

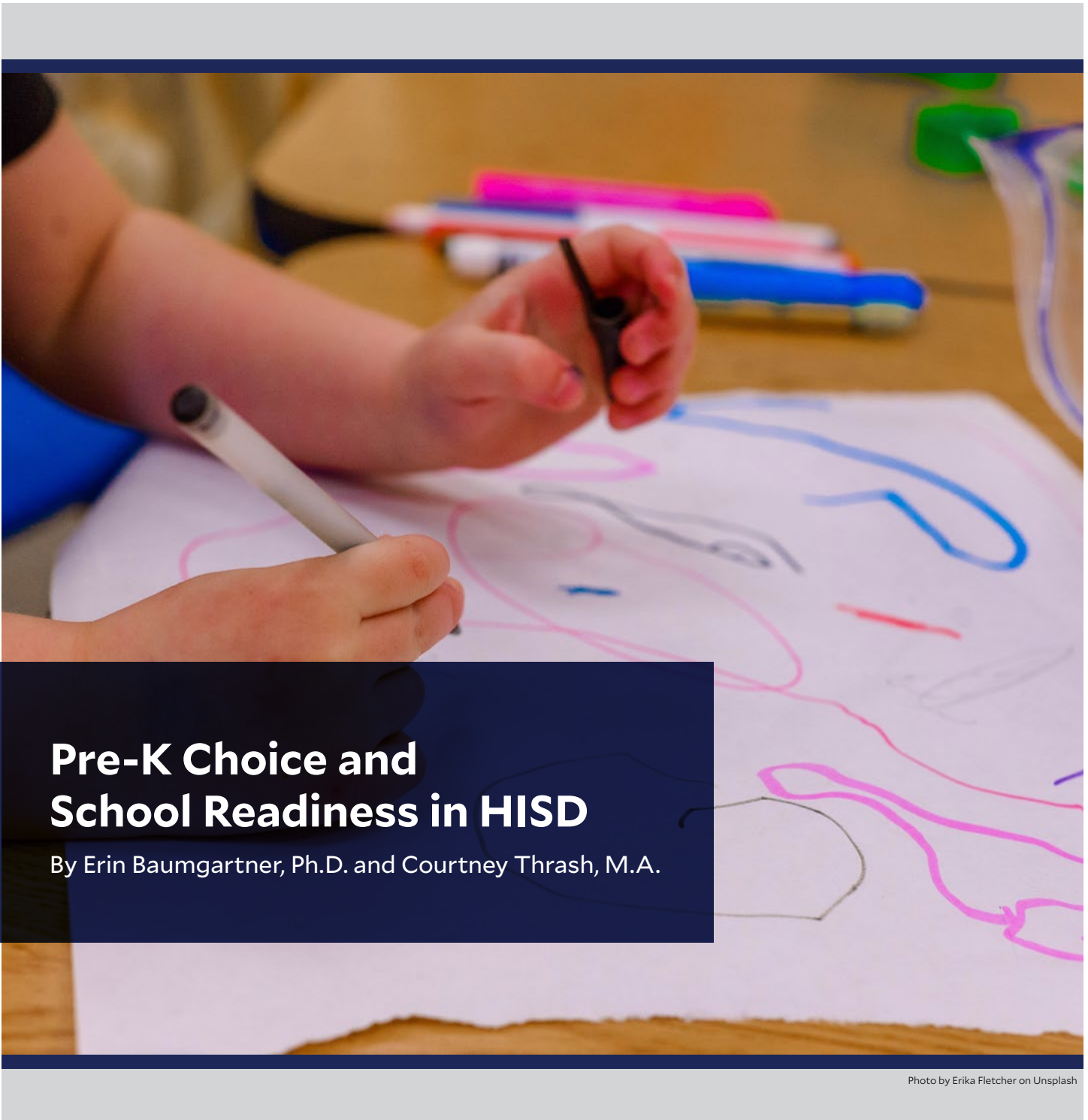


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Pre-K Choice and School Readiness in HISD

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Research Brief

for the Houston Independent School District

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About HERC. Focusing on the most pressing challenges facing the region, the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC research is developed directly alongside district leaders with findings shared with decision makers—culminating in long-term, equity-minded solutions, opportunities and growth for Houston and beyond.

Research Brief

Pre-K Choice and School Readiness in HISD

Many students attend a pre-kindergarten (pre-K) program outside of their neighborhood school, but there is no evidence that making this choice is associated with subsequent student readiness for kindergarten. In the Houston Independent School District (HISD), pre-K is not zoned, which means families can request to enroll their children on any campus with a pre-K program or Early Childhood Center (ECC) that has space available. As a result, many families may opt for programs that are outside of their neighborhoods, and it has been unclear whether students attending non-neighborhood campuses are more likely to be ready for kindergarten at the end of pre-K.

School choice in pre-K was not associated with school readiness unless students attended a higher-performing pre-K program. Findings from this study suggest that children who exercised school choice and attended a higher-performing pre-K program were more likely to be kindergarten-ready than those who exercised school choice and attended a lower-performing pre-K program.

This brief serves as the fourth, and final, study in a series examining pre-K access for students in HISD.

Key Findings

- **Approximately 38% of students exercised school choice for pre-K.**
- **Students who exercised school choice for pre-K were not necessarily choosing higher-performing programs.** About a quarter of students who exercised school choice attended a higher-performing pre-K.

Some students were more likely to exercise school choice. Black students, non-economically disadvan-

taged students, non-English learners, and special education students were more likely to exercise school choice than their peers.

- **School choice for pre-K was not associated with school readiness unless students chose a higher-performing pre-K.** Students who attended a higher-performing pre-K program were more likely to be school-ready at the beginning of kindergarten when compared to students who attended lower-performing pre-K programs.

Background

To date, pre-kindergarten (pre-K) students, the youngest students in public education, have been largely ignored in research on public school choice (Hastings, et al., 2005; Hastings, et al. 2007; Schneider, et al., 1997). School choice, in this instance, is referring to the opportunities that exist for students, within a public school district, to enroll in *any* program with space available.

In a number of ways, pre-K may be one of the most important points at which school choice decisions are made. First, a significant body of existing literature has established the importance of high-quality early education in improving student readiness at school entry and beyond (Barnett, 1998; Campbell, et al., 2002; Heckman, 2011; Ramey, et al., 2000). This includes research on the benefits HISD kindergarteners found from having enrolled in HISD pre-K the previous year (Baumgartner, 2017). Second, for a majority of students, the school they enter at pre-K may also serve as their school through elementary school; therefore, choice at this early stage may have longer term implications (Burkam, et al., 2009).

While understanding if students and families choosing a program outside of their neighborhood school is important in understanding new opportunities available to them, this study also aimed to understand whether making this choice was associated with student outcomes at kindergarten entry. In other words, were students who attended a school outside of their neighborhood (engaged with school choice) more likely to have skills needed at kindergarten entry? Findings on the benefits of school choice are often mixed (Cullen, et al., 2006; Ozek, 2009), and very little research has examined whether kindergarten-aged students benefit from these opportunities.

Research Questions

The questions this study aimed to address were:

1. What proportion of HISD pre-K students enrolled in a campus outside of their neighborhood campus?
2. When students and families exercised school choice, to what extent were they choosing a program that is higher or lower performing than the program at their neighborhood campus?
3. To what extent was choosing a pre-K outside of their neighborhood associated with school readiness?

HISD Context

Though HISD is divided into elementary zones with an elementary campus in each zone, students do not have to attend the campus in their zone. A seat is guaranteed on a zoned campus for students of kindergarten age and older, but as not all HISD elementary campuses have pre-K programs, pre-K is not treated as a zoned grade. Additionally, some elementary zones include a standalone Early Childhood Center (ECC). There has been some recent discussion about zoning pre-K, but no decision has been made as of the 2020–21 school year. HISD does not provide transportation for pre-K students, so parents and/or caretakers are responsible for dropping off and picking up their students.



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Data and Methods

To address these questions, this study utilized administrative student- and school-level information from HISD for the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years. Specifically, student sociodemographic data were from the 2018-19 Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), student zoned and enrolled pre-K schools were from the 2017-18 Zoned/Enrolled file, student kindergarten test scores were from the 2018-19 literacy Renaissance 360 tests administered by HISD, and school-level pre-K test scores were from the 2017-18 CIRCLE tests administered by HISD.

The sample of students included in this study was limited to those students who attended HISD pre-K in 2017-18 and HISD kindergarten in 2018-19, who lived in a zone with a pre-K option¹, and who had the other relevant data necessary for our analyses (N=8,475).

¹ Seven elementary school zones do not include a pre-K or ECC option. As a result, 197 students who resided in these zones were excluded from analyses.

Variables

- **School choice**—Pre-K students were considered to have exercised school choice if they attended a pre-K that was outside of the elementary school zone in which they resided in during the pre-K school year.
- **Higher-performing pre-K**—For those who exercised school choice in pre-K, the program they attended for pre-K was considered to be higher-performing if it had an average end-of-year CIRCLE score that was at least half a standard deviation above the pre-K program at the campus in their residential zone.
- **Kindergarten-ready**—Students were considered to be “kindergarten-ready” if they met the benchmark on the Renaissance 360 literacy tests administered at the beginning of their kindergarten year.

We conducted multilevel models with students clustered at the pre-K campus in their residential zone. Summary results are provided here, and full tables are available upon request.

Key Findings

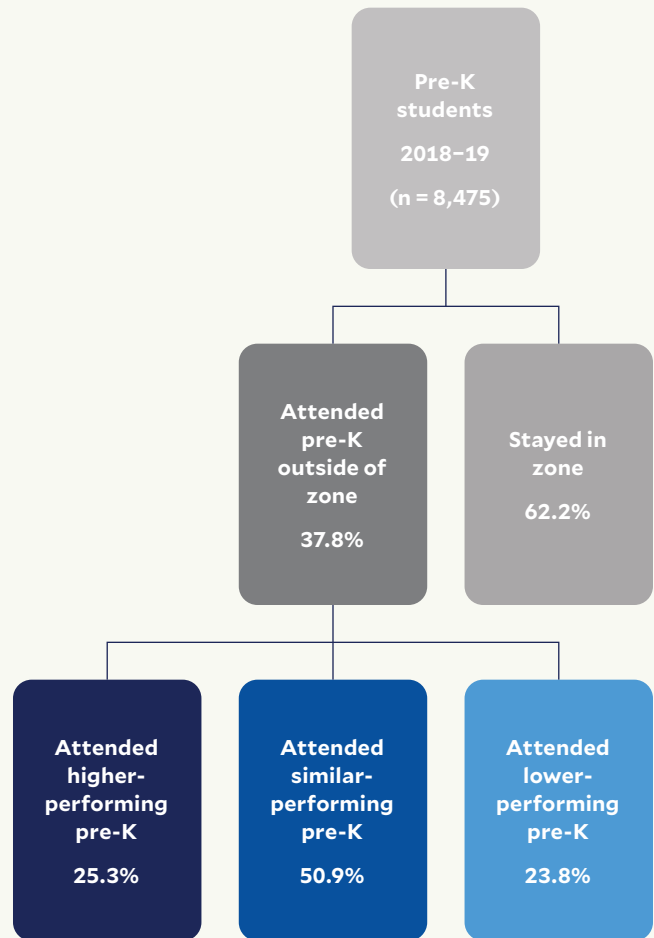
1 Approximately 38% of pre-K students exercised school choice.

Among pre-K students who lived in a zone with a pre-K or ECC, 37.8% chose to attend a pre-K program that was outside of the zone in which they resided. Given that we restricted this study to students who had a pre-K program available in their zone, the decision to attend a pre-K outside of their residential zone would reflect school choice if pre-K were zoned. The remaining 62.2% attended the pre-K in the zone in which they lived.²

2 Students who exercised school choice for pre-K were not always going to a better-performing school.

Among pre-K students who exercised school choice for pre-K, 25.3% ultimately chose to attend a pre-K program with an average CIRCLE score at least one-half standard deviation above the pre-K program they were zoned to attend. In contrast, 23.8% attended a pre-K program with an average CIRCLE score at least one-half standard deviation below the pre-K program they were zoned to attend. The remaining 50.9% of students exercising choice ultimately attended a pre-K program that had similar average CIRCLE scores to the pre-K they were zoned to attend.

FIGURE 1 Pre-K students and school choice.



² In HISD, pre-K is not zoned. Families are able to send their child(ren) to any pre-K program in the district that has seats available.

3 Black, non-economically disadvantaged, non-English learners, and special education students were more likely to exercise school choice.

Black students were more likely to exercise school choice for pre-K when compared to Hispanic students. Students classified as non-economically disadvantaged were more likely to exercise school choice than economically disadvantaged students. Students classified as non-English learners were more likely to exercise choice than English Learners. Special education students were more likely to exercise school choice when compared to non-special education students.

4 School choice for pre-K was not associated with school readiness, unless students chose a higher-performing pre-K.

Pre-K students who exercised school choice were no more or less likely to be kindergarten ready when compared to students who attended the pre-K program in their zone. Approximately 55% of pre-K students met the benchmark and were considered school-ready at the beginning of kindergarten. Additionally, the percent of students who were school-ready at the beginning of kindergarten was roughly the same for students who exercised school choice for pre-K and those that did not. However, the quality of the pre-K program that students exercising choice attended did alter the percent of students who were school-ready at the beginning of kindergarten.

School choice mattered for students' kindergarten readiness when students were choosing to attend higher-performing pre-K programs. Almost 59% of students who exercised school choice to attend a higher-performing pre-K were kindergarten-ready. In contrast, only 52% of student who exercised school choice to attend a lower-performing pre-K were likely to meet the benchmark at the beginning of kindergarten. Therefore, choosing a higher-performing pre-K program increased the likelihood of a student being kindergarten-ready.

FIGURE 2 Some students were more likely to exercise school choice than others.

Choosers are more likely to be...		
Black (vs. Hispanic)	→	1.2x more likely
Non-economically disadvantaged (vs. economically disadvantaged)	→	2.1x more likely
Non-English learner (vs. English learner)	→	1.1x more likely
Special education (vs. non-special education)	→	1.8x more likely

FIGURE 3 School choice was not significantly associated with school readiness.

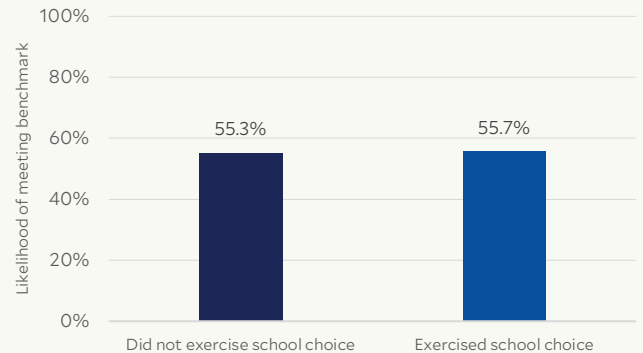
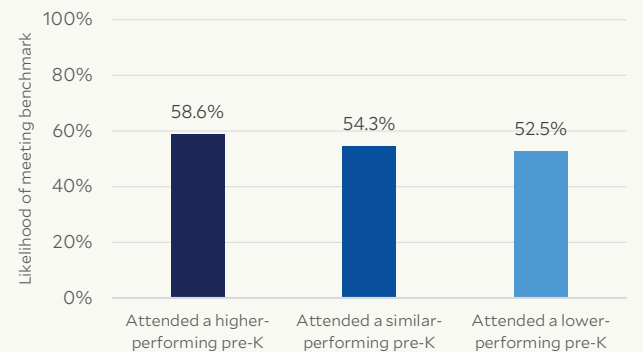


FIGURE 4 Choosers who attended a higher-performing pre-K were more likely to meet the benchmark than those who attended a lower-performing pre-K.



Conclusion

Implications

Approximately two in five pre-K students chose to attend a pre-K program that was outside of the zone in which they resided. However, families of pre-K students were not necessarily choosing to send their child to a higher-performing program. In fact, a majority of students who exercised choice for pre-K ultimately attended a pre-K program that had similar or lower average CIRCLE scores than the school in their neighborhood/elementary zone. This suggests that families may be exercising choice for reasons other than program performance (see [Brief 3](#) of this series). Previous research from this series found that there are a multitude of reasons that families choose a pre-K program outside of their residential zone, including proximity of the program to work and/or home and the availability of specific programs. For instance, students who are classified as having special education needs may be more likely to choose a campus outside of their zone if they are looking for programs with specific types of resources

that are not available at their neighborhood campus. As an example, T.H. Rogers has a pre-K program specifically for students experiencing hearing impairment, and a family may want to enroll their child(ren) in that specific program.

Students who exercised school choice and attended a higher-performing pre-K program were more likely to be kindergarten-ready than students who exercised school choice and attended a lower-performing pre-K program or those who attended the pre-K in their residential zone.

An important takeaway from this study is that, on average, only 55% of students in this sample had literacy skills that were on grade level at kindergarten entry. While we know the readiness rate for students who attended HISD pre-K is higher than for students who did not attend HISD pre-K (Baumgartner, 2017), this finding reinforces that nearly half of students are still not considered school-ready, with regards to early literacy skills, at the beginning of kindergarten.

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Mission

The Kinder Institute for Urban Research builds better cities and improves people's lives by bringing together data, research, engagement and action.

About

The Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC aims to improve the connection between education research and decision making for the purpose of equalizing outcomes by race, ethnicity, economic status, and other factors associated with inequitable educational opportunities.



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