“The Choice Is Yours — You Can Get with This, or You Can Get with That”: The Geospatial Relationship of School Choice and Educational Attainment in New York City

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Introduction

School choice is an umbrella term that describes an array of policies offering alternatives to publicly provided schools. This paper focuses on New York City’s high school choice policy through the empirical strategy of identifying the top two and bottom two community districts in terms of attainment, first at the secondary level then at the postsecondary level, in order to examine the geospatial relationship of school choice and educational attainment.

Literature Review

Throughout the history of American education, various school choice policies have been devised to accomplish different goals. Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, southern school districts implemented so-called “freedom of choice” plans in which Black and white students were free to choose which school they would attend, in theory (Stancil, 2018). However, in practice, “freedom of choice was adopted within the existing superstructure of segregation” (Liu & Taylor, 2005, p. 793) where white children almost exclusively chose to continue attending the segregated schools, while very few Black children chose to attend white schools knowing they would face discrimination and hostility. If families made no choice, they were assigned to schools in their geographic catchment area. Since most neighborhoods had long been segregated, Black children tended to live near and attend all-Black schools, and vice versa (Wells, 1993). Then, in the era of school desegregation between the latter half of the 1960s through the 1980s, various school choice options were introduced to do the exact opposite, namely, to promote racial integration and diversify schools (Logan, 2018).

More recently, popular school choice options—including charter schools, voucher plans, as well as intra- and inter-district open enrollment programs—have been enacted in many states (Logan, 2018). These plans are designed to infuse neoliberal, free market-based principles into government-funded schools and thereby foster laissez-faire innovation through greater competition (Roda & Wells, 2013). In other words, the modern school choice movement views education as a private good. Consumers and demanders of education (students and parents) enter the education marketplace to maximize their satisfaction, while suppliers of education (schools) desire to maximize monetary profits. Their symbiotic supply-and-demand interaction is believed to yield a more efficient and academically successful education system than the underperforming underfunded public schools.

The majority of empirical studies on school choice have focused on evaluating the outcomes of these policies by examining various indicators, such as the academic achievement of students in choice programs compared to those in non-choice public schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2005; Martinez, Godwin & Kemerer, 1996). Evidence on the effects of school choice in each of these areas is highly contested because it doesn’t provide a holistic overview of external factors. Scholars are pursuing new and increasingly sophisticated ways to measure the association between school choice and other variables, such as student achievement and equity and even gentrification (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Corcoran, Jennings, Cohodes, & Sattin-Bajaj, 2018; Jordan & Gallagher, 2015; Nathanson, Corcoran, Baker-Smith, 2013; Ross, 2005; Saporito, 2003 Sattin-Bajaj, 2009, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). Decades of research has also shown that, on average, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds enroll in

choice schools at higher rates than their lower socioeconomic peers. Studies in districts with open enrollment plans, voucher programs, magnet school options, and inter-district choice have long concluded that there is a "creaming effect" (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014a, p. 8) where children of higher educated parents with more material resources are more likely to exercise school choice (Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Armour & Pieser, 1998; Wells & Crain, 1997). But this large and growing body of research seldom looks at the geospatial relationship between school choice and educational attainment. For example, high school graduation and matriculation rates coupled with college persistence and completion, which, ultimately, may be different and of greater consequence than a single indicator in and of itself, such as only high school graduation rates.

Empirical Strategy

One of the most fertile grounds to examine school choice policies is New York City (NYC), home to the largest public school system and high school choice program in the nation, where no neighborhood-school default option exists. Since 2004, all NYC eighth graders—over 80,000 children—have been required to select, rank, and apply to up to 12 preferred high school programs out of more than 700 options (Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings, 2020). The NYC Department of Education then matches each student with a school based on their preferences and other criteria depending on the school's admission method. But not all families and students are aware that there are so many high school options for them to choose from. These are the same families and "students from poor neighborhoods [who] are more likely to 'choose' schools with high concentrations of other students from poor neighborhoods" (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2016, p. 9). Accordingly, the question at hand is not about whether one exercises school choice, but rather how they exercise it and what factors play a role in their decision-making process and outcomes.

The goal of this paper, then, is to explore the geospatial relationship of school choice and educational attainment in NYC. Do where students live mediate the kinds of school choices they make and are aware of? To what degree do disparities in educational attainment exist between the variations in students' school choice? To shed light on these questions, this paper draws upon triangulated data from Lewis and Burd-Sharps (2016) and Nathanson et al. (2013), as well as data published by American Community Survey (ACS). Based on the extant literature, this paper hypothesizes that students living in less affluent community districts apply to schools that are less selective, lower-performing, and more disadvantaged than those to which students living in more affluent community districts apply (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014). Furthermore, students living in less affluent community districts will not only graduate high school, matriculate into, persist, and graduate from college at lower rates, but also the community districts that they come from will have lower mean incomes than their counterparts living in more affluent districts.

Secondary Attainment

In 2004, NYC Department of Education (DOE) implemented its high school choice policy because on-time graduation rates were disastrous. Just 46.5 percent of students who graduated high school in 2005 completed their degrees in four years, compared to 70.5 percent of those who graduated in 2015 (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2016). Although the on-time high school graduation rate has increased, low-performing students attend lower-performing high schools and reside in impoverished neighborhoods where schools are under-resourced and underfunded. A direct correlation exists between socioeconomic status and school quality. For example, the top two community districts, Manhattan community districts 1 and 2 (Mn 1&2), which consists of Battery Park City, Greenwich Village, and SoHo had 95.1 percent on-time high school graduation in 2014. The bottom two community districts, Brooklyn community district 16 (Bk 16), which consists of Brownsville and Ocean Hill, and Bronx community district 5 (Bx 5), which consists of Morris Heights, Fordham South, and Mount Hope, had 61.4 percent

and 60.9 percent on-time high school graduation, respectively (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2016). Lewis and Burd-Sharps also indicate that Bk 16 and Bx 5 also had higher child poverty rates, higher numbers of households participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and lower amounts of adult educational attainment.

Secondary attainment is important because earnings over the lifespan for high school graduates are greater than high school dropouts and General Education Diploma holders. Therefore, it is concerning that school choice benefits households with the cultural capital to navigate applying to selective high schools. The knowledge, power and status that cultural capital grants allowed these households to be aware that the process requires a significant time investment that ranges from a bare minimum of 25 hours to upwards of 72 hours. This calculation is likely a profound underestimate for families aspiring toward the most competitive schools, many of whom will invest much more time than the high-end 72-hour figure (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2016). Time and flexibility are scarce commodities for the working poor. Navigating the high school choice process worsens for students from immigrant families who face language barriers, rely on communal networks, and choose schools that are close in proximity to their homes, many of which are in impoverished neighborhoods that's in correlation with their socioeconomic status. NYC DOE tasks middle school counselors to address these discrepancies without outlining how to do so.

The NYC High School Directory refers to middle school counselors as the premier source of information in applying to high schools. The reality is that middle school counselors in impoverished community districts cannot dedicate all their energy to this process. Rather their work focuses on the social issues affecting students such as Administration for Children's Services cases, learning disabilities, trauma, poor health, hunger, etc. Overall, counselors have high caseloads, but they vary substantially across schools; 40.9% have 301 or more students, while 31.8% have 100 or fewer students (Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings, 2020). The absence of action-guiding advice from counselors is associated with students being admitted to schools with lower graduation and college-going rates (Sattin-Bajaj, Jennings, Corcoran, Baker-Smith, & Hailey, 2018). Middle school counselors are defined by three categories: directional, generic, and procedural. Generic and procedural counselors provide basic overview of the high school process and recommend high schools based on their biases. Directional counselors are hands-on and involved in the process. These latter counselors recognize the cultural capital needed to navigate applying to high schools and take it upon themselves to level the school choice policy field in order to achieve some sort of equity (Sattin-Bajaj, Jennings, Corcoran, Baker-Smith, & Hailey, 2018).

The purpose of NYC school choice is for public education to be equitable in a segregated school system; however, based on the four-year graduation rate at first choice and matched schools in 2011, 58.6 percent of low-achieving students graduated from their first choice schools compared to 52.7 percent from matched schools (Nathanson et al., 2013). Selectivity is based on screenings, admissions tests, and auditions. Screened programs tend to require high academic grade point averages in core subjects, competitive seventh-grade standardized tests, interviews, contingencies on open house attendance, or portfolios if applicable. Admission to specialized high schools is solely based on passing the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT), which disadvantages students who cannot access test preparation services thus, enrollment of low-achieving students is scarce (Tortoriello, 2016). Performing arts high schools or programs require auditions and thus, attract students from families with income capital to afford private lessons in the arts, attend middle schools with strong performing arts programs, or both.

Socioeconomic status determines one's residence, which in turn establishes the quality of schools low achieving students have access to in community districts. A majority of low-achieving students are male and Black or Hispanic. They are also more likely to be English language learners or receive special education services (or both) than their higher-achieving peers (Nathanson et al., 2013). Therefore, the social issues faced by low-achieving students results in them attending lower-performing

high schools, which are largely composed of other low-achieving students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite the attempts of NYC's school choice policy to desegregate its public high schools and give each applicant the right to select the best school for them, it fails to graduate low-achieving students in high numbers compared to their high-achieving peers (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2016). Low-achieving students are falling through the cracks, which brings our focus to a larger systematic issue. School choice does not necessarily equate to secondary attainment for low-achieving students despite NYC's overall on-time graduation rate increases. Instead, the cycle of poverty and lack of educational attainment is perpetuated.

Postsecondary Attainment

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a substantive body of data that policymakers across the nation use to inform their decisions on how to allocate over $675 billion dollars in federal and state funding distributed each year. It is also used to learn more about the population by assessing labor force and job trends, trends in educational attainment, homeownership market trends, as well as other topics to better plan for future spending allocations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). The ACS publishes its data in one-year or five-year datasets. The benefits of using multi-year datasets is that it increases the reliability of the data, particularly for smaller subsets of communities—like the ones investigated in our research (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

In order to frame the arguments asserted in this paper, we used the 5-year ACS Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA) data to assess the levels of educational attainment of individuals 25 years of age and over. We analyzed this data for Mn 1&2, Bx 5, and Bk 16—the top two and bottom two performing community districts in NYC in terms of high school graduation rates (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2016). Utilizing the ACS 5-year estimate data from 2013-2017, we assessed the levels of educational attainment of these communities to measure the relationship between community districts, high school choice, and ultimate educational attainment. Particularly looking at persistence at the postsecondary level. We further triangulated this data with mean income from the ACS PUMA database not only to highlight the correlation between educational attainment and earned income capacity, but also to illustrate the correlation between access to quality education and how that translates to the (in)ability to accumulate intergenerational wealth. Ideally, this paper will highlight the need for policymakers to dig deeper in their analyses of ACS data to better understand the nuances of how school choice policies are exercised in real time, and how that translates into social (im)mobility for communities in NYC in starkly different ways.

Table 1 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

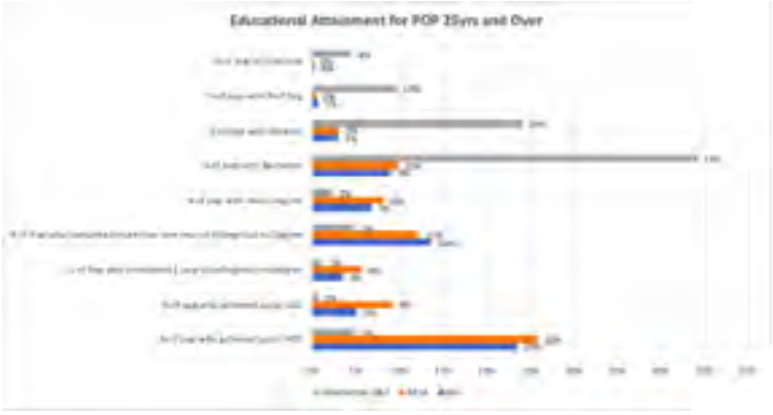

Table 1 shows educational attainment data for the percentage of populations 25 years of age

and over in Bx 5, Bk 16, and Mn 1&2. The graph highlights the stark differences in educational attainment between these community districts. Paying particular attention to the concentration of the population in Bx 5 and Bk 16, whose highest level of attainment is a high school diploma and those who completed one or more years of college but did not earn associate or bachelor degrees (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2016; MacLeod, 2009). We assert that families in these districts lack the resources, academic preparation, cultural capital, and the deep understanding necessary to navigate not only the high school choice process but also institutions of higher education. While high school graduation rates and college enrollment may be increasing overall, folks in these communities are not persisting through degree completion at the rate of their more affluent peers in Mn 1&2. MacLeod (2009) highlights how the concentration of poverty in a neighborhood can also contribute to the regulation of aspirations of low-income youth. While we have limited data on the rates at which the students in Bx 5, Bk 16 and Mn 1&2 are exercising school choice to select better-resourced, higher-performing schools, we posit that MacLeod's (2009) theory could also be a contributing factor to the reduced rates in quality high school choice. Ultimately leading to reduced post-secondary aspirations among low-income students as detailed by Lewis and Burd-Sharps (2016).

In contrast, we note that students from Mn 1&2 have a higher likelihood of having one or more parents, siblings, or friends who attended college. 44 percent of individuals 25 years of age and older have at least a bachelor's degree in Mn 1&2 compared to 9 percent and 10 percent of the same age group in Bx 5 and Bk 16, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). We thus assert that families in Mn 1&2 have a higher likelihood of exercising quality school choice; that is to say, selecting and gaining entrance to the better resourced, more selective high schools across NYC. Thereby increasing the likelihood of their being prepared for and attending more selective colleges, persisting, and graduating with postsecondary degrees and higher incomes as a result (Duncan & Murnane, 2014).

Table 2 and Table 3 below highlight the differences in mean income and the concentration of poverty between Bx 5, Bk 16, and Mn 1&2 . It is important to note that families in Bx 5 and Bk 16 with two or more working individuals earned less than one third of the income of similar families in Mn 1&2 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Annually, families in Bx 5 and Bk 16 with two or more working individuals earned approximately $65,000 and $92,000, respectively, in comparison to families in Mn 1&2 with similar labor market participants who earned approximately $376,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Furthermore, comparing the percentage of populations in these districts that receive public assistance (52 percent for Bx 5 and 44 percent for Bk 16 compared to 4 percent in Mn 1&2) with the percentages of populations who earn income from interest, dividends, and rental income (36 percent in Mn 1&2 compared to 6 percent or less in Bx 5 and Bk 16) highlights the concentration of poverty versus the generational wealth capacity.

Duncan and Murnane (2014) would attribute the disparities in educational attainment between these districts to the income and wealth disparities between them. They assert that "changes in the ways that families at different ends in the income spectrum use their money and time have helped transform income gaps into achievement gaps" (p. 2). This explains how families in Mn 1&2 leverage their cultural capital, resources, and academic achievements to perpetuate the centrifugal accumulation of substantial opportunity and access for their children that ultimately leads to their increased capacity to accrue generational wealth.

Table 2 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Table 3 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

We highlight these correlations as contributing factors to perpetuating inequalities in the secondary and postsecondary attainment of students in these community districts. Contextualizing the data using the theoretical framework of social reproduction theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1977), it becomes apparent that the lack of cultural and social capital of the families in Bx 5 and Bk 16 on one end, and the abundance of cultural and social capital of the families in Mn 1&2 on the other end is the result of disparities we see in the divergent kinds of high school choices students make and their consequent educational attainment. Cultural capital is what is needed for these students to successfully navigate the high school choice process and persist in postsecondary institutions if and when they do make it to college (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2016; MacLeod, 2009).

Conclusions, Policy Implications, and Recommendations

Students in New York City residing in less affluent community districts apply to schools that are lower performing, less selective, and more disadvantaged than those who live in more affluent community districts. This paper explored the geospatial relationship between school choice and educational attainment, and also presented data to support how location of residence mediates the kinds of school choices made. Students in high-poverty community districts are less likely to graduate on time from high school and are less likely to attend higher education institutions than those from low-poverty community districts. Resources are not as easily accessed in the high-poverty community districts, and students tend to not know how or what to choose. This results in more undermatching in both high school and higher education, lower mean incomes in those high-poverty community districts, and a continuation of low educational attainment for generations. More research is needed to further

improve the school choice process and the benefits of students being able to choose where they attend school.

Despite evidence pointing to components of school choice being a driving factor in the improvement and rise of student outcomes, many students are still unable to practice quality school choice due to many barriers. For example, although NYC DOE produces a 600+ page directory to assist students with the school choice process and it's offered in many languages, what happens to the parents who want to help their children but can't read? An informational intervention utilizing a "fast facts" sheet—which displayed 30 high schools within 45 minutes away of the target middle school and that had graduation rates above 70 percent—has shown that low-income students who received these custom lists were significantly more likely to gain acceptance to their first-choice high school, especially students in non-English speaking households (Corcoran et al., 2018).

We recommend providing all middle school students, across NYC, an informational fast facts sheet. These sheets have shown to be very helpful for students who are applying to high school, and every student should benefit from these sheets if we truly want every student to succeed as per the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act. Corcoran et al. (2018) state that both disadvantaged and advantaged students who used their sheets to make high school choices that allowed students to match to better (and to more) schools, and the likelihood of undermatching was less prominent. If providing a simplified and customized fact sheet to middle school students increases the quality of school they match with, this needs to be done on a larger scale. Students are able to see what schools are higher performing, but also the schools that they have a higher chance of being admitted to. One thing to think about with this recommendation is that if both disadvantaged and advantaged students have access to these sheets, they will both be benefiting, and it may not necessarily reduce inequality in education. However, providing students with these resources will support them in the path to higher educational attainment. Those who graduate high school are seen to have higher lifetime earnings than those who do not complete high school. Therefore, helping students find high schools where they will thrive is important to their overall success.

The informational fast fact sheet should ease the confusion between community and school districts. For example, NYC DOE divides the city into 32 school districts across the five boroughs, which helps determine where students attend school prior to high school. Each borough is further divided into community districts; twelve in Manhattan, twelve in the Bronx, eighteen in Brooklyn, fourteen in Queens, and three in Staten Island. These district divisions are very different especially when you look at maps comparing the two. A single school district can contain multiple community districts, which is confusing for readers unsure of which type of district is being analyzed. Why is NYC divided in two different ways, and what are the benefits of these divisions being different?

Mn 1&2, Bx 5, and Bk 16 represent the top two and bottom two performing community districts in NYC when looking at high school graduation rates. Looking at the makeup of these four districts, we see that those in the bottom two community districts, Bx 5 and Bk 16, whose highest levels of attainment are high school diplomas or some college, earn less and lack cultural capital to help them navigate high school and higher education choices. The mean income difference between these top two and bottom two community districts highlights the large inequality between families in each district. Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical framework of social reproduction best explains this disparity. Families in Bx 5 and Bk 16 lack predominant cultural and social capital, as they bring other cultural and social capital with them depending on their lived experiences, and those in Mn 1&2 have an abundance of cultural and social capital. This is seen when middle school students choose higher-performing high schools because cultural capital is necessary for students to successfully make high school choices and eventually higher education choices.

We believe that this paper opens the door for more research to be done on these community and school district lines. Would it be beneficial for students to make the community and school district

lines similar? Or would this further hurt their educational attainment? Making the lines similar could pose many positives but also negatives for students in the long run. One block can make a difference in many things in NYC, not just schooling. Your neighbor across the street could be in a different district than you, and their district may have higher test scores and better school choice practices than yours, but what can you do about it? Making these districts similar may allow students to further their reach when it comes to schools, but it could have the opposite influence as well. There is a risk of further concentrating poverty when making districts similar, due to neighborhoods still being segregated. The only way to know what would happen, or what might happen, is to further research this idea.

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