 98 percent of students are Black and 98 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. These schools may be different from others because they had supports through the initiative for SEL programming. All of the schools used a curriculum called 6to16, a college-readiness and social capital-based curriculum designed to provide students with the knowledge, beliefs, and skills to select, enter, and successfully graduate from college. As part of this curriculum, students received assistance with the high school search, application, and choice process. Other schools in the district also used the 6to16 curriculum, but not all schools in the district may have had dedicated staff time to help students with the process.

The previous districtwide GoCPS study noted that Black students were less likely to place schools with the highest ratings at the top of their application lists—and Black students comprise more than one-third of all CPS students and one-half of all charter students.¹⁰ District leaders were hoping that GoCPS would facilitate these students enrolling in high-performing high schools. A regional analysis of Chicago public schools serving the West Side reports that there are 15 high schools in the area the majority of which (10) are rated as Level 2 schools. They also report that the racial composition of the West Side where NLCI schools are located is predominantly Black and has an average free or reduced-price lunch rate of 88 percent.¹¹ Given where the NLCI schools are situated geographically and the majority Black population, they provided a meaningful site to examine the student experience of the school choice process to provide further insight into those previous findings.

⁹ Allensworth & Zou (2020).

¹⁰ Barrow & Sartain (2019).

¹¹ Chicago Public Schools (n.d.b.).

Data Used in This Brief

As part of the evaluation of the NLCI, the research team conducted focus groups of eighth-grade students to learn about their experiences in the high school search and application process, an area that school leaders had identified for in-depth study. We conducted seven focus groups across three schools in the cluster initiative in the spring of 2018, the same school year studied by Barrow and Sartain (2019). A total of 38 eighth-grade students participated. No demographic data was collected for the participants. The focus group protocols were intentionally designed to focus on students' experience with the school choice process, which included researching potential schools, considering school options, negotiating the application process, and finally choosing a high school to attend in the coming year. Student responses were analyzed using inductive and deductive approaches across and within schools to allow for a better understanding of how experiences differed across and within schools. The findings from those focus groups are described in this report.

Choice Factors

What factors did students consider when choosing which high schools to apply to?

Previous research on school choice has identified multiple factors which families take into consideration when selecting a school for their child. Families consider the proximity of potential schools to their home,¹² as well as their convenience,¹³ and perceived safety.¹⁴ School quality, including its academic reputation¹⁵ and the match of the school to personal values¹⁶ are also common considerations of parents. The students we spoke to identified several of these factors that have been established in school choice research, as well as additional factors that shaped which schools they researched, applied to, and ultimately selected.

We found that choice factors arose throughout the entire school choice process. Analytical investigations into factors shaping the selection of a school for enrollment in a school choice environment have often focused on the final selection, yet our discussions with students revealed that factors relevant to choice arose throughout the entire process of researching, applying to, and selecting a high school for enrollment. The narrowing of potential school options was based on identification of key consideration factors which solidified through the application process. Factors which shaped students' search process stemmed from their own interests as well as advice from friends, family, and school staff. Our discussions with students revealed three main categories of consideration factors (see Table 1) and two overarching concepts which were salient to the choice process:

Three consideration factors:

1. Setting—school location, distance from home, and transportation logistics
2. School—characteristics, reputations, rating, and impressions of school
3. Students—identities, personally and within social contexts

Considerations of these factors were often related to two overarching ideas:

1. What makes a "good" school
2. Importance of fit between a student and school

¹² Bell (2009b); Stevens, de la Torre, & Johnson (2011).

¹³ Hamilton & Guin (2005).

¹⁴ Armor & Peiser (1997).

¹⁵ Armor & Peiser (1997); Schneider, Teske, & Marhsall (2000).

¹⁶ Godwin, Kemerer, & Martinez (1998); Lee, Croninger, & Smith (1996).

Setting Factors

School location and distance from a student's home limited the set of schools which students considered.

Considerations of *setting* focused on the location of potential schools and the perceived safety of the school and surrounding neighborhood. The key importance of location in school choice is well documented in the literature¹⁷ and again confirmed through this work. The centrality of the location factor in the choice was furthered in three ways: 1) Almost all students reported receiving direct instruction at school on how to map the distance from their home to potential schools; 2) while almost all other school supports for the process varied, there was consistency with which location tracking reinforced verbal messages from staff and family that distance and related transportation logistics should be a central consideration in choosing schools which to apply and in the final decision; and 3) students routinely mentioned advice from staff, family, and friends to consider schools that were nearer their home, as well as to pick the closest school when making their decision. One student captured the ubiquity of location in messaging about school choice saying, "My mom said the same as everybody. She just said pick a school that's closest to you."

School staff encouraged students to think about potential consequences of school location in terms of how the commute had the potential to deter attendance, increase tardiness, and leave less time for homework and relaxation at the end of the day. Students' noted that their families tended to make the same point, but focused students' attention on how weather and seasonal changes could impact the commute. One student provided an example of his mother's advice, saying: "Pick somewhere that's closer to home because you've gotta think about the rainy days, the snow days, and how you're gonna transport there." Some students also reported that their parents would not be available to take them to school, so they needed to be able to handle things on their own. Overall, location was a key factor both in constraining the pool of potential schools students considered for application and in their ultimate school decision.

"Pick somewhere that's closer to home because you've gotta think about the rainy days, the snow days, and how you're gonna transport there."

—Student's mom

¹⁷ Bell (2009b).

School Factors

Students outlined multiple characteristics, reputations, and impressions of school-specific factors that guided their research and school selection including organizational characteristics, academics and sports, and auxiliary programs.

The availability of *sports* and other extracurricular programs was the most mentioned choice factor across all focus groups. Students repeatedly reported using the web to research the afterschool options offered by schools. The specific program desired varied depending on the student, but sports programs, especially basketball, were most commonly mentioned. While students brought up consideration of auxiliary programs throughout the process, it was most common during the research phase. Only a few students brought up sports as a determining factor in their final school decision.

Students in all but one focus group reported considering *academic factors* during the school choice process. Interestingly, discussion of which academic factors students considered was highly granular, compared to the way they described other factors, though they still reflected the individual preferences of the students. Academic aspects considered included course offerings, instructional approach, and perceived difficulty of the school. When considering a potential school's course offering, students often desired a school with a wide variety, associating this with a school's "goodness." Other students noted looking for schools with a specific academic and technical program or instructional approach which reflected their career goals and preferred learning styles. Though these students considered multiple factors in their school selection process, the most prominent factor was academic in focus. For example, one student outlined their desire for an interactive learning environment saying:

"With my school that I pick, it's a project-based school so like I don't really like them giving me work like that and just teaching us. With that, they like want teachers to come in and help us with the projects and stuff. That's what we're doing like mostly with our classes. So that's why I picked the school. I picked a small school because I'm used to like the small school with less kids. So instead of them giving us like finals, we get like—at the finals we take, we do projects. We don't like write essays or nothing."

While another student highlighted how their career interests guided their school selection to the omission of competing consideration factors, saying:

"I was just looking for a culinary arts school where I could have done different activities and everything. I wanted to go to Clemente for culinary arts and also arts. And, also, I didn't let what other people had to say about the school affect my choice of whether I was supposed to go that school or not. Some of the kids were just telling me not to go because they were gonna end up going. And, yeah, it was just like, no way, I don't care if you're going or not. I'm going there, too."

Many students reported noting school ratings as a general factor in their consideration of schools, yet they largely focused on more granular data about schools.

Lastly, students repeatedly talked about taking into account the perceived difficulty of a school during the application and choice process. Students' determinations of how 'hard' or 'easy' a particular school was varied in their construction, but the amount of homework was a consistently appearing element. Often student considerations of a school's difficulty level were framed in terms of messaging and expectations about high school. Students across all schools reported receiving messaging about the increased demands and autonomy expectations which shaped how they assessed potential schools. One student summarized how he understood the messaging from school staff about high school thusly: *"Nobody is gonna be able to hold my hand through high school. I'm gonna have to learn how to be responsible with what I do with my education and everything."* Several students shared this interpretation, noting how they had been told high school would be more difficult generally, which often translated to considerations of what they believed they could handle on their own. Students also talked about considerations of a school's perceived difficulty in comparison to how prepared they felt for high school, *"If you're going to a hard school, make sure you know like what's coming for you."* For many students, the perceived difficulty of a school was primarily framed as an important element of fit between a school and student. Students' alignment of the perceived difficulty of a school with fit did not take into consideration the ways in which schools offer student supports. As such, student conceptions of fit might rely heavily on what they think they can accomplish on their own, as opposed to with school-based supports.

Organizational characteristics of schools were taken into consideration as students constructed lists of potential schools.

Multiple students reported taking into account various organizational characteristics, such as student-teacher ratio, class size, and dress and discipline codes of the schools they were considering. Though rare, a few students reported considering the size of classes offered by schools and how they believed that might impact their learning opportunities. For example, one student said: *"One of the schools that I picked, they've got small classes, no more than 12 to 15 people. So I figured I'm gonna be able to learn in a small class with a teacher there."* The dress code policy of potential schools was also taken into consideration by

"One of the schools that I picked, they've got small classes, no more than 12 to 15 people. So I figured I'm gonna be able to learn in a small class with a teacher there."

—Student

multiple students. It is worth noting that all students in our sample attended schools with dress codes, prompting some to use it as an important choice factor in defining their school choice set. For example, one student said: *"I'm tired of wearing a uniform so that's like I pick for all my schools is a school that did not have to wear a uniform."* While some students' consideration of dress code was a response to their previous experience, a handful of others related dress codes to school quality as one student did when they said: *"So if you don't have no dress code. It's probably a bad school."* Students' discussion of school discipline was similar to considerations of dress codes, with some students desiring what they perceived as more lax discipline policies and enforcement while others associated strict discipline with "good" schools.

Student Factors

Students centered themselves in the school choice process taking into consideration aspects of identity, both personally and within social contexts, and aspirations.

In addition to considering setting and school-specific choice factors during the research and application process, students highlighted three common *personal and social factors* taken into consideration beyond fit, the social aspect of the schools, and a student's goals and personal connections.

Several students mentioned taking social considerations into account when searching for a school. The social desirability of a school for students we spoke with demonstrated a spectrum of considerations and perspectives. Some students looked for schools with populations which aligned with their personal preferences. For two students there was a preference for a school with a diverse student body, *"I want to go to a school where it was different cultures there...Like I want to surround myself with different people. So I went with a school that's like—the diversity was real good."*

"I wanted to go to a school where not a lot of people go, but enough people I know that'll help me once I first start and they'll guide me around. 'Cause I know at first I be so scared, so lost, and everything."

—Student

A few students identified the presence of friends or family members at a specific school as an important consideration in deciding to attend. Some students actively disregarded social considerations in lieu of other factors, *"Don't just pick a school because your friends are going there. It's important to pick what's best for you."* While others identified a desire to ensure some degree of social safety net is in place as they transition to a new school. Several students desired a school which would allow them to meet new people while also having a small number of familiar friends. On repeated occasions students talked about the value of a small known social circle in terms of easing the high school transition as when one student said: *"I wanted to go to a school where not a lot of people go, but enough people I know that'll help me once I first start and they'll guide me around. 'Cause I know at first I be so scared, so lost, and everything."* While another framed it in terms of how it would support his personal goals as well as reaffirming the importance safety plays in assessing potential schools, he said:

"I don't want to go to a school where I know a lot of people 'cause then they might get me in trouble. I ain't trying to get in trouble. I'm trying to go somewhere with my life. I'm gonna go somewhere I don't know a lot of people, but I do know some people. So in case somebody tries to beat me up and chase me home after school somebody helps."

Just as this student's desire for a small existing social circle was linked to his perceived ability to stay on track for success, a handful of other students talked about assessing potential high schools' ability to adequately prepare them for college and provide support in getting into college and locating potential scholarships.

Some students assessed potential high schools in terms of the personal goals more generally, like one student who said, "*choose a high school that can help you achieve what you want to do in life.*" While others were more specific in what they were looking for, like a student who prioritized a school that they believed would "*get you into college with a scholarship.*" Lastly, students' personal connections to a school were a consideration factor for some. Though personal connections were most commonly cited as lending desirability to a specific school, occasionally it was a deterrent, as when one student removed a school from consideration because their cousins attended and going to school with them "*wouldn't be smart.*" Similarly, to school-based consideration factors, the personal and social factors considered by students highlight an important element in students' choice process—their knowledge of self both in terms of what facilitates their learning and what they hope to achieve.

“Good” Schools

In theory, the CPS choice policy is designed to improve access to high-quality educational opportunities for all students. As noted above, research into choice reveals that families and students not only consider a variety of factors in addition to school quality, but that the interpretation of school quality itself is variable. The way in which students and families define a high-quality or “good” school has implications for schools and choosers alike. Therefore, we asked students how they determined which potential high schools were “good” or better than others. Their responses ranged from the anticipated “[by] how they rank the high schools” to multi-dimensional assessments shaped by their own perspective and the advice and guidance of others. One student’s definition of a “good” school illuminated the complexity with which they evaluated quality. They said: “Like, it’s like it got Spanish class, arts class, sports, and it’s like there ain’t no bullying there. And they got like some afterschool programs, too.” For them school quality included concrete elements, such as the variety of academic and extracurricular offerings as well as their perception of social safety. For another student, the quality of school was defined by the experience provided and its ability to prepare students for high school. They said:

“I feel like different high schools, they’ll push you to – I think it all depends on the high school that you go to. So I feel like if you go to like a good high school that gonna push you to do what you gotta do, then it’s gonna be different. Classwork gonna be different. They’re gonna push you so you could get ready for college. But I feel like if you’re going to like one of these high schools that don’t count, then that’s all on you. It all depends on what you make it.”

This student also assigned some agency and power to the students and their ability to get the most out of whatever high school they selected. For them, and a few other students, school quality was not viewed as a fixed quality, but one that was shaped by those participating in that environment. For some, this perspective on school quality was closely tied to the importance of fit between a student and their selected school. While most students acknowledged the desire to attend a “good” school, definitions of “good” often reflected personal wants and needs more closely associated with fit.

Student-School Fit

Considerations of fit between a student and potential schools was paramount in how students thought about choosing schools. Though sports and extracurricular programs may have been the most discussed consideration factor, the consideration of fit—the specific alignment between student and school—was an overarching theme in all focus groups across all phases of the choice process. The concept of fit is one of two key components of the 6to16 curriculum, in its attempt to support students in the school choice process. Previous research found that Success Coordinators and counselors described high school fit as including academic aspects and support systems offered and their potential alignment with student

priorities and needs as well as logistical considerations such as school location and required commute.¹⁸ This broad, inclusive definition of fit was also evident in the way students described school consideration factors with regards to their identities, priorities, and goals. The importance given to fit was apparent when students were asked what advice they would give future students going through the choice process and their most common response was *"choose the school that is best for you."* The notion of fit was not an isolated factor but more so, a way of centering the importance of an individual student's needs and wants in the choice process. Almost all previously outlined factors were assessed by some students in terms of fit including the perceived difficulty of the school, amount of homework given, courses offered, and preparation for college.

Several students outlined how their school counselor facilitated their thinking as they considered potential schools and what would be best for them by walking them through questions about how they learn, what they are looking for in a high school, and their personal goals. One student summarized the approach used by their counselor as a way of helping students *"pick which one [school] that's best for you that's good enough,"* reminding them to account for both school quality and their perceived personal ability to be successful in the school they select. The support offered to students by some counselors was a source of comfort and assurance as they negotiated this complex decision. For these students, discussions with the counselor increased confidence in their selection process because, as one student said, *"She [school counselor] ain't letting you down the wrong path that easily."* The concept of fit centered considerations of school choice around the individual student, for example, one student described how they considered the math requirements of a school with respect to themselves and their self-efficacy with the subject, noting that they were concerned about their ability to be successful with higher-level coursework. For another, fit was defined as a balance between basketball and college prep courses. Though some students framed fit in terms of best choice they largely understood best fit as relative to individuals.

¹⁸ Cowhy & de la Torre (2017).

School Exploration

How did students learn about potential high school options?

It is commonly accepted that information is key to the school choice process. The ability of school choice to realize the goal of increased educational opportunity for all is highly dependent on the presence of substantive, meaningful information about school options that is easily accessible to the public.¹⁹ Previous studies have confirmed this notion of identifying the importance of and limitations surrounding information about potential school options, especially with regards to quality. Therefore, we sought to better understand the formal and informal information sources students and families relied on during the choice process.

In speaking with students, we asked them about the ways in which they learned about schools and the limitations to each modality. Due to the intentional selection of schools participating in the NLCI, which utilizes a 6to16 specialized SEL and college exploration and readiness curriculum, we expected students to have in-school support throughout the choice process. While we found that the degree and breadth of support offered to students differed across schools, all students reported having access to school support, with counselors as a meaningful resource to students throughout all phases of the process, but especially in the learning about potential schools. Specifically, counselors provided direction about how to research schools online and facilitated experiential opportunities for students to engage in information gathering. Many students also informally collected information about schools through their social networks of friends and family, in addition to school staff.

Overwhelmingly, students relied on GoCPS, CPS and school websites to learn about potential high schools.

All students in our sample reported relying heavily on online sources to research potential high schools. Use of the GoCPS platform, the CPS website, and school websites were introduced to students as part of the 6to16 curriculum. A majority of students described how school counselors or other school staff facilitated navigation and use of these online resources. The messaging of this facilitation was impactful not only in the research process, but also largely defined many of the factors which students cited as impacting the schools to which they applied, as well as their decision about which school to attend.

Students in two of our study schools received instruction from staff about how to map the distance and route from their home to potential schools. Distance, location, and transportation were prevalent factors in students' choice of school, making this instruction a key resource in the school research process. Much of the parental bounding of school choice options manifested in the research and application phase. This

¹⁹ Fox & Buchanan (2017).

was particularly true with regards to school locations. While the distance was a concern for some families, the neighborhood of schools was a point of concern for others. One student reported how his father was working to get him into a high school in a better neighborhood than the one they had initially chosen because of concerns about safety of the area surrounding the school.

Similarly, school staff taught students to use the web to gather information about schools. The information students sought about schools reflected their personal desires, familial advice, and school advice, which primarily reflected the choice factors previously presented. In addition to looking at school locations students also used the web to gather information about school quality and identity. Students examined school rating, demographics, and safety as well as academic factors like the graduation rate, programs and courses offered, and instructional approaches employed. Extracurricular offerings, especially the availability of athletics, were heavily researched aspects of potential schools.

While the internet was an essential tool in researching potential high schools, students highlighted limitations to the available information that hindered the process to varying degrees. Several students expressed frustration with high school websites, often finding them out of date or lacking information related to their consideration factors. The absence of student voice about their experiences was also a noted limitation. Some students wanted to hear about the experiences of students in high schools they were considering. For some, this desire was connected to a lack of web information about the lived reality of a school. In explaining this desire, one student summarized the limitation in saying, *"we haven't learned like how it's gonna be when we get in the classes."*

Some students took advantage of experiential opportunities to learn about potential high schools.

Students learned about potential schools through experiences with high school fairs, school visitations, and shadow days. Each of the schools in our study hosted a high school fair, which brought representatives from high schools in to facilitate students learning more about potential high schools. Students reported that the representatives discussed the high school generally, but also how they prepared students for college and supported students in finding ways to pay for college. While these high school fair opportunities were appreciated by the students, they noted that the limited number of high schools involved, and the lack of student voice limited their utility and appeal. One student noted appreciation for the counselor's effort to host the fair while also pointing out what more they would have liked from the experience, *"I want a student from a freshman class to come and tell me what to expect, the homework. I want you to tell me everything or write something and post it on the thing [website] because I need to know something."* Some students also had the opportunity to learn about these aspects of potential high schools through visitations.

A few students reported individually visiting potential high schools either during an open house or for a shadow day. Selective enrollment high schools were the most common sites of individually arranged

school visitations. One school in our sample took rising eighth-graders to visit two potential high schools. Most students appreciated this experience and felt it helped them think about how to compare potential schools, in addition to providing them with a more comprehensive knowledge of both schools. Participation in shadow days provided the few students who had the opportunity a rich source of information and experiential learning about a potential school. For one student, participation in a shadow day was valuable in getting a sense of the school as a whole, in addition to providing an opportunity to experience some courses. Initially, attending the math class was anxiety producing. The work being done appeared complex, prompting the student to note that he *"was scared."* Yet, as the class progressed, he was able to understand more and his confidence built that he could handle the coursework. Through the extended experience of a shadow day, this student was able not only to get a more comprehensive picture of the potential school but also how they might fit in with the environment and expectations. While few students reported having the opportunity to participate in a shadow day, the few that did found it highly informative and beneficial.

Students received messaging from family, friends and school staff which framed schools as desirable, "good" or to be avoided, "bad."

Across information sources students received messaging about a schools' overall value as a potential option. These messages were present throughout the process, but typically increased in intensity during the final selection phase. Several students reported being shown how to look up potential high schools School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) rating by their school counselor during the research phase. Most students viewed the rating as a measure of how "good" a potential school was but had little understanding of how the ratings were determined. While some students' opinions on school quality were influenced by ratings, personal, anecdotal assessments from friends, family, and school staff appeared more impactful. Through interactions during the research and application phase, many students received messages about specific schools being "good" and worth attending, or "bad" and to be avoided. For example, in relaying a discussion he had with a coach about potential school options, one student said: *"He [the coach] went to some high school, and he wanted me to go to. But he's like it's bad now, so I don't want you to go there."* The school was removed from consideration by the student following their coach's qualification. While occasionally the designation of a school as "bad" was associated with a particular aspect, like its safety or the behaviors of the student body, more often it remained an amorphous designation that held enough weight to remove schools from being applied to or selected by students.

Application Process

How did students experience the application process using GoCPS?

For many of the students in our sample, the researching phase of the high school application process helped them determine what they were looking for in a high school. As a result of this determination process, which effectively narrowed potential schools prior to the application phase, most students found the application process relatively simple, with a few notable exceptions. The GoCPS application platform was easy for students to navigate and there were few logistical concerns. Two areas which were sources of confusion in the application process were applications for schools and programs which had additional requirements and the GoCPS ranking rationale and acceptance.

Students almost unanimously agreed that the GoCPS platform was logistically easy to use for the application process.

Almost all the students we spoke to interacted directly with the GoCPS platform and felt the application process for schools without additional application requirements was easy to understand and complete. They appreciated that they could navigate the platform easily from a computer or phone. Most students noted having access to support from counselors and family. *"We could have did it ourselves, but our counselor, she'll pull us for our advisory time to help us if our parents can't do it. So we have time to do it. She'll help us if we didn't help ourselves."* Three students reported handling the whole choice process, application, and acceptance completely independently.

Though the platform was easy to navigate, applications to schools with additional steps or requirements caused difficulties for some students. Students who chose to apply to schools or programs with extra requirements often noted confusion about the different requirements for schools regarding essays, teacher recommendations, and selective enrollment testing. For several students applying to these schools, the more demanding application process was challenging and required additional school or parental support or resulted in an incomplete application at the deadline. One student reported that while they were able to complete the required essay for application, they were still missing one teacher recommendation signature at the time the application was due. While students generally found navigation of the application process on GoCPS easy, with some exceptions about the additional application requirements, students also identified lack of information about schools as a key limitation to the platform in context of the larger school choice process.

Several students voiced frustrations with GoCPS's limitations as an information source for the high schools to which they were applying.

Many students expected GoCPS to be a one-stop-shop to learn about, apply to, and choose a high school. They expressed frustration that this was not the case. In describing the contrast between their expectations of the platform and its actual utility one student said: "*I expect[ed] when I press the high school, I expected it to give me information about the high school. It didn't. You only apply and get out of there. They [GoCPS] did not hold information. You have to go find information.*" This frustration was personified in cases when students had missed or not been provided previous directions on how to research schools. While the technical aspects of using the web to learn about schools was not an issue, some students voiced irritation at having to repeatedly leave the GoCPS platform to find information about a particular school, only to immediately return to the platform.

The ranking aspect of the application was a source of confusion for many students, parents, and school staff.

Several students shared confusion and frustration about the correct approach to take when ranking the schools in GoCPS. This confusion reflected disparate messaging from adults about how to engage with the ranking process and for some, beliefs about how to work the system to their advantage. The depth of confusion about how to approach school ranking meant that not even staff in a single school agreed on what was best and not all students received the same messaging. The misinformation resulted in a handful of students ending up with acceptances to schools which were not of high desirability to them, which prompted participation in the second round of applications. Students in one focus group outlined how their understandings about ranking shifted between the first and second application rounds.

Student A: Listen, they only give you two [responses from schools]. They give you the one that's closest to home and your number-one pick. But I thought they gave me all 20 [responses], 'cause my number one pick is not even a school that I like. I was just saying school names. But then they gave me my number-one pick and a school close to me. But I don't want either one of them.

Other students agreed and went on to explain how their understanding developed between the first and second round of applications, while highlighting the disparate messaging happening within one school.

Student B: The way you rank schools is the way we get in. So if it's in our top or something, we get in. But the ones I wanted to go to, I was just going down the list.

Student C: Right. She [the counselor] didn't tell us that the top four is what they're [the district/schools] gonna choose.

Student D: *She told me that.*

Student C: *'Cause if it's after that, they're not gonna choose you 'cause you ranked their school low. So when it came to doing that, I was just like, "Wow, you [the counselor] could have explained it."*

As this exchange illustrates, students' understanding of the ranking rationale and its impact on the likelihood of acceptance to potential schools was still developing even after completing the school choice process.

Selecting a School

Communication of school acceptances on GoCPS was clear but did not match most students' expectations which produced confusion and frustration for some.

Students found the way the platform color coded acceptances and rejections clear and useful. Despite this, several students reported confusion about the number of schools from which they received responses. Some of this confusion and the related frustrations were directly related to a lack of understanding of the ranking process. These students often reported being admitted to a school which did not interest them, while receiving no response from other schools. There was significant student confusion about why they did not receive acceptance or rejection notifications from all the schools to which they applied. As one student put it, *"I picked 20 schools. I want to get 20 answers back. I only got two back."* This belief largely stemmed from their knowledge of the college application process, in which students receive responses from each school. Confusion about the appropriate ranking rationale during the application process was also cited as increasing students' frustration with the limited number of school responses.

Students in our sample reported a high degree of agency in deciding which high school they selected to attend in the fall.

Most students were afforded a great deal of agency in making their school decision. Though families and school staff continued to provide guidance with regards to key consideration factors, students were typically left to make the ultimate decision. Some students framed this freedom as possible because parental input during the application phase had previously constrained the options to those already deemed acceptable for attendance. Even the opportunity for constrained choice was highly valued by most students and aligned with the high degree of importance they placed on personal fit as a choice factor. A few students highlighted the key role knowledge of self should play in the choice, to ensure a good fit. For example, one student offering advice to the incoming eighth-graders said, *"I say don't listen to nobody. Do what you want to do, 'cause it's the best thing for you."*

Yet, not all students were offered this degree of freedom in their school selection. For students, whose parents closely oversaw the application process, the final school choice was largely seen as predetermined. For these students, the ultimate choice seemed a moot point, as completion of the rankings on application was seen as a proxy for the choice. Often, these students had a personal connection to the school, like a sibling in attendance, which overshadowed other choice factors. While almost all students highly valued whatever agency they were afforded in the process, it did not mean that upon reflection they did not question their choice.

Insights and Implications

School Exploration

Students in our study had direct, school-based support for the school choice process. While this support helped students learn how to locate information about potential schools on the internet, they noted frustrating limitations. Students specifically cited out-of-date high school websites and a lack of information available about the student experience as constraining their ability to learn about schools. The chance to visit potential high schools—including open houses, class trips, and shadow days—provided participating students with a richer understanding of a school and the student experience therein. Yet, these opportunities for exploration were less accessible for some. Using information gleaned from the internet, school visitations, and social networks, students applied to and ultimately selected a high school to attend the following year. Therefore, it is important for student-support networks and prospective high schools to understand what information students are looking for to ensure it is accessible and accurate.

Students Need

1. GoCPS to provide easy, linkable access to information on schools, beyond their rating and location, that is searchable on phones.
2. Up-to-date information about school offerings including academics, expected workload, programs, class sizes, extracurriculars—particularly sports, discipline practices, and dress code policies.
3. Increased opportunities to hear what it is like to attend a school from current students.
4. Generative discussions with adults that scaffold and facilitate school-to-school comparisons and highlight key consideration factors.

Application Process & School Selection

Students' families and school staff received and sent mixed messages and incomplete information about how the application system works. While students found the GoCPS application process was straightforward, completing the application for schools that had additional application requirements proved more challenging. Clarity of expectations around additional application demands, and the time and logistics required to collect or produce these components, served as a barrier to applying to these schools for some students. For students who did not have direct familial support in the application process, navigating and meeting additional applications requirements was almost insurmountable.

Confusion regarding the correct approach to school ranking in the application was a source of frustration for students, families, and school staff alike. For some, misinformation and misunderstanding of the “true preference” ranking system forced participation into the second round of applications as they had not ranked schools by their preference. In addition, students' expectations regarding notification of acceptance to schools was another source of confusion—most anticipated getting responses from all the schools to which they applied.

Students Need

- 1) Consistent and correct messaging about the GoCPS process, including:
 - School ranking process—emphasizing that the order they list schools on their application is very important and should reflect their true preferences. Students should rank schools in the order of preference for attending the schools.
 - Extra requirements and the process for completing them for particular schools and programs,
 - What they should expect in terms of acceptances—emphasizing that they only receive acceptances from three schools at most, and are not considered for schools lower on their application list once they are accepted at a school they ranked higher.
- 2) Access to adults familiar with and knowledgeable about the GoCPS process. Adult assistance ensuring supplemental requirements are completed for programs that require them.
- 3) The simplest application process for all schools. Streamlining or eliminating additional steps and requirements for all schools would allow more students to successfully apply to all schools whether or not they have parental support in the process.

Choice Factors

Students identified a wide range of factors (see Table 1) which they took into consideration as they applied to and ultimately selected a high school to attend the following year. Opinions and advice of school staff, family, and friends were influential both in identifying consideration factors and in shaping perceptions of potential schools. Messages from school staff often highlighted the degree of autonomy and responsibility high schools would entail for youth. For some, these negatively framed messages limited which schools students felt they could be successful in on their own. Students were often told to choose a school that was a good fit for them, though the meaning of fit was amorphous and varied. The importance of fit was often used to highlight student preferences in terms of school policies, practices, and programs. While academic quality was important, it was only one factor that mattered. Students assessed potential schools' academic desirability in different ways. For some students, the quality of the experience and the types of programs available were more important than the school rating. While relative importance of consideration factors varied from student to student, almost all students placed school proximity and commuting time as highly influential factors in their choice.

Students Need

1. Emotional and concrete support. This is a stressful process full of uncertainty for what high school will bring. Students need reassurance they are not going to make a mistake in the choice process and that they will be successful in high school. The schools studied here had dedicated time and staff to help students with the search process, and that allowed students to get information and have support, which provided reassurance and made the process easier. Not all elementary and middle schools have this level of support.
2. School options they can be excited about. Students look for different things in a high school and having schools nearby with options, like sports and interesting academic programs, helps students feel like they have school options that will be a good fit for them.
3. Opportunities to get a sense of what the prospective high schools are like for students, such as school visits or events where they can talk with current students.

Table 1. Student Consideration Factors in School Choice

Setting Factors	
Students considered aspects of setting including those related to physical location, proximity to students' home, and transportation logistics of potential schools	
Distance	- How far is a potential school from my home?
Location	- Is the school located in a neighborhood perceived as safe?
Transportation	- How will I get to a potential school?
	- What are the transportation options?
	- Does the commute have the potential to deter my attendance?
School Factors	
Students considered the characteristics, offerings, reputations, and impressions of potential schools.	
Auxiliary Programs	- What sports are available? - What afterschool programs are offered?
Academics	- What special programs are available?
	- What courses are offered?
	- What instructional approaches are used?
	- How "hard" or "easy" is a school? - How much homework can I expect?
Organizational Characteristics	- What supports are available for me if I'm struggling?
	- How big are classes?
	- What is the student to teacher ratio?
	- Is there a dress code? - What is discipline like?
Student Factors	
Students considered their identities, both personally and within social contexts, priorities, and goals.	
Social	- What are the demographics of the student body?
	- Do I have friends or family who attend?
	- Will social connections help or hinder my high school success?
Personal	- How does this school or program align with my personal priorities?
	- Will this school help me reach my personal and academic goals?

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