Choice in a Time of COVID: Immediate Enrollment Decisions in New York City and Detroit

Sarah A. Cordes, Temple University; **Sarah Winchell Lenhoff,** Wayne State University**; Amy Ellen Schwartz,** University of Delaware; **Jeremy Singer**, Wayne State University; **Samantha Trajkovski,** Saint Michael's College

Overview

The COVID-19 crisis caused the educational system's sudden and drastic upheaval as parents were forced to decide where their children would attend school and how they would get there. These decisions were complicated by the uncertainty surrounding what type of online or hybrid schooling districts would offer, the health risks of different transportation options, and the vaccine timeline. Families had to weigh the quality of their children's education, the health risks, and the logistics of various schooling options, which could have long-term implications for educational equity and access.

This report provides essential details on how the pandemic has affected enrollment and mobility in New York City and Detroit -- two major urban districts with school choice programs. We investigate how the coronavirus crisis altered K-8 enrollment and provide some of the first evidence of COVID-19's impact on student mobility for traditional public and charter schools in the 2020-21 school year.

Key findings are as follows:

- COVID-19 had little to no effect on the overall enrollment of K-8 students—while there were some enrollment declines in traditional public schools, especially in NYC, these declines are driven largely by fewer new kindergarten entrants and appear to be continuations of previous enrollment trends.

- We do not find any considerable difference in enrollment trends in either charter or traditional public schools by race/ethnicity or poverty. It seems that COVID-19 had no real impact on the kinds of students who did or did not enroll in schools.

- In both districts, COVID-19 noticeably decreased non-structural school moves when a student moved to a new school before they reached the highest grade offered by their current school. Non-structural mobility decreased by 60 percent in NYC and 86.5 percent in Detroit relative to pre-pandemic levels, although non-structural mobility rates in Detroit were significantly higher than in NYC both before and after the onset of COVID-19.

- In both cities, reductions in non-structural mobility were largest among Black and economically disadvantaged students.

- Finally, we found divergent patterns among English language learners (ELLs). While ELLs in NYC experienced slightly larger reductions in non-structural mobility than their peers, ELLs in Detroit experienced significantly smaller reductions in mobility. This discrepancy may be caused by differences between the two cities in the makeup of their ELL communities and geography.

Background

School Choice

Studying the impacts of COVID-19 on enrollment and mobility of K-8 students, we compared two cities with established choice programs: New York City (NYC) and Detroit. Both cities share socio-economic characteristics such as large percentages of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, and most are students of color. Although these two districts have many similarities, there are also key differences. For instance, NYC has generally experienced declining K-8 enrollment since 2015, while Detroit has had steady enrollment figures. Moreover, the type of school choices they offer varies greatly: while 45% of Detroit public school students attend charter schools and 10% use inter-district school choice to leave city schools, NYC's primary choice option is through district-managed schools with a 34% participation rate in some form of district choice and roughly 15% attending charter schools.

The two cities also provide a valuable example of how infrastructure varies among school districts. While NYC offers reliable public transportation and school buses to elementary children in traditional public and charter schools alike, approximately half of Detroit schools have no transportation provided, and others only offer transport if a student is assigned to the school. The school selection process also differs. – Detroit does not have a centralized enrollment process, whereas NYC has a unified middle school choice procedure, and the majority of charter schools are part of a common application supervised by the New York City Charter School Center. These two districts are similar to other major city areas with wide choices, such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Denver, and Los Angeles; however, they stand in contrast to districts with limited selection.

Responses to COVID-19

In the Spring of 2020, NYC and Detroit saw an early spike in COVID-19 cases, leading to a complete switch to remote instruction for the remainder of the school year. By the 2020-21 school year, Michigan required schools to submit plans for reopening in remote, hybrid, and in-person formats. Detroit's traditional Public Schools mostly offered remote learning, with some offering in-person instruction. Detroit charter schools had a variety of instructional offerings, with some providing in-person options but more providing remote-only instruction. NYC traditional public schools began the 2020-21 school year with in-person and virtual options but moved entirely online eight weeks later. At the end of November, NYC opened elementary schools for students who signed up for in-person instruction and offered some in-person instruction for middle schools by the end of February. Modality decisions were left up to individual charter schools/networks.
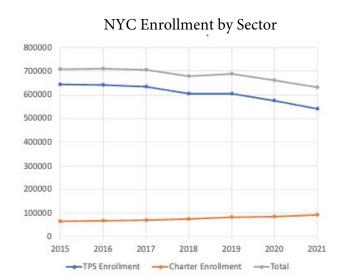
Significance

Across the country, enrollment in many large urban districts was declining or stagnating (Spurrier, 2019; Pearman, 2020), so further losses, changes in enrollment patterns across district schools, or shifts in enrollment between sectors (district, charter, and non-district), could significantly impact future funding and school closures. Changes in enrollment, student mobility, and student characteristics could also have serious budgetary and staffing consequences. Furthermore, individual students may experience altered performance based on how their new schools compare to their previous ones.
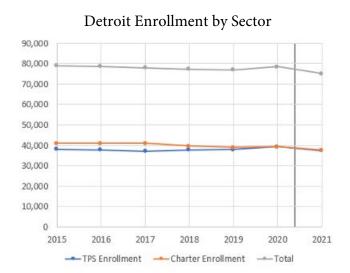
How did COVID-19 impact K-8 student enrollment in NYC and Detroit?

COVID-19 had little to no effect on the overall enrollment of K-8 students—while there were some enrollment declines in traditional public schools, especially in NYC, these appear to be continuations of previous enrollment trends. We do not find any considerable difference in enrollment by race/ethnicity or poverty. It seems that COVID-19 did not impact students' enrollment (Figure 1).

> " *We found COVID-19 had little to no effect on the overall enrollment of K-8 schools.* "

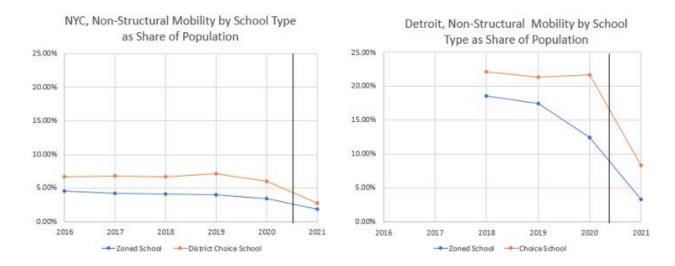### Figure One: Enrollment Trends in NYC and Detroit, K-8

Note: The years are Spring to Spring.

We did find small declines in new student entries across both locations, particularly in early grades, although these were smaller in NYC. Kindergarten entries in NYC fell 0.3 percentage points, while they fell more steeply (4.5 pp) in Detroit. One possible explanation for this difference is that NYC has a robust pre-K sector, so many students who enrolled in kindergarten in 2020-21 may have been enrolled in pre-K prior to the pandemic. Exits (i.e., students not re-enrolling the following year) followed pre-pandemic trends.

How did COVID impact K-8 student mobility?

In both districts, COVID noticeably decreased non-structural school moves when a student moved to a new school before they reached the highest grade offered by their current school.

Figure Two: Non-Structural School Mobility by School Type in NYC and Detroit, K-8

Note: A student is mobile if the school they attend in t differs from the school attended in t-1. Structural moves are defined as moves where a student's school t-1 does not offer their grade in year t. The time period is Spring to Spring.

Students in NYC were 3.1 percentage points less likely to switch schools, and those in Detroit were 17.3 percentage points less likely. These effects are considerable--compared to the year immediately prior to the pandemic, non-structural mobility decreased by 60 percent in NYC and 86.5 percent in Detroit.

In both cities, reductions in non-structural mobility were largest among Black and economically disadvantaged students. We found divergent patterns among English language learners (ELLs). While ELLs in NYC experienced larger reductions in non-structural mobility than their peers, we see the opposite pattern in Detroit. This discrepancy may be caused by differences between the two cities in the makeup of their ELL communities and geography.

How Did We Carry Out This Analysis?

Two main factors motivated us to focus on elementary and middle school students. First, enrollment decisions for some high school students also involve dropouts. Therefore, "exit" in the high school context is a different concept than exit in earlier grades when attendance is still compulsory. Second, the school choice and mobility among high school students in New York City are vastly different, as, unlike K-8, there are no zoned high schools. Also, there is limited student movement among high schools for various logistical and practical reasons related to the high school assignment process. For these reasons, we leave the study of enrollment and mobility among high school students to a different report.

Data

Data for NYC comes from the NYCDOE, New York State School Report Cards (SRC), and NYC Open Data. Data for Detroit come from the state of Michigan's longitudinal data system. These student-level administrative data provide information on all public school students (traditional public and charter), including sociodemographic and program characteristics.

Sample

Our NYC analysis draws on two samples. We begin with a school-level sample from the SRC to examine overall enrollment trends and enrollment by sector. This sample consists of schools serving K-8 students from AY 2015-2021, excluding alternative or full-time special education schools.

For Detroit, our sample includes all kindergarten through eighth-grade students for the 2014-15 through 2020-21 school years, excluding students in alternative schools or special education centers.

Methods

We examine enrollment and mobility trends for NYC and Detroit through descriptive and regression analysis, focusing on enrollment, entry, exit, and mobility overall and by grade level and sector. Our mobility analyses focus on students enrolled in consecutive years–we define students who transfer to other districts, private, or homeschooling as exiters. We also assess the effects of COVID-19 on mobility in 2020-21 and the connections between structural and non-structural mobility, residential mobility, and student traits.

Full Details of the study's methodology can be found in the TECHNICAL REPORT

Conclusions and Implications

Our study revealed that K-8 enrollment declines in NYC and Detroit were modest and, in the case of NYC, largely a continuation of prior trends, which is in contrast to the more prevalent narrative of plummeting enrollment due to COVID-19. Further, we find little or no evidence that COVID-19 induced exit from the public school system in either district. Effects on entry were small and tended to be concentrated in the earlier grades. This finding differs from other recent evidence, such as Dee et al. (2021) and Musaddiq et al. (2021). Our findings may differ because other analyses tend to focus on state-level trends, which may mask differences by district. In particular, these districts' rich and varied public school choice environments gave families more options when deciding whether to enroll their children in public schools versus private or homeschooling. Another reason our findings may differ is that Dee et al. (2021) only consider changes in enrollment from fall 2019 to fall 2021, which does not put enrollment declines in the context of longer-term enrollment trends. Rather than affecting enrollment, the biggest impact of COVID in these districts was to reduce non-structural mobility, particularly among residentially mobile students, substantially. After COVID, students in Detroit and New York were more likely to "stay put" in their schools if they could, even when their families moved homes.

Our findings raise questions about whether, during non-pandemic years, families would prefer not to switch schools as often as they do. This implies that infrastructure, such as transportation to schools of choice, may be helpful in reducing unwanted mobility in non-pandemic years. NYC offers a robust pupil and public transportation system that more easily facilitates students remaining in their school following a residential move compared with Detroit. This could explain both the lower overall rates of non-structural mobility in NYC and the larger reductions in non-structural mobility in Detroit during a year when most schools were online and transportation posed less of a barrier. The findings may also indicate that schools need to provide more support for housing unstable students as they navigate school enrollment during periods of residential transition.

Questions for further consideration

- Does mobility return to the status quo?
- What can we learn from the high school evidence?
- How did the PreK system in NYC impact Kindergarten enrollment?

How Does This Relate To Other REACH Research?

REACH has a significant body of work investigating the multifaceted impacts that COVID-19 has had on education. For more information, visit

- A Year That Forced Change: Examining How Schools and School Systems Adapted to the Challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Calls for Racial Justice in 2020

- Schools and School Choice During a Year of Disruption: Views of Parents in Five States

- Why Did So Many Public Schools Stay Remote During the COVID Crisis?

- The Effects of School Reopenings on COVID-19 Hospitalizations

- How America's Schools Responded to the COVID Crisis

COMING SOON...

Additional research on this subject will be released in the near future including *Shocking the System?: COVID-19 and Virtual Schooling in Oregon*.

About the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH)

About the Authors

Sarah A. Cordes

Sarah A. Cordes is an Associate Professor of Policy, Organizational and Leadership Studies at Temple University. Dr. Sarah Cordes' research lies at the nexus of education and urban policy and explores how the urban context—particularly school choice, mobility, housing, and geography--shapes student outcomes. Cordes's work has been published in journals such as Urban Studies, Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Education Finance and Policy, and the Journal of Public Policy Analysis and Management, and her work has been funded by the Institute for Education Sciences, the Russell Sage and William T. Grant Foundations, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Sarah Winchell Lenhoff

Sarah is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies; Director of the Detroit Partnership for Education Equity & Research; Leonard Kaplan Endowed Professor. Lenhoff began her career as a New York City public school teacher, and she led the research and policy division of the non-profit The Education Trust-Midwest for four years. Her research focuses on education policy implementation and access to equitable educational opportunities, focusing on how collaborative research with practitioners and community members can facilitate systemic improvement. Her recent research has examined district and school infrastructure to support school improvement, the effects of school choice policy on equitable opportunities for students, and the causes and consequences of student absenteeism.

Amy Ellen Schwartz

Amy Ellen Schwartz is the Dean of the Biden School and Professor of Public Administration at the University of Delaware. Her research spans a broad range of education policy and urban economics, focusing on the nexus of schools, neighborhoods, and public services. Current projects include a study of the role of transportation on school choice, commuting, and student outcomes using unique micro data on New York City public school children; an examination of the impact of housing vouchers on school access and academic outcomes; a study of how neighborhood crime shapes students success and the link between the retail and built environment on children's success; and an investigation of school food and special education programs. Schwartz's past research has considered infrastructure investment, school finance, school reform, and the causes and solutions to educational inequality.

Jeremy Singer

Jeremy Singer is a postdoctoral research associate with the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University and a research affiliate of the Detroit Partnership for Education Equity & Research (Detroit PEER) at Wayne State University. His research focuses broadly on the intersections of educational policy and racial and socioeconomic inequality. He earned his Ph.D. in educational leadership and policy studies from Wayne State University and worked for the Detroit Education Research Partnership. He previously taught in the Detroit Public Schools.

Samantha Trajkovski

Samantha Trajkovski is an Assistant Professor of Economics at Saint Michael's College. Her research lies at the nexus of labor and education, using applied econometric methods to shed light on parental decision-making in early childhood. Her recent research focuses on education policy, including school food and transportation policies, and its relationship to student outcomes in New York City. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut.