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High School Choices and Contexts of Newcomer Students in HISD

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Research Brief

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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 Rice University 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.

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Research Brief

High School Choices and Contexts of Newcomer Students in HISD

This brief explores the characteristics of the high schools that newcomer students choose to attend in the Houston Independent School District (HISD). Using data from the 2007–2008 through 2018–2019 school years, the study compares the high school enrollment patterns between newcomer students who attended Las Americas, a school dedicated to serving newcomer middle school students, and newcomer students from other HISD middle schools. Specifically, this brief examined school characteristics related to potential peer networks, English learner (EL) support and resources, disciplinary climate, and academic context. The analyses show that compared to non-Las Americas students, Las Americas students tended to enroll in high schools that provided more access to potential social networks with similar peers with respect to racial/ethnic diversity as well as foreign-born status. While Las Americas students were more likely to enroll in high schools where they might have greater access to EL support and resources, there were no differences in the disciplinary climate of the high schools attended between former Las Americas and non-Las Americas enrollees. Finally, Las Americas students were more likely than non-Las Americas students to choose high schools with a context potentially more conducive to academic achievement, as measured by end-of-course exam scores.

Key Findings

Potential Peer Networks

- Newcomer students from Las Americas were more likely than newcomers from other middle schools to enroll in high schools with student bodies more racially/ethnically diverse than that of the school district and with above-average shares of foreign-born students.

English Learner Support & Resources

- Newcomer students from Las Americas were more likely than those from other middle schools to enroll in high schools with above-average shares of EL students and above-average shares of teachers certified to teach ELs.

Disciplinary Climate

- There were no meaningful differences in the discipline rates of the high schools attended by Las Americas students and newcomers who attended other middle schools.

Academic Context

- Newcomer students from Las Americas were more likely than newcomers from other middle schools to enroll in high schools with above-average end-of-course exam scores for English 1 and Algebra 1. However, students from Las Americas were less likely to enroll in high schools with above-average shares of gifted students.

Background

Newcomer students are English learner (EL) students who have recently immigrated to the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Given newcomer students' experiences with limited or interrupted formal education, trauma stemming from their migration journey, and unfamiliarity with the American school system, they often require extra support beyond what traditional classrooms typically offer English learners (Custodio, 2011; Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2020; Hos, 2020; Jaycox et al., 2002; Short & Boyson, 2004). To meet newcomer students' needs, districts across the country have set up newcomer programs, which aim to ease students' transition to mainstream schools. Newcomer programs have four goals: (1) to accelerate students' English language acquisition, (2) to help them develop literacy in their home languages, (3) to deliver content-based instruction, and (4) to support students' cultural integration (Short & Boyson, 2012). One of these schools, Las Americas, operates in southwest Houston and serves recent immigrant English learners in grades four through eight.

Spotlight: Las Americas Newcomer School

In 1995, Las Americas Newcomer School (formerly called Las Americas Middle School) opened in southwest Houston, an area of the city with a high concentration of foreign-born residents. As a separate-site newcomer program, Las Americas serves only recently arrived, English learner students and delivers a content-based EL curriculum designed to help students develop language skills and successfully transition to mainstream classrooms. Because Las Americas is a non-zoned school of choice, students and families must actively choose to enroll at the school. The school recognizes and affirms students' life experiences and provides socio-emotional support through a trauma-informed curriculum and partnerships with local social work and mental health organizations. In fall 2006, the program moved from its original location in an apartment complex in the Gulfton neighborhood to the campus of Jane Long Academy, where it continues to operate as a separate school.

Newcomer programs like Las Americas are designed as temporary “shock absorbers,” easing students’ transition into a traditional classroom environment (Friedlander, 1991, p. 2). Students attend Las Americas for one to two years before enrolling at a mainstream middle school or high school. Thus, at some point, Las Americas students must decide which school to attend next. Depending on the grade level they leave Las Americas, some must choose another middle school, but, eventually, all must choose a high school. Newcomer students who *did not* attend Las Americas must also decide which high school to attend. High school is an important educational transition to study for newcomer students because the decisions students make may shape their social context, the resources and supports available to them, and their academic environment (Allensworth et al., 2017).

Because newcomer students are marginalized in terms of race/ethnicity, nativity, and poverty, they may face barriers when navigating high school choice options (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017; Medina, 2008; Sattin-Bajaj, 2011; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). Given their unfamiliarity with the U.S., as well as its educational system, newcomer students and their parents may rely on limited information to guide decisions (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). There may be insufficient outreach and support to newcomer families, and materials on the school choice process may not be in their native language, with little to no translation or interpretation services (Sattin-Bajaj, 2011; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). As a result of these barriers, newly arrived immigrant students and parents may make school choice decisions based on incomplete or inaccurate information.

Participating in a newcomer program such as Las Americas, however, may alleviate these barriers and enable recent immigrant families to make better-informed high school choice decisions. Given their specialized curriculum and support services, participating in a newcomer program or school may expose families to resources and social ties that can help expand the school options for their children.

Research Question

Given the potential barriers facing newcomer immigrant students and their families in the school choice process and the resources and social ties that newcomer programs like Las Americas can offer, this research brief focuses on the following research question:

Did newcomer students who attended Las Americas enroll in different types of high schools compared to their peers who attended other HISD middle schools?

Specifically, the following categories of high school characteristics were examined:

- **Potential Peer Networks:** racial/ethnic diversity,¹ share of foreign-born students
- **English Learner Support and Resources:** share of EL students, share of teachers certified in English as a second language or bilingual education
- **Disciplinary Climate:** campus discipline rates²
- **Academic Context:** end-of-course (EOC) exam performance, advanced course participation³

To address this question, the study followed 11 cohorts of newcomer students in grades six through eight who first enrolled in HISD schools between the 2007–2008 and 2017–2018 school years and who enrolled in a district high school by 2018–2019. Additional details on the data, sample, and analytic strategy, as well as full results, are available from the authors upon request.

1 The measure of racial/ethnic diversity compares each high school’s racial/ethnic composition to the district’s overall average. The measure has three categories: more diverse than the district average, less diverse than the district average (0-50% less diverse), and much less diverse than the district average (50-100% less diverse). The measure is based on Theil’s entropy index (Reardon & Firebaugh, 2002).

2 The measure of campus discipline is based on the number of incidents, including in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, referrals to alternative education programs, and expulsions.

3 This measure of advanced course participation is the share of students completing Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dual credit, and other advanced courses, as determined by the Texas Education Agency. Please visit this link for a list of eligible courses corresponding to the 2018–2019 school year: <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/2020/glossary.pdf>.

Measuring Student Racial/Ethnic Diversity in HISD Schools

There are two important considerations when determining the extent to which a school is racially/ethnically diverse: (1) the number of racial/ethnic groups present and (2) the percentage of students from each racial/ethnic group.

The diversity measure described in this brief compares the racial/ethnic diversity of each HISD school to the overall racial/ethnic diversity in the district. Based on the diversity measure calculated, the pie graphs below show what the student racial/ethnic composition would be for an HISD school that is *much less*, *less*, and *more diverse* than the student body of the entire school district. The actual racial/ethnic composition of the district is provided for reference. An average HISD school that is

much less diverse than the district has multiple racial/ethnic groups, but one group, Hispanics, makes up the vast majority of students. An average HISD school that is *more diverse than the district* has multiple racial/ethnic groups present, and the percentages of students of each racial/ethnic group are more even.



Results

Potential Peer Networks

- Newcomer students from Las Americas were more likely than newcomers from other middle schools to enroll in high schools that were:
 - more racially/ethnically diverse than HISD,
 - had above-average shares of foreign-born students

Figure 1 displays the predicted probabilities of HISD newcomer students attending three types of racially/ethnically diverse schools: much less diverse, less diverse, and more diverse than HISD. The first set of bars shows that among HISD newcomer students, those who attended Las Americas were less likely to attend a high school *much less diverse* than HISD than newcomers from other middle schools. The second set of bars shows that newcomers who attended Las Americas were more likely to attend high schools *less diverse* than the district. Finally, the third set of bars shows that Las Americas students were more likely than newcomers from other middle schools to enroll in high schools

more diverse than the average diversity level of HISD. Overall, it appears that compared to other newcomer students, students from Las Americas tended to enroll in high schools with more racial/ethnic diversity.

FIGURE 1

Probability of Attending High Schools with Much Less, Less, and More Racial/Ethnic Diversity than HISD

Newcomer students at Las Americas were more likely than those at other middle schools to attend high schools *less diverse* or *more diverse* than HISD and less likely to enroll in high schools *much less* diverse than HISD.

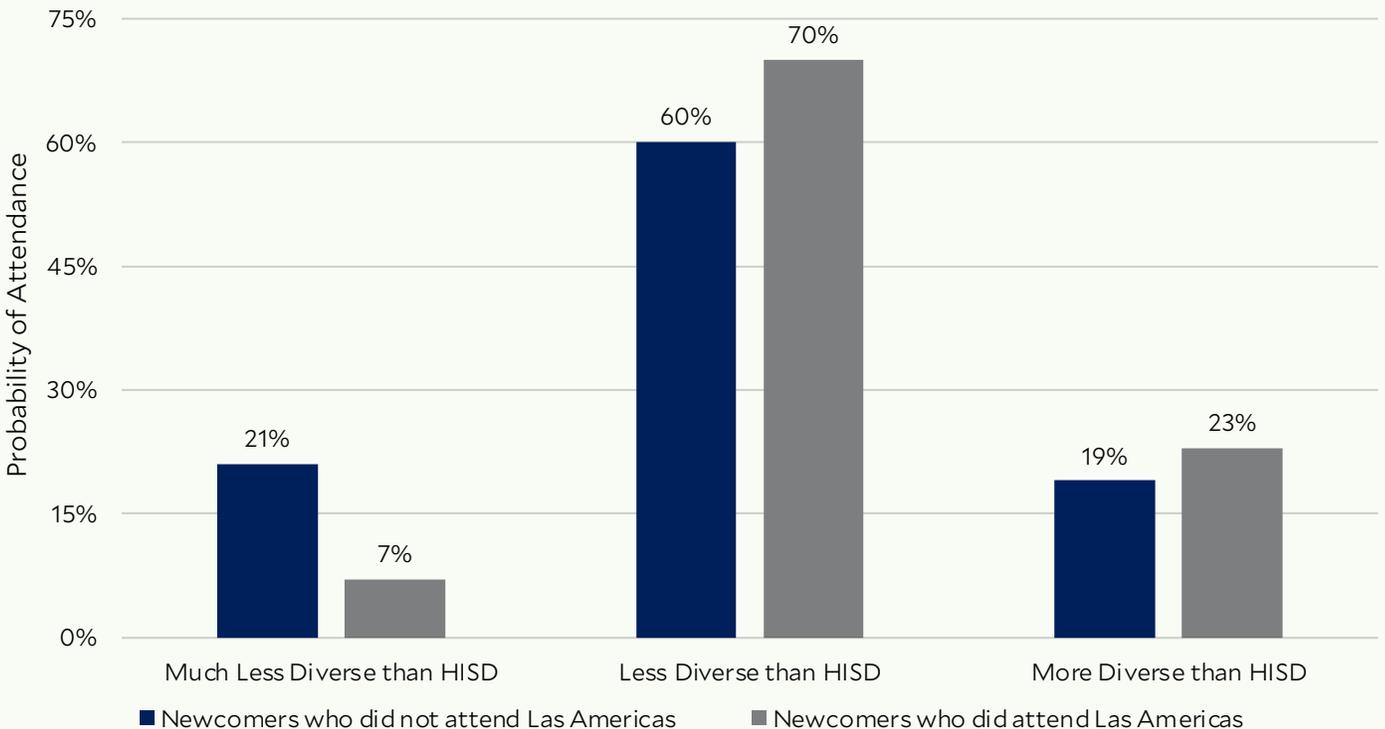


FIGURE 2

Probability of Attending a High School with Above-Average Shares of Foreign-Born Peers

Newcomer students at Las Americas were more likely than newcomers at other middle schools to enroll in high schools with above-average shares of foreign-born students.

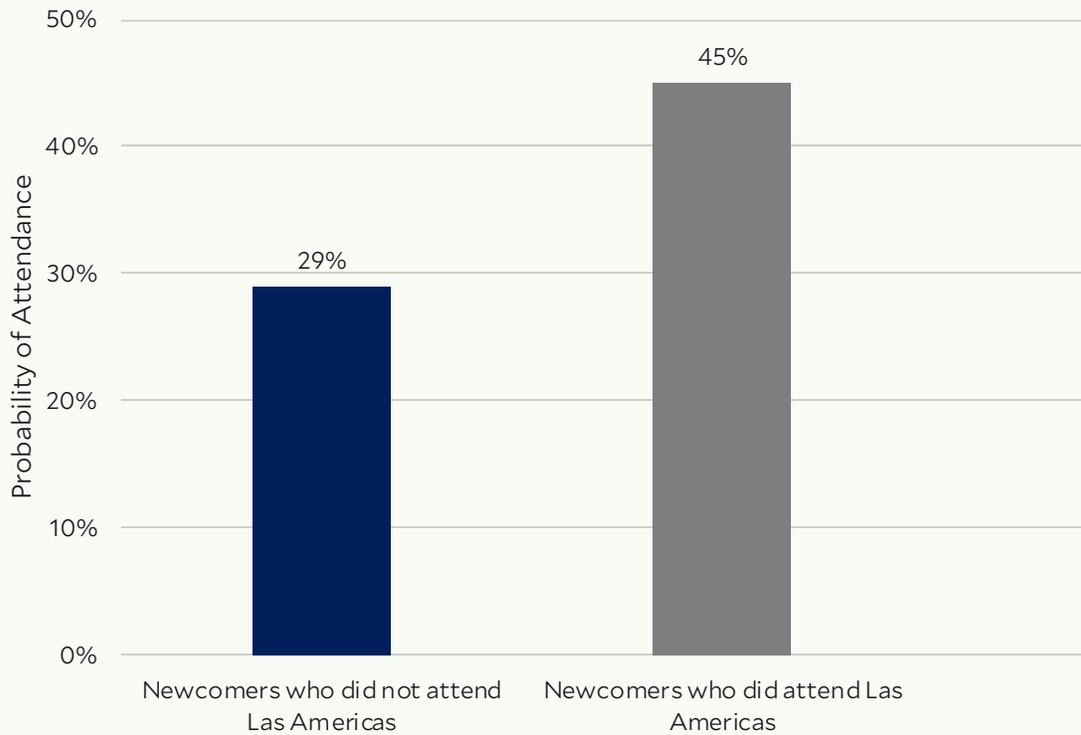


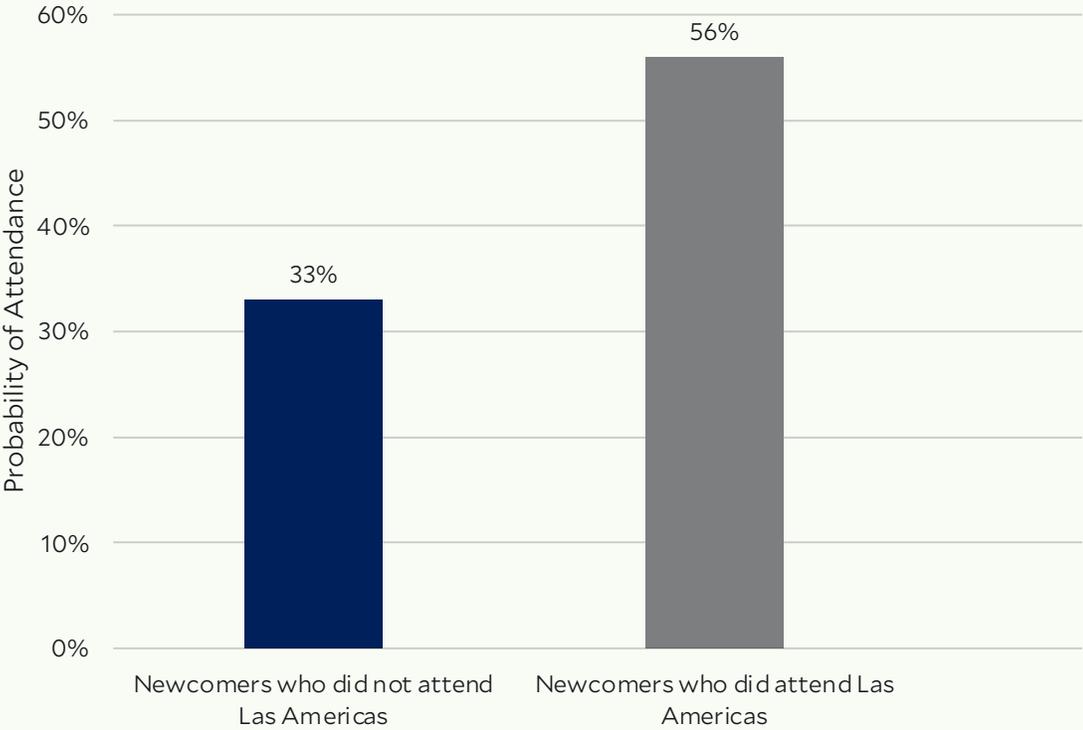
Figure 2 displays the predicted probabilities of HISD newcomer students attending a high school with above-average shares of foreign-born peers. Among newcomer students enrolled in ninth grade in HISD, those who went to Las Americas were more likely to attend high schools with above-average shares of foreign-born peers than newcomers who went to other HISD middle schools.



FIGURE 3

Probability of Attending a High School with Above-Average Shares of EL Peers

Newcomer students from Las Americas were more likely than newcomers from other middle schools to enroll in high schools with above-average shares of EL peers.



English Learner Support & Resources

- Newcomer students at Las Americas were more likely than newcomers from other middle schools to enroll in high schools with:
 - above-average shares of EL students
 - above-average shares of teachers certified to teach EL students.

Figure 3 displays the predicted probabilities of HISD newcomer students attending a high school with above-average shares of EL students. Among newcomer students enrolled in ninth grade in HISD, those who went to Las Americas were more likely to attend high schools with above-average shares of EL students than newcomers who went to other HISD middle schools.

FIGURE 4

Probability of Attending a High School with Above-Average Shares of EL-Certified Teachers

Newcomer students from Las Americas were more likely than newcomers from other middle schools to enroll in high schools with above-average shares of EL-certified teachers.

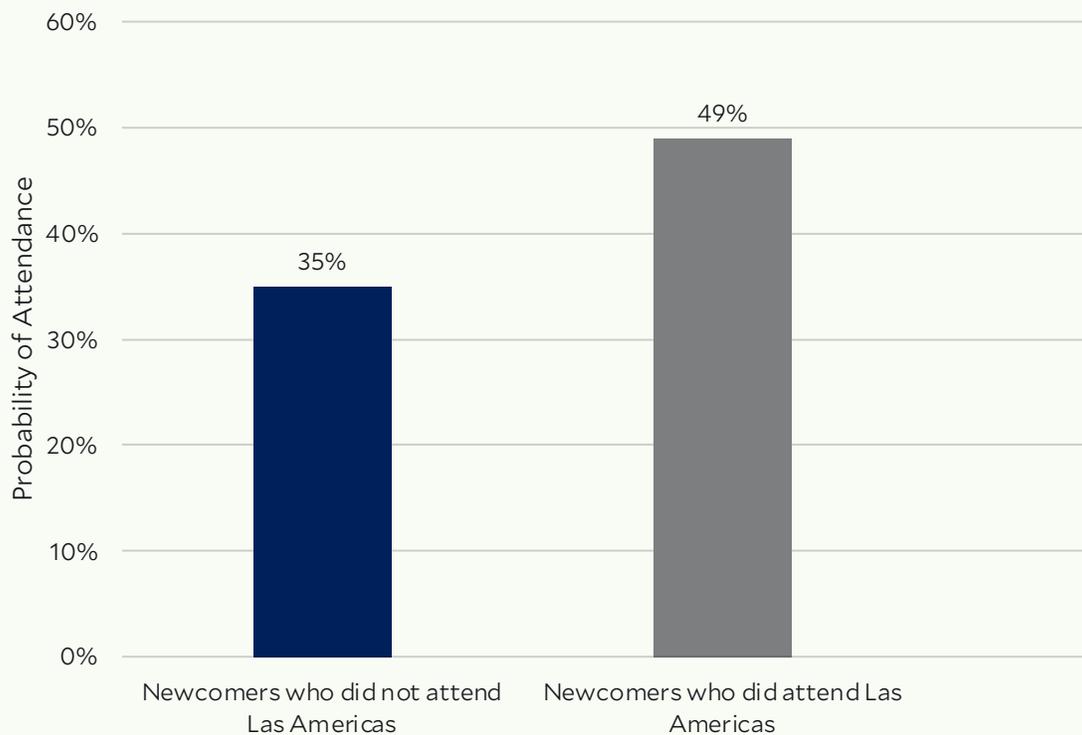


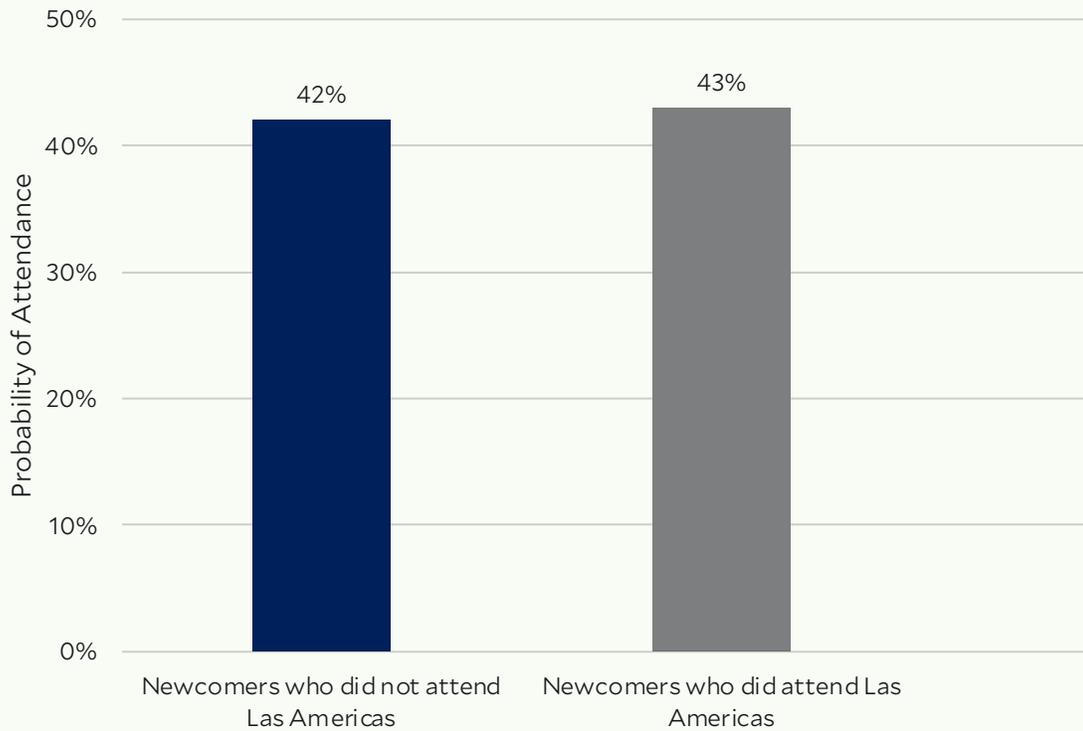
Figure 4 displays the predicted probabilities of newcomer students in HISD attending a high school with above-average shares of teachers certified to teach ELs, specifically English as a second language (ESL) and bilingual education certifications, by middle school attendance. Among newcomer students enrolled in HISD in ninth grade, those who attended Las Americas were more likely than newcomers from other middle schools to enroll in high schools with above-average shares of teachers certified in ESL or bilingual education.



FIGURE 5

Probability of Attending a High School with Above-Average Discipline Rates

There were virtually no differences in the predicted probability of attending a high school with an above-average discipline rate between Las Americas students and newcomers from other middle schools.



Disciplinary Climate

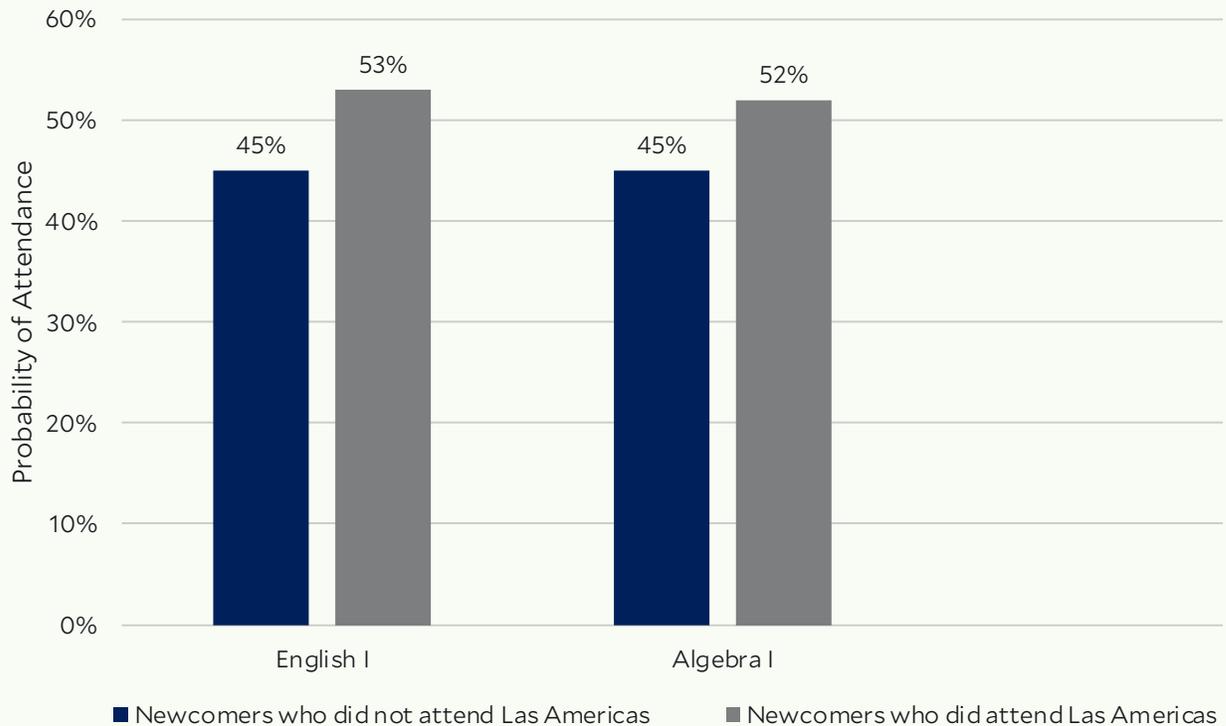
Figure 5 shows there were virtually no differences in the predicted probability of attending a high school with an above-average discipline rate between Las Americas students and newcomers from other middle schools.



FIGURE 6

Probability of Attending a High School with Above-Average End-of-Course (EOC) Exam Scores

Newcomer students who attended Las Americas were more likely than newcomers who attended other middle schools to enroll in high schools with above-average English 1 and Algebra 1 EOC exam scores.



Academic Context

- Newcomer students at Las Americas were more likely than those from other middle schools to enroll in high schools with:
 - above-average end-of-course exam scores for English 1
 - above-average end-of-course exam scores for Algebra 1
 - below-average shares of students classified as gifted

Figure 6 shows the predicted probabilities of HISD newcomer students attending a high school with above-average English 1 and Algebra 1 EOC exam scores by Las Americas attendance. Among newcomer students enrolled in HISD in ninth grade, those who attended Las Americas were eight percentage points more likely to enroll in a high school with above-average English 1 EOC scores than newcomers from other middle schools. In addition, newcomers who attended Las Americas were seven percentage points more likely to attend a high school with above-average Algebra 1 EOC scores than newcomers who attended other middle schools.

FIGURE 7

Probability of Attending a High School with Above-Average Shares of Students Classified as Gifted

Newcomer students from Las Americas, compared to newcomers from other middle schools, enrolled in high schools where fewer students were classified as gifted.

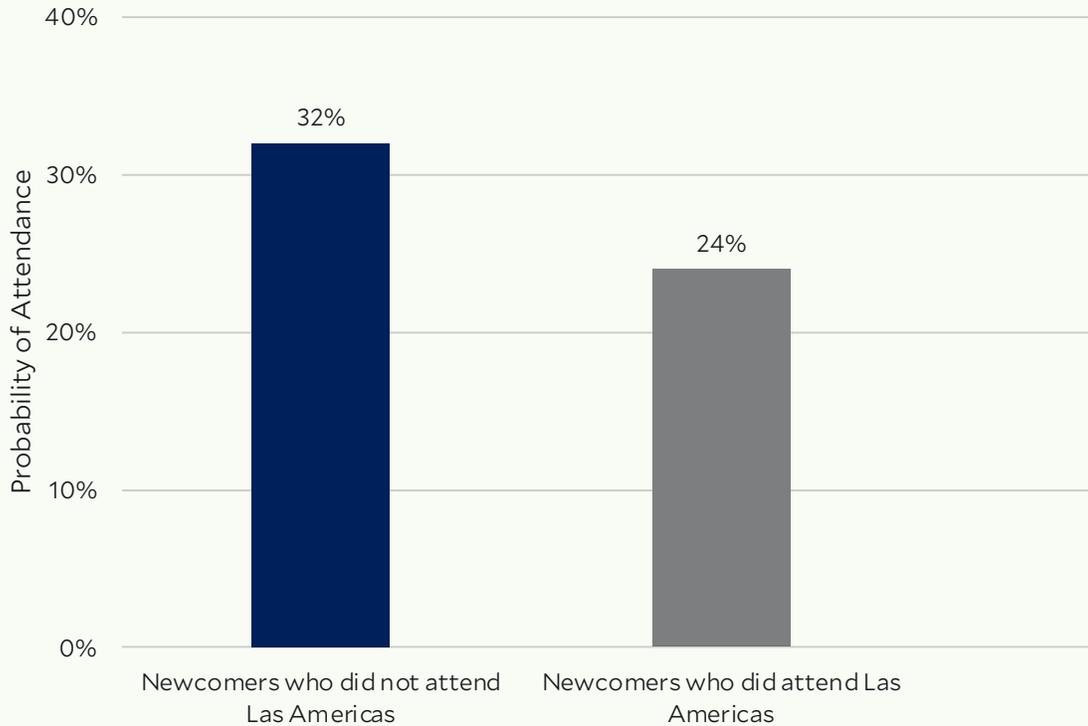


Figure 7 shows the predicted probabilities of HISD newcomer students attending a high school with above-average shares of students classified as gifted. Students who went to Las Americas were less likely than newcomers who went to other middle schools to enroll in high schools with above-average shares of gifted students.

The analyses also examined whether students who attended Las Americas were more likely than students who attended other HISD middle schools to enroll in a high school with above-average shares of students enrolled in advanced coursework. However, no meaningful differences emerged: both groups enrolled in high schools where slightly more than one-third of students took advanced courses.

Conclusion

Summary and Discussion

This study examined whether the high school choices of newcomers who attended a specialized middle school, Las Americas, were different from the high school choices of newcomers who attended other HISD middle schools. The researchers examined four categories of high school characteristics: potential peer networks, EL support and resources, disciplinary climate, and academic context.

Findings suggested newcomers who attended Las Americas were more likely than those from other middle schools to enroll in high schools that might set them up to do well academically. Newcomer students who attended Las Americas were more likely than newcomers from other middle schools to enroll in high schools with a racially/ethnically diverse student body, as well as above-average shares of foreign-born peers. With respect to EL support and resources, Las Americas students were more likely to attend schools with higher shares of EL peers, as well as higher shares of teachers certified to teach EL students. There were no differences in the disciplinary climate of the high schools that former Las Americas and non-Las Americas students attended. Lastly, in terms of academic context, the results suggested, to some extent, Las Americas students were more likely to attend high schools that were higher-achieving in terms of end-of-course exam scores, compared to the high schools of newcomers who attended other middle schools.

Recommendations

- **Continue to communicate with newcomer students and parents at Las Americas and at other HISD middle schools about high school choice options.** According to conversations with HISD's Multilingual Education Department, this has been taking place. These efforts may continue to help newcomer families identify high school options more customized to their preferences and needs.
- **Take an equity-minded approach to supporting newcomer students by targeting schools with higher shares of newcomers.** Based on past conversations with district leaders, a summer training opportunity helps teachers earn a Quality Teaching of English Learners certification. School and district leaders may be able to encourage or incentivize teachers at high schools with a substantial share of newcomer students to earn the certificate.
- **Follow up with former Las Americas students to learn how they made their high school choices.** Because this study is limited to studying which aspects of the Las Americas experience were related to newcomer students' high school choices, follow-up studies are imperative. A follow-up study can ask students how they felt about Las Americas and how attending the school affected their transition into the U.S. schooling system and the broader society. Students may provide insights on how Las Americas influenced their decisions to choose high schools that fit their preferences and needs, or what supports helped them navigate the complex school choice process.

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