

Transition to High School



*School “Choice”
& Freshman Year
in Philadelphia*



RESEARCH FOR *ACTION*

FEBRUARY 2010



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Christman, J. B., Brown, D., Burgess, S., Kay, J., Maluk, H. P., & Mitchell, C. (2009). *Effective organizational practices for middle and high school grades: A qualitative study of what's helping Philadelphia students succeed in grades 6-12*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

Gold, E., & Evans, S. A. (2008). *Blueprint for secondary education in Philadelphia: The planning process, 2006-2008*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

Hartmann, T. A., Reumann-Moore, R. J., Evans, S. A., Haxton, C., Maluk, H. P., & Neild, R. C. (2009). *Going small: Progress and challenges of Philadelphia's small high schools*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

Acknowledgements

The authors of this report wish to thank the many individuals and institutions that contributed to and supported this research. The research would not have been possible without the financial support of the William Penn Foundation. In addition, we are deeply appreciative of the time that central office, regional, and school leaders spent with us, sharing their insights about Philadelphia high schools. We owe special thanks to the School District of Philadelphia's accountability and research offices for providing us with district data sets important to this study.

RFA colleagues were critical to bringing this report to fruition. Jolley Bruce Christman and Sukey Blanc assisted with data collection and analysis. Senior RFA staff provided feedback to an early draft, and RFA interns Maggie Larson, Stephanie Rosen, and Meagan Steiner assisted with data management, coding and transcription. Judy Adamson, RFA Managing Director, directed design and production of this report.

Feedback from three anonymous external reviewers contributed significantly to refining and clarifying the report findings. The authors alone, however, are responsible for any shortcomings in the report.

Finally, thanks to our editor, Nancy Bouldin, who assisted in making this report clearer and more accessible, and to Judy Lamirand of Parallel Design for her contribution to the design of the report.

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Abstract

The School District of Philadelphia's tiered system of selective, nonselective, and charter high schools, and the process for high school choice, has created real variation in the degree to which high schools can successfully meet the needs of ninth graders. Research has shown that the ninth grade year is critical in determining a student's likelihood of graduating from high school. This mixed-methods study examines the transition to high school in Philadelphia, which we define as including the eighth grade high school selection process and students' experience in their ninth grade year.

In our analysis of eighth grade applications to district-managed high schools for the 2007-08 school year, we found that most District eighth graders participated in the high school selection process, but fewer than half of them were admitted and enrolled in any of their chosen schools. Further, comparing across types of high schools, we found first, that the choice process contributes to system stratification, with low-income students, Black and Latino students, students who need special supports, and boys concentrated in nonselective neighborhood high schools and Whites, Asians, and girls concentrated in special admission high schools. Second, we learned that the choice process creates distinct challenges to the neighborhood schools' ability to support ninth graders. Enrollment at neighborhood high schools does not settle until the school selection process settles in late summer, and then continues to shift through the fall due to geographic mobility and returns from the juvenile justice system or other schools. Late enrollments undercut the ability of the neighborhood high schools to prepare for incoming classes, and contribute to changes in course schedules and teacher assignments after the school year begins, which cost important instructional time.

Finally, we found that despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of the freshman year, competing district agendas often mean it is not a priority in district and school planning. Freshman year interventions are often implemented piecemeal, without the professional support teachers need to adopt new practices, and without the assessments needed to know if they are effective. We argue that if low-performing neighborhood high schools are going to "turn around" or improve, it will require not only building school capacity but also implementing changes to the broader systems of district policy and practice in which these schools function, including the high school selection process.

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At a Glance: Philadelphia High Schools by Admissions Category

31 Neighborhood High Schools	13 Citywide Admission High Schools	27 Charter Schools with High School Grades
<p>Audenried Bartram Carroll Edison Fels FitzSimons Frankford Franklin, Benjamin Furness Germantown Gratz High School of the Future Kensington Business Kensington CAPA Kensington Culinary King Lamberton Lincoln Northeast Olney East Olney West Overbrook Rhodes Roxborough Sayre South Philadelphia Strawberry Mansion University City Vaux Washington West Philadelphia</p>	<p>Bok Communications Technology Constitution Dobbins Douglas Mastbaum Motivation Philadelphia HS for Business & Technology Philadelphia Military Academy at Elverson Philadelphia Military Academy at Leeds Randolph Robeson Swenson</p>	<p>Arise Academy Boys' Latin of Philadelphia CHAD (Charter High School for Architecture and Design) Community Academy of Philadelphia Delaware Valley Charter Eastern University Academy Esperanza Academy Franklin Towne Charter Freire Charter School Hope Charter School Imhotep Institute Charter Mariana Bracetti Academy Maritime Academy Charter School Mastery – Lenfest Campus Mastery – Pickett Campus Mastery – Shoemaker Campus Mastery – Thomas Campus Mathematics, Civics, and Sciences Charter Math, Science, and Technology Community Charter Multi-Cultural Academy New Media Technology Philadelphia Academy Philadelphia Electrical and Technology Preparatory Charter School of Mathematics, Science, Technology and Careers Sankofa Freedom Academy Truebright Science Academy World Communications</p>
	<p>16 Special Admission High Schools</p> <p>Academy at Palumbo Arts Academy at Rush Bodine CAPA (Creative and Performing Arts) Carver Central Franklin Learning Center GAMP (Girard Academic Music Program) Lankenau Masterman Parkway Center City Parkway Northwest Parkway West Philadelphia High School for Girls Saul Science Leadership Academy</p>	

District high schools, September 2009. See Appendix A for how our list differs from the District's *Directory of High Schools*.

Introduction

Transition to High School

Education reformers, city officials, and citizens across the nation are raising alarm about the “graduation rate crisis” in urban high schools. One large-scale study of nearly all public high schools nationwide has found that “high schools with the worst promoting power are concentrated in a subset of the nation’s cities.”¹ Philadelphia, where 41% of entering ninth graders in 2004 failed to complete high school by 2008, is one such city.² Although Philadelphia’s four-year graduation rate has improved in recent years—almost 10 points higher for the class of 2008 than for the class of 2006—the overall graduation rate of 59% is still low.³

Not only can researchers point to particular cities with low graduation rates and consequently high rates of student dropout, but they have also found that the dropout problem is concentrated in about 15% of the nation’s schools, with school poverty level being the strongest predictor of dropout.⁴ In Philadelphia as well as across the country, many of these high-poverty schools are neighborhood or comprehensive high schools, which serve all students regardless of their academic record. Balfanz and Legters found that “there is a near perfect linear relationship between a high school’s poverty level and its tendency to lose large numbers of students between the ninth and twelfth grades.”⁵

Nonetheless, there is a convergence of evidence that, regardless of socio-economic background or other disadvantages students may have, schools can play a significant role in reversing the rate of dropout by helping youngsters make a successful transition into high school. As longtime observers of the dropout problem, Ruth Curran Neild and colleagues believe that “the inner city dropout epidemic cannot be ameliorated *unless high schools organize themselves* to help students *through the transition to high school*” (emphasis added).⁶ Elaborating further, Neild and Farley state that, “ultimately, the best dropout-prevention programs may be those designed to help students make the transition into the high school environment, with its more demanding curriculum, new social opportunities and pressures, and comparatively greater freedom.”⁷

Regardless of socio-economic background or other disadvantages students may have, schools can play a significant role in reversing the rate of dropout by helping youngsters make a successful transition into high school.

¹ Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. (2004). Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation’s dropouts? In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 57-84). Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, p. 64.

² Socolar, P. (2009, Spring). District graduation rates show an upward trend. *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, 16(3), 16.

³ Socolar, 2009, Spring.

⁴ Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. (2006). Closing ‘dropout factories’: The graduation-rate crisis we know, and what can be done about it. *Education Week*, 25(42), 42-43.

⁵ Balfanz & Legters, 2006, p 42.

⁶ Neild, R. C., Stoner-Eby, S., & Furstenberg, F. (2008). Connecting entrance and departure: The transition to ninth grade and high school dropout. *Education and Urban Society*, 40, 543-569, p. 559.

⁷ Neild, R. C., & Farley, E. (2004). Whatever happened to the class of 2000? The timing of dropout in Philadelphia’s schools. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 207-220). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 218.

The Importance of Freshman Year Transition

Research over the past decade has shown that among the strongest indicators of being “on track” to graduation are whether a ninth grader attends school, passes his or her courses, and proceeds to tenth grade.⁸ Studies that explore why the transition to high school is so critical to students staying “on track” span numerous disciplines and offer multiple explanations for why the transition is so challenging. These challenges include issues of adolescent development and differences in preparation for high school made in eighth grade, as well as discrepancies in community and family resources.⁹ For many adolescents the freshman transition results in the loss of academic momentum. While this setback does not doom all students, it is especially difficult to overcome for youth with multiple disadvantages and scant access to support systems.¹⁰

Philadelphia, where all but a few neighborhood high schools serve largely students of color and high-poverty populations, has been highlighted in multiple studies of the student dropout problem. One study points out that, “at most of [Philadelphia’s] neighborhood high schools, the proportion of freshmen without any risk factors for non-promotion is extremely low.”¹¹ Historically, about one third of first-time freshman in the School District of Philadelphia (the District) do not pass ninth grade.¹² The highest degree of ninth grade retention occurs in the District’s neighborhood high schools where the average ninth grader enters with academic skills several years below grade level.¹³ In the absence of strong, coherent interventions to support these students catching up and successfully making the transition to high school, ninth grade retention increases the likelihood that they will ultimately drop out of school.¹⁴

In this report we take a hard look at issues of high school transition in Philadelphia, with a particular focus on the conditions for transition at the nonselective neighborhood high schools.

⁸ Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008; Allensworth, E., & Easton, J. Q. (2005). *The on-track indicator as a predictor of high school graduation*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research; Allensworth, E., & Easton, J. Q. (2007). *What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago public high schools*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

⁹ Grossman, J. B., & Cooney, S. M. (2009). *Paving the way for success in high school and beyond: The importance of preparing middle school students for the transition to ninth grade*.

Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures; Neild, R. C. (2009). Falling off track during the transition to high school: What we know and what can be done. *The Future of Children*, 19(1), 53-76.

¹⁰ Grossman & Cooney, 2009; Neild & Farley, 2004. See also: Newberg, N. (1991). Bridging the gap: An organizational inquiry into an urban school district. In D. A. Schön (Ed.), *The reflective turn: Case studies in and on educational practice* (pp. 65-83). New York: Teachers College Press.

¹¹ Neild, R. C., & Balfanz, R. (2006). An extreme degree of difficulty: The educational demographics of urban neighborhood high schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 11(2), 123-141, p. 137.

¹² Neild & Balfanz, 2006.

¹³ Neild & Balfanz, 2006.

¹⁴ Allensworth & Easton, 2007.

Transition to High School in Philadelphia: A Closer Look

In this report we take a hard look at issues of high school transition in Philadelphia, with a particular focus on the conditions for transition at the non-selective neighborhood high schools. Our goal is to identify implications of existing policies, practices, and processes for Philadelphia’s students and for the District’s and city’s efforts to improve low-performing schools.

To fully understand issues of transition in Philadelphia, we began by looking at the process of high school selection in the eighth grade and the supports for transition available to freshmen in various types of high schools. In Philadelphia there are four types of public high schools each with different admissions criteria.¹⁵ *Special admission* and *citywide admission* high schools are selective in their admissions criteria and therefore students must apply to be accepted at these schools. *Neighborhood* high schools are nonselective and any student who attended a feeder middle school or who lives within the feeder pattern can automatically attend one of the “default” neighborhood high schools. Finally, *charter* schools are public schools but are not managed by the District. Students apply separately to charter schools, are frequently screened through an interview process, and then go into a lottery to determine acceptance.

The type of high school to which a student is accepted is likely to have a significant influence on that student’s educational experience and future opportunities. As the table in **Appendix A** shows, with few exceptions the District’s neighborhood high schools have the lowest graduation rates and highest dropout rates while the special admission high schools have the highest graduation rates and lowest dropout rates.

Our data reveal that for the 2007-08 school year the majority of District eighth grade students tried to select a high school that was not their neighborhood school, submitting a list of up to five preferred District high schools.¹⁶ At the end of a lengthy application and selection process, however, *fewer than half* of those participating in the District’s selection process were admitted and enrolled at a school of their choice. Despite a growing number of high school options, the majority of Philadelphia’s eighth graders ended up attending their nonselective neighborhood high schools.

We also found that, although all types of Philadelphia high schools offered a similar range of freshman year interventions, neighborhood high schools faced a unique set of challenges in implementing these interventions due to their status as “default” schools. To a significant extent, these challenges are artifacts of

For the 2007-08 school year the majority of District eighth grade students tried to select a high school that was not their neighborhood school.

¹⁵ We use the same nomenclature to categorize the different high schools that is used by the School District of Philadelphia in its directories of high schools and other public communications.

¹⁶ There is no limit to the number of charter schools to which a student may apply. Charter school applications are made through a separate process described in Chapter Two.

the process of high school selection. Neighborhood high schools, however, are the very schools that most require strong, strategic, and well-coordinated student supports.

Our investigation of high school choice and freshman year interventions reveals that choice and opportunity are embedded within an interconnected system of schools. Whether the District adopts incremental improvement or quicker “turnaround” strategies, as U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is promoting, our study indicates that looking simply at individual school capacity, while important, is not sufficient.¹⁷ To improve student outcomes, it is also important to consider the broader ecology in which any school functions.

The District has long been aware of the particular challenges experienced by neighborhood high schools serving vulnerable populations. In fact, as detailed in Chapter One of this report, Philadelphia has been a pioneer in several attempts to reform neighborhood high schools. In the subsequent chapters of this report, we demonstrate that these reforms have been minimally sustained.

About this Study

Our examination of Philadelphia high schools is guided by the significant existing body of work on high school transition and student dropout. We have

Whether the District adopts incremental improvement or quicker “turnaround” strategies, our study indicates that looking simply at individual school capacity, while important, is not sufficient. To improve student outcomes, it is also important to consider the broader ecology in which any school functions.

Research Questions

The broad research questions that guided this study were:

- What does the high school transition — high school selection and freshman year supports — look like in Philadelphia?
 - How is the high school selection process implemented and experienced in Philadelphia? What are the implications of the process for access and equity?
 - What interventions do high schools use to help students through their ninth grade transition year? What challenges do high schools face in organizing themselves to support freshman year students?
- What are the implications of the policies, practices, and processes for high school selection and freshman year supports for efforts in Philadelphia to improve or “turn around” low-performing high schools? What are the lessons for other urban districts?

¹⁷ A guide published by the U.S. Education Department’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES) notes that “School turnaround work involves quick, dramatic improvement within three years while school improvement is marked by steady, incremental improvement over a longer period of time,” as cited in Viadero, D. (2009). Research doesn’t offer much guidance on turnarounds. *Education Week*, 28(37), 10.

widened the usual lens for viewing transition, however, to include the system-wide eighth grade high school selection process, in addition to school-level ninth grade supports designed to help students meet the challenges of high school. Our research questions reflect this expanded view of what constitutes the transition to high school (see box on page 4).

To answer these research questions, we analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data collected primarily during the 2007-08 school year. Please see the box below for an overview of our research methods.

Methodology

Transition to High School is a mixed methods study. We collected the qualitative data between May 2007 and August 2008, including interviews, observations, and document review. Our quantitative data included relevant information about eighth grade selection from the 2006-07 school year, as well as data about student demographics, high school enrollment, and student outcomes from the 2007-08 school year. We also analyzed the 2007-08 District teacher and student surveys for questions relevant to this study.

Our data collection and analysis focused on issues of high school transition at multiple system levels: central, regional, and school level. Our school-level data were from a sample of schools that reflect the variety of types of high schools found across the District. The sample included 15 District-managed schools (referred to as District high schools in this report), which represent three categories of Philadelphia high schools: neighborhood, citywide admission, and special admission high schools. We also included four charter high schools (governed by independent boards, not the District), a growing sector in Philadelphia. (See Table 1.1 Study Data Sources on next page.)

In our analysis we sought to understand patterns in applications and enrollment, demographics, and outcomes indicated in the quantitative data, as well as perspectives on these patterns and the transition to high school experience as revealed through qualitative central office, regional, and school-level data. In addition, we interviewed parents, students, and leaders of community-based organizations to better understand their perspectives on the admissions process and the basis upon which students and parents selected their preferred schools. (A detailed description of our data collection and analysis is in Appendix C.)

Table 1.1 Study Data Sources

Qualitative Research

Data Sources	# Conducted
Interviews	68
Central office staff	13
Regional staff	8
School principals	15
School leaders	15
Community or nonprofit leaders	12
Parents from community organizations	5
Focus Groups	4
Focus groups with 4-6 students each	4
Observations	18
2007 High School Expo	1
District professional development session for 9th grade teachers	1
District roundtable on college preparation and access	1
Regional principal meetings	3
Ninth grade school orientations ¹⁸	12

Quantitative Research

Data Sources	Valid Cases
Student Outcomes Data for 7th graders (2005-06)	N=17,490
Student Demographic and Outcomes Data for first-time 9th graders (2007-08)	N=14,274
Application and Enrollment Data for entering 9th graders (2007-08)	N=12,806
School District's Annual Teacher Survey (2007-08, high school only)	N=2,006
School District's Annual Student Survey (2007-08, high school only)	N=10,573

¹⁸ Our observations of 12 ninth grade orientations include seven observations done for a different RFA study: Christman, J. B., Brown, D., Burgess, S., Kay, J., Maluk, H. P., & Mitchell, C. (2009). *Effective organizational practices for middle and high school grades: A qualitative study of what's helping Philadelphia students succeed in grades 6-12*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

Despite the mounting empirical evidence that a fundamental rethinking of the structure and content of secondary education is necessary to create the conditions for learning,¹⁹ neighborhood high schools have proven to be durable institutions resistant to change. This study seeks to add to the very important conversation about urban high schools that is taking place both locally and nationally. This conversation also harkens back to earlier high school reform research in Philadelphia that likewise pointed to the importance of school organization, instructional quality, *and* system-level change as crucial in any effort to make schools engaging, effective places of learning.²⁰ By defining “transition” to include the high school selection process, we show how this process, in the context of Philadelphia’s tiered system of high schools, affects the ability of different types of high schools to organize themselves to provide freshman year supports. Specifically, we are able to identify the systemic processes connected to high school transition that appear to make improvement at the school level—and particularly improving the ninth grade experience in low-performing neighborhood schools—so elusive.

Relevant Timing for Philadelphia and the National Debate

This research provides a view of current high school realities in Philadelphia as new District leadership prepares to implement its strategic plan, which by necessity includes a strong focus on high schools. Its publication also occurs at a moment when city leaders and nonprofit actors are galvanized around the need to reduce the rate of student dropout.

What needs to occur, we believe, is a reconsideration of the system in which neighborhood high schools function—with attention to what reinforces and what inhibits the ability of neighborhood high schools to organize themselves to support new ninth graders. Unless the systemic challenges that neighborhood high schools face are addressed, we believe that efforts to build school capacity will prove a frustrating undertaking. This means opening a dialogue about the high school selection process and how it works within the context of the city’s stratified high school system, regardless of how hard such a conversation is bound to be.²¹ If neighborhood high schools are truly to change, school conditions such as scale, leadership, teacher incentive systems, school and District capacity to implement interventions, and the need for strategic focus on the freshman year transition must also be considered.

¹⁹ Neild, 2009.

²⁰ Christman, J. B., Cohen, J., & MacPherson, P. (1997). Growing smaller: Three tasks in restructuring urban high schools. *Urban Education*, 32,146-165; Christman, J. B. & Macpherson, P. (1996). *The five school study: Restructuring Philadelphia’s comprehensive high schools*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Education Fund; Luhm, T. (2000). *Children achieving in Philadelphia high schools*. Unpublished internal report, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, Philadelphia.

²¹ Luhm (2000) makes reference to resistance to District attempts to alter the selection system.

Without both systemic and school-level reforms, improvement is likely to fall short of the kind of difference Philadelphia students, families, and education reformers desire—a difference that can ensure that all students graduate, that graduates are ready for post-secondary education or employment, and that they can contribute to the economic, political, and social future of the city and the nation.

At a time when school choice is expanding in countless cities across the country, we hope that this report also contributes to the growing knowledge base available to educators and policymakers. Through empirical study we show the perhaps unintended, but nevertheless inequitable, conditions created when school choice is constructed in a way that stacks the deck against the success of nonselective schools.

Overview of Chapters

- **Chapter 1** presents an orientation to the *broader context of high school reform* in Philadelphia, including a brief history of how the system has evolved to its present form.
- **Chapter 2** provides an in-depth description of *how the high school selection system works*, including its limitations in creating choice for high school students and families. The chapter also briefly compares Philadelphia's school selection process to those used in other cities, in order to explore other models and ideas that might inform Philadelphia's system.
- **Chapter 3** turns to the *array of transition interventions* for students across different school types when they enter ninth grade and examines the challenges to implementation. Our research shows that in all school types there can be challenges to implementing these interventions, but in neighborhood high schools in particular these interventions fall short of being able to substantially address the needs of ninth graders whose academic skills, on average, are several years below grade level.
- **Chapter 4** considers the *implications* of the current system for school reform policy and practice in Philadelphia's system of high schools and summarizes *key conclusions and recommendations*. These implications have national relevance as well. The importance of a broader, more coherent and unifying strategic focus is examined to increase the efficacy of ninth grade interventions across District schools. Recommendations are offered to: (1) make the process of high school selection more equitable, so that school choice becomes more meaningful, and (2) improve the quality of education in Philadelphia's vitally important neighborhood schools, so that these schools become desirable options for both students and teachers.

Chapter One

Context of the School District of Philadelphia

Philadelphia has pioneered numerous high school reform initiatives over the past four decades. The pattern has been for high school reforms to wax and wane, with vestiges of the efforts remaining in schools, but often disconnected from their original impetus or rationale. A close examination of Philadelphia high schools reveals evidence of multiple past reform initiatives, one layered on the other without the benefit of a unifying strategic vision. Furthermore, varying high school reform initiatives over time have supported the development of a highly stratified public school system of selective, nonselective, and charter high schools. In this chapter, we provide a brief history of high school reform in Philadelphia in order to understand the context in which the District's system of high school choice and ninth grade transition interventions have developed.

History of High School Choice and the Development of a Tiered System of High Schools

The notion of high school choice has become normalized in Philadelphia. In this study, we found that 70% of eighth grade students in District schools participated in the school selection process for the 2007-08 school year by submitting an application to attend a District high school other than their own neighborhood high school.²² A look at the origins of Philadelphia's high school options indicates that the choices that now exist evolved over several decades through the layering of different kinds of school reforms, each with somewhat different rationales and purposes. The cumulative effect has resulted in a tiered system of 60 District selective and nonselective admission high schools as well as 27 charter high schools.²³

Philadelphia's Selective Schools

Central High School, which dates from 1838 and which was the second public secondary school in the nation, and Philadelphia High School for Girls, which dates from 1848 and was the first public secondary school for women in Pennsylvania, are today among Philadelphia's 16 special admission high schools.²⁴ They and the other *special admission* high schools, many introduced in the 1970s, maintain stringent academic and behavioral criteria for

A look at the origins of Philadelphia's high school options indicates that the choices that now exist evolved over several decades through the layering of different kinds of school reforms.

²² Based on School District of Philadelphia 2006-07 data. This is an increase since 1995-96, when Neild found that 65% of eighth graders in the District participated in high school choice by applying to attend a District high school outside their own neighborhood. See: Neild, R. C. (2005). Parent management of school choice in a large urban district. *Urban Education*, 40, 270-297.

²³ As of September 2009 (see Appendix A).

²⁴ Central High School is the the second-oldest public high school, other than contemporary public schools that were formerly private. It was an all-boys school until September 1983. See: <http://centralhigh.net/pages/about/history>. Philadelphia High School for Girls was known as "The Girls Normal School" prior to 1893. In the early 1930s, the school began to identify itself as a high school for academically talented young women. For more on Philadelphia High School for Girls, see <http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/schools/g/girlshigh/>.

admissions. In addition, Philadelphia has a history of *citywide admission* schools, dating from the first vocational schools in the 1930s. Today, there are 13 citywide admission schools, including six of the District’s eight CTE (Career and Technical Education) schools; these schools are selective but usually have less stringent admissions criteria than special admission schools.²⁵ Standing in contrast to these selective schools²⁶ are Philadelphia’s 31 *nonselective neighborhood* schools, which must accept all students within their designated feeder pattern and are considered the “default” schools for any student in the District’s school selection process.²⁷

The 1960s: Diversification and Options

The decade of the 1960s was a period in which diversification of high schools and high school programs flourished in Philadelphia as well as in many other cities. Numerous high school options developed, many of which required students to apply to be admitted. Some options were located inside of the nonselective neighborhood high schools. For example, in 1962 the first magnet program within a neighborhood high school—an aerospace academy—was initiated. In 1963, at another neighborhood high school, a Motivation program opened which provided access to college preparatory activities for some students who could not meet the criteria for the most selective options. Eventually, there would be Motivation programs at nine neighborhood high schools. In 1967, the District created the first “school without walls” in the country, where students designed their own learning program and used the city’s cultural institutions and businesses as classrooms. Then in 1969, Philadelphia High School Academies, Inc. was founded as a nonprofit organization that, working in partnership with industry, began establishing themed business and vocational or career programs in neighborhood high schools. Today, there are 30 such programs in 17 middle and high schools in Philadelphia.²⁸

²⁵ The eight CTE high schools are: Bok, Communications Technology, Dobbins, Edison, Mastbaum, Randolph, Saul, and Swenson. All are citywide admission except for Saul, a special admission high school, and Edison, a nonselective neighborhood high school. In addition to the District’s eight full-time CTE schools, CTE “programs of study” are offered by a number of high schools across admission categories. See: Philadelphia Youth Network (2009, March). *Strengthening career and technical education and 21st century skills in Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Author.

²⁶ Although we frequently distinguish between special and citywide admission schools, we sometimes refer to them together as “selective” schools.

²⁷ Included in our count of neighborhood high schools is the District’s one hybrid-admissions high school, High School of the Future, which admits 75% of its students from the neighborhood, and 25% of its students via citywide admissions criteria. See Appendix A for a full description of how our count of special admission, citywide admission, and neighborhood high schools differs slightly from the District’s high school directories.

²⁸ Mezzacappa, D. (2009, Spring). Reforming Philadelphia’s troubled high schools – what’s been tried. *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, 16(3), 20.

1970s through 1990s: Magnet Schools and Small Learning Communities

The 1970s brought an expansion of the selective admission schools with the establishment of four new magnet schools. Created in response to a continuing desegregation lawsuit, these schools were intended to help attract and retain white and middle class students to the city's high schools, thus assisting in achieving racial integration in the District. In the late 1980s, the District with the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative began restructuring large neighborhood schools into *small learning communities* (SLCs) with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts. The admissions process and criteria for SLCs was determined school by school. Although there were a few magnet SLCs that drew students from across the city, students mostly came from within the high school's feeder pattern. However, a tiered system developed within many schools, with some SLCs having criteria for admissions and others not having any.²⁹

In the 1990s, SLCs were scaled up districtwide (81 SLCs in the District's 22 neighborhood high schools) and one study called this a period of "universal choice" because the expectation was that all students would apply either to one of the two types of selective schools or to the SLC they wanted to attend.³⁰ SLCs, however, were not sustained, and thus the period of "universal choice" was brief.

Late 1990s and Early 2000s: Charter Schools and Small High Schools

In 1997, the state legislature approved *charter school* legislation, which led to additional high school options and their consequent impact on the selection process for Philadelphia students and schools. Students must apply to charter high schools directly, and each charter school has its own admissions process.³¹ Once a student has applied to a charter school—a process which often includes an interview to ensure a match between the student and the charter school—a lottery randomly determines which applicants are accepted.

²⁹ Luhm, 2000.

³⁰ Keefe, C., Scher, L., Sparks, A., & Weinbaum, E. (2002, April). *School choice in Philadelphia*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, LA. This definition of "universal choice" varies from its more common usage in which zoning based on residential location is eliminated and all schools within a given district are designated as choice (magnet or alternative) schools. In the more common scenario, the concept of a neighborhood school no longer exists and all parents must choose a school for their children. See: Marschall, M. (2000). The role of information and institutional arrangements in stemming the stratifying effects of school choice. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 22(3), 333-350.

³¹ At the high school level, some charter schools in Philadelphia house high school grades only, while others include middle and high school grades together and still others are K-12. Thus, some rising ninth graders in charter schools may choose to bypass the high school admissions process by remaining at the same charter school where they attended eighth grade.

Between 2003 and 2008, the District created 26 *small* high schools, in addition to the six small special admission schools already in existence.³² These new small high schools spanned selective (special and citywide admission) and nonselective (neighborhood) admissions categories.

This account of the development of school options in Philadelphia is not exhaustive, but it shows the evolution of a tiered system of selective and non-selective schools in which the idea of “choice” has historically been embedded. It is against this historical backdrop that Chapter Two explores in more depth school choice in Philadelphia, including the ways in which the high school selection process works and its implications for access and equity.

Ninth Grade Interventions: The Talent Development High School Reform Model

In addition to reflecting past efforts to provide school choice, Philadelphia high schools today show evidence of multiple past reform interventions, a number of which have been focused on the ninth grade. Many of these date back to the Philadelphia Schools Collaborative (1988-1995) and the Talent Development High School Model.³³ In the mid-1990s, with federal funding available to support whole-school reform models and SLCs nationwide, a partnership between Johns Hopkins University and the Philadelphia Education Fund brought the Talent Development model to Philadelphia, where several middle schools adopted the model followed by seven high schools.³⁴ From 1999 to 2005, Philadelphia became the primary site for the Talent Development High School Model.

The Talent Development High School Model was designed to improve the organizational structure and educational process in large, public, nonselective high schools, recognizing that these were the schools where dropout was endemic, and where even those who stayed in school often performed poorly.³⁵ The model focused on freshman year supports, further recognizing the critical nature of the transition juncture to improving graduation rates.³⁶

³² Hartmann, T. A., Reumann-Moore, R. J., Evans, S. A., Haxton, C., Maluk, H. P., & Neild, R. C. (2009). Going small: progress and challenges of Philadelphia’s small high schools. Philadelphia: Research for Action. Small high schools are defined by the District as having 700 or fewer students. Our count of small high schools does not include high schools which are currently “small” due to under-enrollment.

³³ Christman & MacPherson, 1996; Luhm, 2000.

³⁴ The Talent Development comprehensive reform model was developed by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR), now called the Center for the Social Organization of Schools (CSOS), at Johns Hopkins University.

³⁵ Kemple, J. J. & Herlihy, C. M. (2004). *The Talent Development High School Model: Context, components, and initial impacts on ninth-grade students’ engagement and performance*. New York: MDRC; Kemple, J. J., Herlihy, C. M., & Smith, T. J. (2005). *Making progress toward graduation: Evidence from the Talent Development High School Model*, New York: MDRC.

³⁶ See Chapter Three for more on ninth grade Talent Development supports.

Philadelphia high schools today show evidence of multiple past reform interventions, a number of which have been focused on the ninth grade.

Despite evidence that the Talent Development model was resulting in improved student outcomes among ninth graders—including attendance, academic course credits earned, tenth-grade promotion, and algebra passing rates—in 2005 the District severed formal ties to the initiative, which was competing with other District priorities for funding.³⁷ When the District cut its ties with Talent Development, then-Deputy Chief Academic Officer Al Bichner noted that it was the intention of the District to utilize selected interventions from the model, particularly the intensive supports for ninth grade students districtwide.³⁸

When the District talked about its intention to scale up selected practices from the Talent Development model, James Kemple, an author of the MDRC study that demonstrated the model’s effectiveness, expressed doubts about whether the interventions would be effective if they were disconnected from an overall strategy intended to alter students’ high school experience through substantive changes to school culture, organization, curriculum, and instruction. “[Talent Development] really is [an] intervention with multiple interlocking components. It is the combination of those components. We don’t know what happens if you take the model apart and what the result of doing one component from another, without the package, would be,” stated Kemple.³⁹

High schools in the District have clearly been shaped by the Talent Development model. Principals and teachers at a number of high schools in our study referred to their prior participation in the Talent Development program. However, they also reported that they had stopped the interventions associated with it when the program ended.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, at several schools we observed vestiges of Talent Development interventions, although in most cases they were no longer articulated as part of a coordinated strategy of “interlocking components” intended to alter school culture and climate. These interventions also lacked the professional development and coaching support that were components of the original model.

³⁷ Kemple, Herlihy, & Smith, 2005; Simmons, S. (2005, June). Advocates question termination of Talent Development program. [Electronic version]. *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*. Retrieved January 16, 2009 from <http://www.thenotebook.org/newsflash/2005/june/talent.htm>

³⁸ Simmons, 2005.

³⁹ Simmons, 2005, para. 35.

⁴⁰ With funding from a Department of Labor grant, one neighborhood high school in Philadelphia is using the Talent Development model in 2009-10.

Philadelphia: School Choice — A Mixed Legacy

Philadelphia has a long history of admirable school innovation and reform, including initiatives aimed at increasing school choice and providing interventions to assist freshman year students in making the transition to high school. A brief survey of key milestones may help educators, policymakers, and community leaders better understand the context in which today's selection process and interventions take place.

- **1838** Philadelphia opens the nation's second public secondary school. Today, that school, Central High School, is one of the District's 16 special admission high schools, with highly selective admissions criteria.
- **1930s** Philadelphia establishes its first vocational schools, precursors of today's eight CTE (Career and Technical Education) schools. Six of these are now among Philadelphia's 13 citywide admission high schools, which are selective, but with less stringent admissions criteria than special admission high schools.
- **1960s** This is a period of strong diversification of high schools and programs, with many new options created.
- **1962** The city's first magnet program in a neighborhood high school initiates an aerospace academy.
- **1963** Motivation programs are established to provide college preparatory activities for students in neighborhood high schools, eventually expanding to nine neighborhood schools. A few of these programs are precursors to today's small high schools.
- **1967** Philadelphia introduces the first "school without walls" in the country. The "Parkway" schools still exist today, but the curriculum is no longer regarded as alternative.
- **1969** Philadelphia High School Academies, Inc., a nonprofit organization, creates business and vocational or career programs based in neighborhood schools. The model has been copied nationwide and continues today.
- **1970s** Four new magnet high schools — Masterman, Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA), Carver Engineering and Science, and Bodine High School for International Affairs — are established, all selective high schools.
- **1980s** Small learning communities (SLCs) are created within large neighborhood high schools, focused around topics or subjects of common interest. The admissions process and criteria are established at the school level.
- **1990s** SLCs are expanded districtwide, with 81 in the District's 22 neighborhood high schools. This period represents one of "universal choice" where every student chooses a selective school or SLC for high school. SLCs, however, are not sustained, and thus the period of universal choice is brief.
- **Mid-1990s** The Talent Development High School Model is introduced and adopted by seven District neighborhood high schools. Despite evidence of improved outcomes, the model is discontinued in 2005 due to funding priorities.
- **1997** Charter schools are approved by the Pennsylvania state legislature. Charter high schools, which number 27 in fall 2009, have a separate application process and criteria, but by law may not exclude students based on merit.
- **2000s** Twenty-six "small" high schools are created across all District school types — special admission, citywide admission, and neighborhood.
- **2009-10** Philadelphia has 60 District high schools: 31 neighborhood high schools (including one hybrid high school that is three-fourths neighborhood and one-fourth citywide admission), 13 citywide admission high schools, and 16 special admission high schools.

Redefining the High School Transition

We have defined transition as beginning with Philadelphia’s now well-established process of having eighth grade students participate in high school selection. As this report will show, ninth graders’ high school experience is shaped in part by the high school application and admissions process and the extent to which they, as eighth graders, attempted to exercise choice and were successful in achieving admission to one of their chosen schools. In other words, the high school experience is shaped by the type of high school a student attends. We also show that, despite Philadelphia’s experience in leading reform initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for ninth graders, especially for those attending large neighborhood high schools, these interventions today appear fragmented and weak. They have become disconnected from larger high school reform initiatives which had a strategic focus on the ninth grade. In the next two chapters we discuss in greater depth what the transition to high school looks like in Philadelphia, and what challenges the District faces in trying to improve the likelihood of students persisting to graduation.

Chapter Two

High School “Choice” in Philadelphia

In this chapter we examine the School District of Philadelphia’s high school application and admissions process. We consider the ways in which this District process facilitates or inhibits support for students as they make the transition to high school, paying particular attention to issues of equity and access. Policies that allow families to apply to schools other than the one to which they are assigned are typically referred to as “school choice” policies; however, it is more accurate to describe Philadelphia as having a system of “high school selection.”

“Choice” does not accurately describe the Philadelphia system for two reasons. First, Philadelphia high schools generally receive more applications than they can accommodate and cannot accept every student who applies. In some choice systems, oversubscribed schools randomly select students by lottery, but in Philadelphia’s system of high school selection, most schools use a variety of criteria to determine which students to admit. As a result, we found that schools actually have more influence over where students attend than do students and parents. Second, because there are not enough desirable options to meet student demand, many students fail to access any of their “chosen” schools. In fact, we found that more than half of ninth graders attend a high school for which they have expressed no preference. For these reasons it is inaccurate to refer to Philadelphia as having a system of choice; this may also be the case for other cities that claim to have a system of high school choice. We argue that a system is not one of “choice” unless a significant majority of students do in fact *choose* which high school they will attend.

School choice is a highly debated policy that refers to a diverse set of concepts including vouchers, charter schools, and magnet programs. Proponents argue that choice creates an education marketplace that pushes all schools to improve as they compete for students. In addition, choice is said to provide more options for low-income parents and students who, through the act of choosing, become empowered agents in the educational marketplace.⁴¹ Opponents maintain that school choice increases racial and economic segregation and exacerbates inequalities in the public education system.⁴² For example, families have been found to express their racial preferences through their school choices. In addition, higher-income families are often most successful at learning about and gaining access to the best school choices. Research on

“Choice” does not accurately describe the Philadelphia system... . More than half of ninth graders attend a high school for which they have expressed no preference.

⁴¹ Chubb, J. E. & Moe, T. M. (1990). *Politics, markets, and America’s schools*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution; Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Equality and achievement in education*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Wong, K. K. (1992). Choice in public schools: Their institutional functions and distributive consequences. In K. K. Wong & T. N. Clark (Eds.), *Research in urban policy (Vol. 4): Politics of policy innovation in Chicago* (175-198). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

⁴² Elmore, R. F. (1990, December). *Working models of choice in public education*. New Brunswick, NJ: Consortium for Policy Research in Education; Henig, J. (1994). *Rethinking school choice: Limits of the market metaphor*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Wells, A. S. (1993). *The sociology of school choice: Why some win and others lose in the educational marketplace*. In E. Rassel & R. Rothstein (Eds.), *School choice: Examining the evidence* (29-48). Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

school choice has consistently found a positive relationship between family socioeconomic status, information access, and school admissions.⁴³

There is no single theory of action underlying the Philadelphia District’s high school selection system. In interviews, District staff provided a range of objectives for high school choice. These included: 1) providing students with more options; 2) attracting and retaining middle class families; and 3) allowing students to access schools that are appropriate to their interests. Despite these varying objectives, what we consistently heard from District personnel was an assumption that a choice system would, by definition, give students and parents greater ability to direct their educational futures. However, as this chapter will show, we found that the assumed agency that choice can offer students is not realized by the District’s implementation of high school selection. High school selection has failed to empower or provide high school options to the majority of students. One senior District administrator called the selection system one of “haves and have nots,” explaining:

More times than not, youngsters are not being well served at the [neighborhood] high schools in Philadelphia. They’re the kids that got left. Those who could, who are savvy, who had the support of parents, elected to go somewhere else.

Godwin and Kemerer have argued that the outcomes and influence choice policies have on schools and students depend upon the institutional structures that characterize the choice program.⁴⁴ It is critically important to consider the structure of Philadelphia’s high school selection system because it has implications for students as they enter their pivotal ninth grade year. By determining which of the 60 District high schools each student may attend, the high school selection system has the potential to seriously influence a student’s high school environment, likelihood of graduation, and future academic and career opportunities. Moreover, our research suggests that the selection system has exacerbated stratification in the District. Previous studies, as well as our own, have found that students with the highest need are concentrated in Philadelphia’s neighborhood high schools.⁴⁵ Additional longitudinal research is needed to explore exactly how the expansion of high school choice is affecting the distribution of high-need students across school types. Nonetheless, our findings indicate that as the District’s system of high schools has expanded over time to include a broader set of options, neighbor-

By determining which of the 60 District high schools each student may attend, the high school selection system has the potential to seriously influence a student’s high school environment, likelihood of graduation, and future academic and career opportunities.

⁴³ Marschall, 2000; Lareau, A., & Saporito, S. (1999). School selection as a process: The multiple dimensions of race in framing educational choice. *Social Problems*, 46(3), 418-439; Neild, R. C. (1999). Same difference: School choice and educational access in an urban district (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1999). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 60, 2441.

⁴⁴ Godwin, K., & Kemerer, F. R. (2002). *School choice tradeoffs: Liberty, equity, and diversity*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

⁴⁵ Neild, R. C. (2004). The effects of magnet schools on neighborhood high schools: An examination of achievement among entering freshmen. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 9(1), 1-21; Neild, R. C. & Weiss, C. (1999). *The Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study (PELS): Report on the transition to high school in the School District of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Education Fund.

hood high schools have been further disadvantaged by conditions which result from the selection process. It appears that the selection system contributes to a unique set of challenges in Philadelphia's neighborhood high schools that inhibit the implementation of interventions meant to support students' transition to high school.

In this chapter, therefore, we provide an overview of Philadelphia's high school selection process, including data on patterns in eighth grade students' application decisions and enrollment outcomes. We then compare ninth grade enrollment across school types by race, gender, special needs status, socioeconomic status, and English language learner (ELL) status. The second part of the chapter describes how students and parents experienced the high school selection process, and how inequities in information access and social networks resulted in an inequitable pattern in admissions.

Data Sources

Data sources used in this chapter include:

- Interviews with principals and guidance counselors
- Interviews with regional superintendents and other regional staff
- Interviews with central office staff at the School District of Philadelphia
- Interviews and focus groups conducted with eighth and ninth grade students and parents
- Interviews with staff at community-based organizations (CBOs) with programs serving eighth grade students
- High school application data, fall 2006, and enrollment data for 2007-08
- Ninth grade student demographic and outcome data for 2007-08

The Philadelphia Application and Admissions Process⁴⁶

Every fall, eighth graders participate in the District's high school application and admissions process, vying for spots in a variety of public high schools across the city, including special admission, citywide admission, and neighborhood schools.⁴⁷ Special admission high schools require that students meet admissions criteria that include a strong record of grades, test scores, behavior, and attendance in seventh grade. Citywide admission high schools are generally less selective than special admission high schools, requiring that

⁴⁶ This section describes the application and admissions process for students entering ninth grade in the 2007-08 school year.

⁴⁷ In addition to eighth grade students in District-managed schools, students from independent, private, and charter schools can submit high school applications. However, our analysis is limited to applications from District eighth graders.

applicants meet at least three of four criteria related to grades, attendance, lateness, and behavior. Some special and citywide admission high schools also have additional admissions requirements, including writing an essay, presenting a research project, or attending an interview or audition. Any student who does not apply or is not admitted to another school of his or her choice is assigned to one of the District’s 31 neighborhood high schools, based on his/her middle school feeder pattern. Students may also apply to attend neighborhood schools other than the one to which they are assigned; admission to these schools is based on a lottery and the number of available spots that remain after enrolling students from the feeder pattern.

Any student who does not apply or is not admitted to another school of his or her choice is assigned to one of the District’s 31 neighborhood high schools, based on his/her middle school feeder pattern.

To make matters more complex, charter schools are public schools that are not included in the District’s application process. Students interested in attending a charter school must apply to it directly. Each charter school has its own application form, process, and timeline. Pennsylvania charter schools may not exclude students based on academic merit but they may “establish reasonable criteria to evaluate prospective students.”⁴⁸ For example, many charter high schools have required parents to attend an information session in order for their child to be considered for admission. The expanding number of charter high schools has influenced the selection system and its outcomes. However, because the District does not collect charter school admissions data, this chapter focuses exclusively on data from District-managed high schools in operation during the time of this study.

Table 2.1 Admissions Criteria by School Type

School Type	District-Managed Schools
Most Selective	Special admission schools are the most selective. Students must meet their unique admissions criteria requiring strong grades, behavior, attendance, and test scores. Some also require an interview, portfolio, or audition.
Selective	Most citywide admission schools require that students attend an interview, meet three of four criteria related to grades, attendance, lateness, and behavior, and are then selected by computerized lottery.
Not Selective	Neighborhood schools admit all students who live or attended middle school within their feeder pattern. Using a lottery, additional applicants are sometime accepted from outside their feeder pattern, as space allows.

School Type	Non District-Managed Schools
Not Selective	Charter schools have their own admissions processes; interested students must contact a school directly. Charter schools are often designed around a theme and attract students who fit their focus, but they may not exclude students based on merit. Students are selected by computerized lottery from a pool of applicants.

⁴⁸ See Pennsylvania state charter school law: http://www.pde.state.pa.us/charter_schools/cwp/view.asp?a=146&Q=47379

The year-long high school application and admission process begins in the fall of students' eighth grade year. **Figure 2.1** presents the steps in this process in Philadelphia.

Figure 2.1 **Approximate Timeline of High School Application and Admission Process in Philadelphia**

Month	Process
September	Counselors distribute high school application form & materials to eighth graders.
September - October	Families do research on schools.
Late October or early November ⁴⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students return application form to counselors, having selected up to 5 schools. • The form must be signed by a parent. • The eighth grade counselor enters information from the application forms into a networked computer system.
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High schools begin to evaluate applications. • Selective schools (i.e., special and citywide admission) “deselect” some of the applicants based on information in the students' applications.
December - January	Some selective schools invite the remaining students for an interview or audition. Each school has its own rubric for assessing students.
January - February	Selective schools “deselect” those students who did not do well on or did not attend the interview and/or audition.
March - April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special admission schools accept some students and some schools also maintain a waitlist. • Remaining citywide admission school applicants are entered into a lottery, conducted by the District Office of Student Placement, which takes a number of factors into account.
April	First round of notification letters are sent to students who received multiple acceptances. Letters state where students have been approved, waitlisted, or disapproved.
April - May	If students are approved for more than one school (i.e., receive multiple acceptances), they and their families choose a school from among their options and submit a form with their choice to the middle school counselor.
April - September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After “multiple acceptance” students make decisions about where they will attend, new spaces open up and students who were originally waitlisted or disapproved are reconsidered for admission. • Additional letters are then sent to remaining applicants, informing them of subsequent admissions decisions. In this round of letters, students are admitted to only one school.

⁴⁹In 2006, 2007, and 2008, application forms were due in November. In 2009, the deadline for turning in forms to the Office of Student Placement was moved earlier, to October 30th.

To ensure that students who receive special education and English language learner (ELL) services have access to selective high schools, lotteries are run at citywide admission schools with the goal of accepting 10% students with disabilities and 10% ELL students. Special admission schools, which do not use a lottery in admissions, are expected to enroll ELL and special education students at a rate of 7%.⁵⁰ District materials encourage parents of ELLs and students with disabilities in particular to discuss with their child’s principal or counselor any “special circumstances” that may have prevented the student from meeting the admissions requirements of a given school.⁵¹

In an interview, a senior District official explained that it is challenging for selective high schools to meet admissions targets for ELL and special education students:

The biggest problem is really the special education and ELL. Not because schools are resistant [to admitting these students], more because of the way the District allocates special education resources, some schools may not have a program to accommodate certain types of students It becomes difficult to meet the [special education and ELL] targets.

Some schools’ lotteries and admissions practices are carried out with the goal of admitting a racially diverse group of students. A principal at one citywide admission school explained his preference:

Our goal is to have a student body where the ethnic breakdown is representative of the city as opposed to the District.⁵² We are heavily African American I would like to see . . . 45% African American, I’m guessing 40% Caucasian, 15% Hispanic and Asian.

The District’s central office encourages schools to be racially diverse. A District regional office administrator explained, “Schools are pressured to have a diverse population so that, given two equal students, if one’s Black and one’s White and you don’t have enough White students, you are going to take the White.” Some schools in the District can receive federal desegregation funds if they maintain racial balance in the student population. A District regional

⁵⁰ This expectation is the result of a consent decree between the District and Lamar Lagare, a plaintiff who represented students with disabilities. See: Lamar Legare et al. v. The School District of Philadelphia, C.A. No. 94-CV-4243 (U.S. District Court Eastern District of Pennsylvania 1995). The District has applied the rules of this decree to ELL students, in addition to students with disabilities.

⁵¹ The School District of Philadelphia. (2006). *A directory of high schools for 2007 admissions. Philadelphia*: Author, p. 2. This section describes the application and admissions process for students entering ninth grade in the 2007-08 school year; more recent versions of the *Directory* include similar statements about ELL and special education applicants. Also note that there is a different process for ELL and special education applicants than for other applicants. Our understanding is that the school counselors bring paper copies of these students’ applications to the District central office where decisions are made in consultation with principals. However, we did not find a reliable and verifiable description of this process.

⁵² Compared to the demographics of the City of Philadelphia, Blacks and Latinos are overrepresented in District schools, while Whites are underrepresented.

office administrator said, “It is to their advantage to keep the racial mix so they can continue to get funding because it’s a major funding source for a lot of schools.”

Application Patterns and Enrollment Outcomes in Philadelphia’s Selection System

While the majority of District eighth graders participated in Philadelphia’s high school application process for the 2007-08 school year, fewer than half of applicants (45%) were admitted and enrolled at one of their choice schools.⁵³ In our interviews, students, parents, and community-based organization (CBO) representatives agreed that the demand for high-quality high school options exceeded the supply. A ninth grade student explained:

There are a couple of good schools, but the good schools that there are everybody tries to apply to, so everybody can’t get the equal learning. Some people get rejected and they have to go to bad schools, and that’s why people apply to those few good schools that there are.

An analysis of application and enrollment patterns in the School District of Philadelphia for 2007-08 helps to shed light on the process by which 55% of District eighth graders who participated in the “choice” process were ultimately enrolled in high schools they did not choose. In this section, we investigate application rates among all District eighth graders, and then take a closer look at application and enrollment patterns among eighth grade applicants.

Application Rates Districtwide

In fall 2006, 70% of Philadelphia District eighth graders participated in the high school application process to begin ninth grade in fall 2007. District data suggest that some students are more likely than others to participate in the application process. **Table 2.2** provides an overview of application rates among 2006-07 District eighth graders by race, gender, ELL status, and special education status. These data are based on students who attended eighth grade in District schools and do not include eighth graders in charter schools, private/parochial schools, or other school districts who applied to District high schools.

⁵³ Quantitative data reported in this chapter are for high schools enrolling students in 2007-08. The data include William Penn High School, slated to close for two years in 2010, but *do not* include Audenried, a neighborhood high school, nor the Arts Academy at Rush, a special admission high school, both of which opened in 2008-09. Charter high schools are not included because only limited data on charter schools are available in District administrative data sets.

Table 2.2 Rates of Application to District High Schools for 2007-08

All District 8th Graders	70%
Black	73%
White	74%
Asian	83%
Latino	63%
Female	78%
Male	67%
ELL (non-ELL)	71% (78%)
Special Ed (Regular Ed)	61% (75%)

Source: 2006-07 School District of Philadelphia Application Data and 2007-08 Enrollment Data
 N=15,172 District eighth graders; for ELL, N=10,359;
 for all other demographic variables, N=12,371

Among District eighth graders in 2006-07, over 70% of Black,⁵⁴ White, and Asian students completed an application, compared to 63% of Latino students.

Students in special education were less likely than their regular education peers to apply to District high schools (61% vs. 75%). Also districtwide, English language learners had a lower application rate than non-ELL students (71% vs. 78%). Males were less likely to participate in the application process than females (67% vs. 78%).

Citywide admission high schools had the most applicants. Eighty-two percent (82%) of eighth grade applicants included at least one citywide admission school on their form.

A Breakdown of Eighth Grade Applicants

Over 10,000 District eighth graders completed application forms for District high schools in the fall of 2006. Most eighth grade applicants (72%) applied to the maximum five schools. Application rates differed by school type.

Table 2.3 provides the rates of application for each type of school, among those who participated in the application process. As is evident in **Table 2.3**, citywide admission high schools had the most applicants. Eighty-two percent (82%) of eighth grade applicants included at least one citywide admission school on their form, while 63% applied to at least one special admission school and 59% applied to a neighborhood high school other than their assigned school.

There were demographic differences in the school type to which students applied. **Table 2.3** shows that special education and ELL students were more likely to apply to a citywide admission school than a special admission or neighborhood high school. Asian and White students were most likely to apply to special admission high schools. Of all applicants, Asian and White students were also *least* likely to include a citywide or neighborhood high school on their applications. Black and Latino students' applications differed from those of Asians and Whites, but were similar to each other. Black and

⁵⁴ The District uses "African American" but we are using "Black" in this report because this category includes Caribbean and African immigrants as well as native-born African Americans.

Table 2.3 Rates at Which Applicants Applied to Three High School Types, 2006-07*

	Neighborhood Other than Assigned†	Citywide Admission	Special Admission
District 8th Grade Applicants	59%	82%	63%
Black	63%	87%	60%
White	41%	68%	69%
Asian	33%	54%	89%
Latino	72%	82%	52%
Female	58%	80%	69%
Male	62%	85%	54%
ELL	59%	71%	63%
Special Ed	74%	86%	41%

Source: 2006-07 School District of Philadelphia Application Data
 N=10,522 District eighth grade applicants; for ELL, N=7,976; for all other demographic variables, N=8,943

* This table reflects percentages of eighth grade *applicants* who applied to different school types. The breakdown of applicants by school type does not sum to 100% because each student could apply to up to five schools, including any combination of school types.

† Although students are guaranteed a spot in their zoned neighborhood high school, these percentages represent those applicants who applied to attend a neighborhood high school outside of their neighborhood or middle school feeder pattern.

Latino students applied to citywide schools at a greater rate than to special admission or neighborhood high schools. Of all applicants, Latino students were most likely to apply to at least one neighborhood school and least likely to apply to a special admission school.

Filling out an application, however, did not guarantee that a student would get into any of their chosen high schools. As illustrated in **Table 2.4**, only 45% of applicants were ultimately enrolled at any school to which they applied. Demographic differences were again noticeable. White and Asian applicants were admitted and enrolled at significantly higher rates (56% and 68% respectively) than Black (45%) and Latino (39%) applicants. Female applicants were more likely than male applicants to be enrolled into one of their “chosen” schools (51% vs. 43%). Special education students who applied to schools had a low chance of admission and enrollment; only 27% were ultimately enrolled at a school to which they applied.

Although these data provide useful insights into the outcomes of Philadelphia’s high school selection system, there is an important limitation of the data set—the District only retained a record of one school acceptance per

Table 2.4 Rates at Which Applicants Were Enrolled into “Chosen” High Schools, 2007-08*

	Neighborhood Other Than Assigned†	Citywide Admission	Special Admission	Districtwide
District 8th Grade Applicants	7%	26%	31%	45%
Black	9%	27%	26%	45%
White	6%	26%	52%	56%
Asian	4%	31%	56%	68%
Latino	4%	28%	25%	39%
Female	8%	28%	34%	51%
Male	8%	27%	29%	43%
ELL	4%	35%	36%	50%
Special Ed	6%	20%	14%	27%

Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Enrollment Data
 N=6,227 applicants to neighborhood schools; 8,671 applicants to citywide; 6,615 applicants to special admission; and 10,522 total District eighth grade applicants (The breakdown of applicants by school type does not sum to the total number of applicants because each student could apply to up to five schools, including any combination of school types.)

* This table reflects percentages of eighth grade applicants who received an offer from *and* chose to enroll in a school to which they applied in the given category. The District does not retain a record of schools where students were accepted but chose not to enroll.

† This column reflects the percentages of eighth grade applicants who were accepted and enrolled through a computerized lottery into a neighborhood high school outside of their neighborhood or middle school feeder pattern.

student, the school that the student decided to attend in ninth grade. While some students gain admission to multiple high schools, our data only show that a student was admitted to a school if it is the school he or she chose to attend. As a result, our analysis cannot provide a complete picture of admissions. For example, we cannot show if a student who was admitted and enrolled in a special admission school was also admitted to a citywide school, another special admission school, and/or a neighborhood school. Consequently, we were unable to calculate admission rates at different school types but only enrollment rates.

If we presume that given the choice, students who were admitted to schools in multiple admissions categories would most likely enroll in the highest-tier school (special admission school), then citywide and neighborhood admissions data would likely underestimate acceptance rates. Thus, we will look in depth only at admission outcomes in special admission schools.

Special Admission High Schools. There is a range of selectivity and significant variation in stated admissions criteria across the special admission high schools, which we identify as “most stringent,” “less stringent,” and “least stringent” (see **Table 2.5**; see Appendix C for further explanation).

Table 2.5 Levels of Selectivity at Special Admission High Schools

School Type	Test scores*	Course grades	Attendance	Behavior
Most stringent	88% or above on the TerraNova	As and Bs in major subjects with up to 1 C	Excellent	Excellent
Less stringent	80% or above on the TerraNova	Strong	Excellent	No negative report
Least stringent	Basic or above on the PSSA	As and Bs in major subjects with up to 1 C	Good	Good

*The PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) is a standards-based assessment administered to third through eighth and eleventh graders across the state. Scores are used to determine school progress under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The TerraNova, a second standardized assessment, was administered in first through tenth grades from 2002 to 2006; it is no longer administered beyond second grade.

We found that only 79 high school applicants met the stated admissions criteria for schools in the “most stringent” category, representing fewer than 1% of all applicants (0.6%). On the other hand, 576 students, or 4.5% of all applicants, met the criteria for the schools in the “least stringent” category of special admission schools. Three main points can be drawn from this analysis: 1) the precise admissions requirements at individual schools significantly influence the number of students who will meet a school’s criteria; 2) fewer than 5% of high school applicants qualified for admission to even the “least stringent” special admission schools; and 3) there are far more seats in selective high schools than there are students who meet the formal admissions criteria for these schools.

Next we examined the rates at which students—both those who did and those who did not meet stated admissions criteria—applied and were admitted to special admission high schools. A large majority (88%) of the applicants who met the “most stringent” criteria got into and enrolled at a special admission school.⁵⁶ Among those who met the “least stringent” admissions criteria, a slight majority (58%) were admitted and enrolled at a special admission high school.⁵⁷ Overall, the students who qualified for admission to any special admission high school represented a tiny fraction of the eighth grade applicant population. Therefore, regardless of the criteria, there

⁵⁶ 94% of students who met the most stringent criteria were admitted and enrolled at a school of any type.

⁵⁷ 79% of students who met the least stringent criteria were admitted and enrolled at a school of any type.

were far fewer students who met the special admission criteria than there were spots in special admission high schools.

Among students who did not meet the criteria at any of the special admission schools (most stringent, less stringent, or least stringent), 63% still applied to a special admission high school. Almost one third (30%) of these under-qualified applicants were admitted and enrolled at a special admission school. Further research is needed to explain the circumstances by which under-qualified applicants were admitted to special admission schools, but one clear factor was that special admission schools had remaining slots to fill after admitting the students who met their criteria.

Citywide Admission High Schools. Although available District data do not provide a complete picture of admissions at citywide admission and neighborhood high schools, they do provide some useful information. Almost one third (31%) of all applicants met the stated admissions criteria for citywide admission schools for the 2007-08 school year⁵⁸ and 63% of these students received an acceptance for at least one high school of any type. Of those who applied to citywide admission high schools without meeting the admissions criteria, 19% were accepted and enrolled at a citywide school. As was the case in special admission schools, students who were under-qualified for citywide schools also had some chance of being admitted to a citywide school. Given the imprecision of the stated criteria for admissions and the high schools' apparent flexibility to admit students who do not meet the criteria, we caution that an examination of admissions criteria alone may not fully explain how students are selected.

Neighborhood High Schools. The majority of students who enroll in neighborhood high schools have guaranteed admission because they lived or attended middle school within the feeder pattern. Unlike high schools with criteria-based admissions, neighborhood high schools accept students outside of the feeder pattern based on a lottery and available space. More than half (59%) of all applicants applied to a neighborhood high school outside their feeder pattern. However, students with higher qualifications were less likely to apply. Only 7% of all applicants to neighborhood high schools other than the one assigned to them were admitted and enrolled. This finding indicates that sought-after neighborhood schools did not have adequate slots to meet student demand.

⁵⁸ Citywide admission high schools require that applicants meet three of the following four requirements in seventh grade: all As, Bs, and Cs; no more than 10 absences; no more than 5 latenesses; and no suspensions.

Entering Ninth Grade

In the fall of 2007, close to 15,000 ninth graders entered District high schools, most of them (69%) in neighborhood high schools. They came from District middle schools as well as from charter schools, private and parochial schools, and other school districts. Incoming ninth graders districtwide were 64% Black, 16% Latino, 13% White, and 6% Asian.⁵⁹ Just over half (51%) were boys; nearly 17% were identified as needing special education; and 12% were English language learners (ELLs).

While there was some variation within each category, there were notable differences among admissions categories in the composition of the ninth grade. As seen in **Table 2.6**, on average, the ninth grade at special admission schools was disproportionately female; girls made up 62% of their entering ninth grade class, compared with 52% at citywide admission schools and 46% at neighborhood schools.⁶⁰ Special admission schools also enrolled a higher proportion of White and Asian ninth graders and a lower proportion of Blacks and Latinos than the District as a whole. The opposite was true for neighborhood high schools, where Blacks and Latinos were overrepresented. The racial composition of the ninth grade class entering citywide admission schools was similar to neighborhood high schools. However, a slightly lower proportion of ninth graders at neighborhood schools was Black (65%) compared to citywide admission schools (70%). The opposite was true for Latino students who comprised a larger proportion of the ninth graders at neighborhood high schools (19%) than citywide high schools (14%).

Table 2.6 Race and Gender of First-time Ninth Graders, 2007-08

	Neighborhood	Citywide Admission	Special Admission	Districtwide
Black	65%	70%	55%	64%
Latino	19%	14%	8%	16%
White	11%	11%	23%	13%
Asian	5%	4%	13%	6%
Males	54%	48%	38%	51%
Females	46%	52%	62%	49%

Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Administrative Data
N=14,274 first-time ninth graders

⁵⁹ Fewer than 1% identify as American Indian or Other.

⁶⁰ One of the special admission high schools, Philadelphia High School for Girls, enrolls female students. When this school is excluded from the analysis, the female-male enrollment split at special admission schools is 57%-43%.

Table 2.7 Eligibility for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch by School Type, 2008-09

	Neighborhood	Citywide Admission	Special Admission
Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	78%	75%	54%
Percentage of schools with 80% or greater eligible students	77%	31%	0%

Source: 2008-09 School District of Philadelphia Administrative Data
N=48,726 students, N=59 schools

As shown in **Table 2.7**, there were also significant differences in the percentage of students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in each admissions category.⁶¹ Free and reduced-price lunch eligibility indicates that a student is from a family that earns a low income (below 250% of poverty). In 2008-09, 78% of students enrolled at neighborhood high schools were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, compared to 75% at citywide schools and 54% at special admission schools. Neighborhood high schools were more likely to have a high concentration of students who were eligible. While 77% of neighborhood high schools had an 80% or higher concentration of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, only 31% of citywide admission schools and 0% of special admission schools enrolled low-income students at this 80% rate.⁶²

While 77% of neighborhood high schools had an 80% or higher concentration of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, only 31% of citywide admission schools and 0% of special admission schools enrolled low-income students at this 80% rate.

Table 2.8 ELL and Special Education Status of First-time Ninth Graders, 2007-08

	Neighborhood	Citywide Admission	Special Admission	Districtwide
English Language Learners	13%	11%	9%	12%
Special Education	20%	14%	4%	17%

Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Administrative Data
For ELL, N=12,184 first-time ninth graders; for special education, N=14,274 first-time ninth graders.

English language learners and students receiving special education services comprised a small proportion of the students at selective high schools. ELLs were 9% of incoming freshman at special admission high schools, 11% at citywide admission high schools, and 13% at neighborhood high schools (see **Table 2.8**). The concentration of ELLs was highest (22%) in nine

⁶¹ The School District of Philadelphia uses the “Yancey Index” to measure free or reduced-price lunch eligibility. See: The Reinvestment Fund. (2007). *Estimating the percentage of students income eligible for free and reduced lunch*. Philadelphia: Author.

⁶² While the other data in this section are limited to the ninth grade, this analysis is based on total enrollment at District high schools (N=48,726).

neighborhood high schools located in areas of Philadelphia with the densest concentration of speakers of other languages.⁶³

Special admission schools had the lowest concentration of special education ninth graders (4%); and neighborhood high schools had the highest concentration of special education ninth graders (20%). Following the dominant pattern in our findings, the proportion of special education ninth graders at citywide admission high schools (14%) was greater than the proportion at special admission high schools (4%), but lower than the proportion at neighborhood high schools (20%). Moreover, over 80% of the District’s special education high school students were enrolled in neighborhood high schools, compared to 66% of their non-special education peers, likely because special education students were less likely than their peers to complete a high school application (see **Table 2.2**), and to be admitted and enrolled at selective high schools (see **Table 2.4**).

In order to assess levels of academic performance by school type, we analyzed the algebra enrollment and passage rates of ninth graders. Considering that high school selection is partially determined by students’ prior academic achievement, it is not surprising that the students’ academic outcomes in the ninth grade varied by admissions category. We analyzed data on ninth grade course passage in algebra (**Table 2.9**) and found that ninth graders at special admission schools are most likely to take (96%) and pass (93%) algebra or a higher math course compared to the other school types. Ninth graders at neighborhood high schools were least likely to take algebra or higher (79%) and pass (71%).⁶⁴

Table 2.9 Algebra Enrollment and Passage among First-time Ninth Graders, 2007-08

	Neighborhood	Citywide Admission	Special Admission	Districtwide
Take algebra or higher	79%	92%	96%	84%
Pass algebra or higher	71%	80%	93%	77%

Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Administrative Data
For “Take algebra or higher,” N=14,274 first-time ninth graders; for “Pass algebra or higher,” N=11,933.

⁶³ More than half of ELL ninth graders districtwide (55.2%) attended these nine neighborhood high schools. In all, nearly three quarters (72%) of ELL freshman districtwide attended neighborhood high schools, compared with 65% of non-ELL students. See Allard, E (2008). ELLs have limited high school choices. *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, 16(1), 27.

⁶⁴ Course passage is defined as a letter grade of “D” or higher. D’s represent a numeric grade of 65 or higher on a 100 point scale, in accordance with School District of Philadelphia policy.

How Students and Parents Experience High School Selection

In addition to revealing demographic patterns in applications, admissions, and enrollment in District high schools, our research also explored students' and parents' subjective experiences of the selection process. In the spring of 2008, RFA conducted individual interviews with parents and CBO representatives, and focus groups with students, in order to understand how they experienced and participated in high school selection. These interviews helped us to better understand the characteristics of the process that prevented half of high school applicants from gaining admission to one of their preferred high schools. The sample was not representative of the District but did represent a diverse set of experiences with high school selection.⁶⁵

Learning about High Schools and the Selection System

For parents and students, the first step in the application process was gathering information about high schools and the selection system. Prior research on school choice has shown that the content, format, and distribution of information are major factors in determining how well families understand their options and how successful they are in gaining access to their ideal school.⁶⁶ Parents learn about high schools and selection through formal and informal processes.⁶⁷ *Formal processes* are those exchanges that are organized by a school district to present information to families. *Informal processes* are interactions that are not organized or managed by a school district. Informal communication takes place between anyone who wants to learn about schools and school selection and someone who has relevant information to provide. Compared to working class families, informal processes of communication are often more productive for upper-middle class families who can turn to professional friends and relatives for information about the inner workings of bureaucracies like schools and school districts.⁶⁸

In our interviews, students, parents, and others talked mostly about the formal sources of information that they used in making their decisions. The two formal sources of information provided by the District are an annual *Directory of High Schools* and the High School Expo. The *Directory* is a booklet that provides a profile of all the District high schools. Eighth grade counselors distribute the *Directory* to students every fall. At the Expo, which took place at a university basketball stadium in the year of this study, most high schools have a

⁶⁵ See Appendix C for a more detailed explanation of sampling methods.

⁶⁶ Andre-Bechely, L. (2005). *Could it be otherwise? Parents and the inequities of public school choice*. New York: Routledge.

⁶⁷ Schneider, M., Teske, P., Roch, C., & Marschall, M. (1997). Networks to nowhere: Segregation and stratification in networks of information about schools. *American Journal of Political Science*, 41, 1201-1223.

⁶⁸ Lareau, A. (2000). *Home advantage: Social class and parental intervention in elementary education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

table where attendees can talk to school staff and current students, as well as pick up informational brochures about each school. All of the students and parents in our focus groups and interviews referred to the *Directory* as a resource, and nearly all mentioned that they had attended the Expo.

While parents and students seemed satisfied with the formal sources of information provided by the District, our findings suggest that they may have lacked important information during the decision-making process. For example, only one of our informants said that she had reviewed achievement, climate, or safety data about schools before making selections, and most families did not know how to find data about academic performance at particular high schools. Our review of materials revealed that at the time of this study, the Philadelphia *Directory* offered families significantly less information about schools than directories that were distributed in other cities where students apply to high schools (see **Table 2.10**). While the District’s more recent *Directory for 2010 Admissions* provides more detail on each high school than in past years, it still leaves out the information reflected in **Table 2.10**.⁶⁹

At the time of this study, the Philadelphia *Directory* offered families significantly less information about schools than directories that were distributed in other cities.

Table 2.10 Information Included in 2008 High School Directories⁷⁰

	Philadelphia	New York City	Chicago
Location	✓	✓ @	✓
Admissions criteria	✓	✓ @	✓
Contact information	✓	✓ @	✓
Admission rates		✓ @	
Graduation rates			✓
College-going rates			✓
% ELL students		@	✓
% Special education		@	✓
Attendance rates		@	✓
Survey data			✓

✓ - Available in printed directory @ - Available in online high school choice resource center

⁶⁹ See the conclusion of this report for a description of changes made in the most recent version of Philadelphia’s *Directory*.

⁷⁰ Chicago Public Schools. (2007). *High School Directory*. [Electronic version]. Retrieved September 10, 2008, from http://www.cps.k12.il.us/Schools/hsdirectory/HS_Directory.pdf; New York City Department of Education. (2007). Online high school directory. Retrieved September 10, 2008, from <http://schools.nyc.gov/choicesenrollment/high/directory/search/default.htm>; The School District of Philadelphia. (2007). *A directory of high schools for 2008 admissions*. Philadelphia: Author. All three cities have added new content to, and changed the design of, their high school directories and web resources since the time of the study.

Information about high schools, including test scores, student and teacher attendance, suspensions, and the number of serious incidents at the school, can be accessed on the District website. However, this information is difficult to locate if one does not know where to look and the *Directory* does not provide guidance for finding it.⁷¹ The Pennsylvania Department of Education website also offers high school performance data in its No Child Left Behind report cards, but these too are hard to find, particularly for individuals who are not internet-savvy. None of the students or parents with whom we spoke mentioned either the District's or the Department of Education's website, although some had visited individual school websites.

A recent study suggests that parents use relevant information when it is provided to them through an accessible medium. The study had two key findings. First, parents who were provided with school test score data were significantly more likely than other parents to apply to schools with high test scores. Second, parents who were provided information about students' odds of admission were significantly more likely to apply to schools with higher admission rates.⁷²

Students and parents believed that the District waited too long to disseminate information about schools, and about the application and admissions process. They complained that the District did not get families involved in the process until eighth grade despite the fact that students are judged on their seventh grade performance and behavior, making seventh grade the most important year for high school admission. One parent made the following suggestion:

At the elementary level, the principal and counselor could work together to have some meetings starting in the seventh grade. Have the parents come in and talk about the high school process. Really it should start in sixth grade.

Several people were concerned that parents did not understand the importance of seventh grade until after the year was over. One parent and community advocate explained, "What parents don't know... is that they look at the seventh grade TerraNova testing. I think if parents were on top of that, they would make sure students got the lesson, got extra help."

Our interviews also revealed that some families lacked several crucial pieces of information about the application and admission process. First, many students interviewed did not understand that charter schools each had their

⁷¹ As of December 2009, the District school annual reports are found on the Office of Accountability page of the District website: <http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/offices/a/accountability/>.

⁷² Hastings, J., VanWeelden, R., & Weinstein, J. (2007, November). Preferences, information, and parental choice behavior in public school choice. *NBER Working Paper # 1295* [Electronic version]. Retrieved on November 18, 2008, from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w12995>.

own application, and so students had included charter schools on the District high school application, thereby inadvertently forfeiting one or more of their five school selections. Second, families did not know that their ranking of schools would impact their admissions chances at some schools. In an interview, a senior District official explained the importance of this detail, but acknowledged that it was not included in the *Directory*:

District official: [We recommend that students] put the lottery schools down first [on their school choice forms]. For special admit [schools] there's no lottery. For citywide schools . . . the ones who meet criteria then they go into lottery. It will choose students based on preference. If a child got approved to go into lottery for a citywide school and they had a school as their first choice, they have a greater chance of getting into that school because they ranked it as their first choice.

Interviewer: Do parents get this information formally? Is it in the high school booklet [Directory]?

District official: It's not in the booklet [the Directory of High Schools]. The booklet does say it's a lottery. Parents get this information primarily from contacts with the counselor or through contact with central office.

Finally, many parents and students did not understand the different phases of the application and admission process. This may have been because neither the *Directory* nor the application form indicated what would happen to applications once they were submitted, how the admissions process worked, or when and how students and their families would be contacted. For example, when selective schools invited applicants to be interviewed before making final admissions decisions, some students thought they had been admitted to the school and understood the interviews to be orientations. When these students eventually learned that they had not been admitted, they thought the school had reneged on a previous offer of admission.

Another aspect of the selection system that was not clear in formal communication was information about the admission requirements for the District's special admission and citywide schools. Although the requirements were described in the *Directory*, it could be challenging to interpret them as presented. For example, special admission schools use standardized tests (TerraNova, PSSA) to determine students' eligibility for admission, but students took these tests in several subjects and the *Directory* did not specify to which subjects their test score requirements referred. Consequently, students, parents, and eighth grade counselors were left to guess whether applicants would qualify if they met the test score requirements for most, some, or one subject.⁷³ Moreover, while the *Directory* did not list test scores as admissions criteria for citywide admission schools, we learned from District

Families did not know that their ranking of schools would impact their admissions chances at some schools.

⁷³ A similar source of confusion relates to the seventh grade course grades that some schools consider in the admissions process. The *Directory* said that some special admission high schools evaluate students based on grades in "major subjects" but did not specify which courses were deemed "major."

officials that some citywide schools did in fact consider students' performance on the PSSA and TerraNova in admissions decisions.

Our interviewees rarely mentioned informal processes of communication; instead, they seemed to rely heavily on the *Directory*. When asked, most said that they had not spoken with students, parents, or others about high school selection.⁷⁴ Prior research suggests that because of more limited social networks, low-income parents have less access to accurate information through informal modes of communication and would draw the most benefit from formal communication of information about schools and the process for gaining admission.⁷⁵ For example, a survey of 800 parents who had recently participated in school choice found that those earning less than \$20,000 were more likely than other parents to say that they could benefit from a paid school counselor or parent information center.⁷⁶ Another study found that “more educated parents [were] more likely to have access to new and different information” through casual relationships with a variety of well-educated people. As a result, “higher status individuals have less need to rely on formal sources of information.”⁷⁷ Researchers have also found racial/ethnic differences in information access⁷⁸ and application decisions.⁷⁹ A middle school counselor in our study echoed these research findings. She worried that the disparities in access to information “reinforce the hierarchy that already exists. The families who have more resources, families who have professional careers, have more insight into how to work the system, transfer, and fight for positions.”

A middle school counselor worried that the disparities in access to information “reinforce the hierarchy that already exists. The families who have more resources have more insight into how to work the system.”

⁷⁴ Nonetheless, in assessing schools, families seemed to rely heavily on school reputation, rather than verifiable data. It is probable that our informants did not consider their past conversations about schools' reputations to be part of their communication about the high school decision-making process.

⁷⁵ Hollifield, J. (1993, September). *Providing parent information for Public school choice in Massachusetts cities*. Baltimore, MD: Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning, Johns Hopkins University; Smrekar, C., & Goldring, E. B. (1999). *School choice in urban America: Magnet schools and the pursuit of equity*. New York: Teachers College Press.

⁷⁶ Teske, P., Fitzpatrick, J., & Kaplan, G. (2007). *Opening doors: How low-income parents search for the right school* (Rep. No. ED495279). Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education.

⁷⁷ Schneider, 1997, pp. 1215, 1220.

⁷⁸ Kao, G. (2004). Social capital and its relevance to minority and immigrant populations. *Sociology of Education*, 77(2), 172-175.; Portes, A. & MacLeod, D. (1996, October). Educational progress of children of immigrants: The roles of class, ethnicity, and school context. *Sociology of Education*, 69(4), 255-275; Stanton-Salazar, R. D., & Dornbusch, S. (1995, April). Social capital and the reproduction of inequality: Information networks among Mexican-origin high school students. *Sociology of Education*, 68(2), 116-135.

⁷⁹ Lareau & Saporito, 1999.

Deciding Where to Apply

In our interviews, parents and students listed several criteria as important in deciding which schools to apply to and attend, including:

- School quality (defined in multiple ways)
- School theme and availability of extracurricular activities
- Safety

When their criteria were applied, parents and students rarely saw their assigned neighborhood high schools as viable options, especially in regards to safety.

An important factor mentioned by all students and parents was school quality. School quality was defined in a range of ways, including whether the school had high graduation rates, succeeded in sending its graduates to college, employed highly qualified teachers, or was considered a “top” school in the city.⁸⁰ Students in our focus groups who feared they might not be admitted to a high-quality District school also considered charter and private (especially Catholic) schools. However, there was variation among students in whether they viewed charter schools as desirable, high-quality schools.

Students also said that a school’s theme or programmatic focus was important. For example, several students who attended a selective arts-themed school said that they wanted to go to the school because of its focus. As one student explained, “At the High School Fair [i.e., High School Expo], they had the [school] band playing and I thought ‘Oh my goodness, I want to be in that band. I have to be in that band.’” Some people said students were particularly attracted to the themes of the District’s new small high schools. One parent told us, “Since [the new school] is mostly computers, any child who applies to that school, that’s the reason they want to go there.”

Concerns about safety came up again and again in our interviews. Parents said they wanted to keep their children safe, while students said they hoped to avoid fights and other forms of violence. Unlike with other criteria for selecting a school, when talking about safety, students and parents did not say that they were interested in particular schools because they thought they were safe. Instead, they said that they wanted to avoid certain schools because they thought these schools would pose a safety risk. Parents and students most commonly said that they wanted to *avoid* their assigned neighborhood high school because of concerns about safety. Below are typical parental comments about their assigned neighborhood schools:

Mother 1: A lot of parents don't want to send their child to [local neighborhood school], because of what they've heard. Always something's

⁸⁰ Only one interviewee mentioned having used official data on these indicators in their decision-making process. Lack of access to these types of data may have encouraged families to rely more on school reputation in their decision-making process.

How Students and Parents Experience High School Selection

Learning about High Schools and the Selection Process

Formal sources (organized by the District):

- *Directory of High Schools* – Profiles all District schools; distributed by counselors to students in fall of eighth grade; provides location, admissions criteria, and contact information. However, Philadelphia's *Directory* includes less information than comparable directories in New York City and Chicago. This was the primary resource for students and families sampled.
- *High School Expo* – Event at university arena; attendees can talk to school representatives and pick up informational brochures. Most students and parents reported attending the Expo.
- *Website (minimal use)* – The District website contains information about school test scores, student and teacher attendance, suspensions, and school incidents. However, students are not guided to this site in the *Directory* and it is difficult to locate information on the site itself.

Informal sources (interactions not organized or managed by the District):

- *Parents' social networks* – Parents may get information from their family, friends, and co-workers about high schools and the selection process. However, disparities exist in parents' access to these informal sources. Additionally, the accuracy and comprehensiveness of informal information varies.

Issues/Recommendations:

- *Earlier timing* – Students and parents should be informed about the high school selection process in the seventh grade, at minimum, since students are judged on their seventh grade performance and behavior. Some students and parents are not aware that their seventh grade performance is what is most important for high school admission.
- *Comprehensive, easy-to-use formal communication* – Philadelphia's *Directory* and website should provide more information and present it in an easy-to-find format.
- *Explicit information about the admissions process* – The District should provide clearer explanation that charter schools require separate applications, and that invitations to interview at selective admission schools are not offers of admission.
- *Clear information about admissions requirements* – The *Directory* should clarify selective admissions criteria (e.g., for standardized test scores and grades, which subjects are considered).
- *Acceptance data tracking* – In order to get a complete picture of school acceptance rates, the District should track data on all the schools where students are accepted, rather than only keeping a record of the schools where students enroll. Moreover, this data should be made public.

going on at [school]. Fights. They don't want to send their children someplace where they're fighting every day.

Mother 2: She [her daughter] came to me...as the year was closing down, school's getting ready to start up again. She said she didn't want to attend [assigned neighborhood school]. She said she was real scared.

Interviewer: What was she scared of?

Mother 2: I guess it's the neighborhood children.

Without exception, the students and parents we interviewed considered their assigned neighborhood high school to be unsafe both inside the school and in the neighborhood immediately surrounding the school. Students often considered, however, attending neighborhood schools in other parts of the city. Our quantitative analysis, which found that 59% of high school applicants applied to a neighborhood school other than their own, corroborated this finding. Families sometimes used school size to assess the desirability of neighborhood schools across the city. For example, one student explained that her parents wanted her to apply to two neighborhood high schools that they “knew would be good because they were medium or small schools.”

Some saw reason to avoid neighborhood high schools altogether. For example, an eighth grade charter school counselor said that she never recommended that parents send their children to neighborhood high schools because they were not academically rigorous: “Generally the numbers, the comparison data in terms of graduation rates, SAT scores, college enrollment, they're significantly lower.” However, most parents and students did not make these generalizations about all neighborhood schools. Instead, parents and students were particularly averse to attending their own assigned neighborhood school because of concerns about safety and poor reputation.

Support for Families During the Application Process

Under the best conditions, when all appropriate information is available and accessible, families still need help to strategically negotiate the selection system. In a December 2008 *New York Times* article, Clara Hemphill, who has written a series of books about New York City's best schools, explained that even she was “befuddled and overwhelmed” by the process of helping her daughter apply for high schools. The problem, Hemphill argues, is that “public schools are being asked to do what is a private school process with public school resources ... Instead of having three people who handle admissions, they have nobody.”⁸¹

“A lot of parents don't want to send their child to [local neighborhood school], because of what they've heard. Always something's going on at [school]. Fights. They don't want to send their children someplace where they're fighting every day.” - Mother

⁸¹ Medina, J. (2008, December 9). Even an expert's resolve is tested by the city's high school admissions process. [Electronic version]. *New York Times*. Retrieved on December 9, 2008, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/09/nyregion/09apply.html>

In our interviews, most of the students and parents said that they received little support from their school counselor, other school-based staff, or CBO staff during the application process. According to the District Office of Student Placement, it is the role of the school counselor to shepherd students through the application and admissions process by distributing the *Directory*, offering guidance, answering questions about the selection system, and providing any information that cannot be found in the District's printed materials. All the students interviewed had received the *Directory*, but in terms of direct support from the counselors, parents and students had

How Students and Parents Experience High School Selection

Deciding Where to Apply

Priority Criteria Mentioned by Students and Parents:

- School quality (e.g., graduation rates, college attendance rates, teacher qualifications)
- School theme and availability of extracurricular activities
- Safety (of schools and school neighborhoods)

Student/Parent Perceptions:

- Applying these criteria, students and parents rarely considered their default neighborhood high schools as viable options.
- Without exception, students and parents interviewed considered their own neighborhood high school unsafe, both inside school and in the immediately surrounding area.
- Many parents used size as an indicator of safety in assessing neighborhood schools across the city.
- Parents and students were particularly averse to their own default neighborhood school because of concerns about both safety and poor reputation.

Issues/Recommendations:

- Access to accurate and timely information about school quality and safety indicators in all District schools would provide families with more realistic measures on which to base their selection.

varying experiences. A few students said counselors were helpful in the process. In general, however, most students and parents did not think that their counselors were supportive. One parent explained, “A lot of stuff we do on our own. Sometimes the counselors are not [helpful].”

Philadelphia’s K-8 schools, which in some cases enrolled more than 520 students, were each assigned one counselor during the 2007-08 school year. In our interviews, several people noted that there were just not enough counselors in K-8 schools; as a result, parents could not get enough attention during the high school application and admissions process. One parent pointed out that there were disparities between schools in the ratio of students to counselors, such that students in smaller schools had a distinct advantage in getting better information and support. Counselors may have been overburdened by their workload and simply did not have adequate time to help eighth graders during the application process while simultaneously completing their other duties. Therefore, the lack of counselor support for families may have been, as Hemphill suggested, an issue of inadequate resources. Furthermore, several students and parents reported that counselors sometimes altered the list of schools on high school applications after the parent had signed off. One student explained that this happened to him: “I told him I wanted Bok. I wanted Swenson. He only put one of them down. I wouldn’t have ever put down [a large neighborhood school]. That’s what he put down.” In another example, a student explained that a counselor removed one of the neighborhood schools that she had selected:

The counselor took [neighborhood high school] off the list because she wanted to take off one of the neighborhood high schools. She said she was going to ask me which one, but she never asked me, and she just took off [that particular neighborhood high school] and replaced it with [a special admission high school]...I asked her to change it, but she said it was too late because the papers were already sent off.

Parents and students rarely mentioned teachers or other school staff as having influenced their decision-making and choices. Outside of schools, we looked to CBOs as potential sources of support for students and parents. We found that many students were engaged in enrichment programs across the city; however, these did not constitute a coherent web of support for Philadelphia students to help them navigate school selection and transition to high school. For example, although we accessed the youth in our focus groups through CBOs and enrichment programs, they did not say that these programs supported them in the application and admissions process. In addition, CBO staff members themselves were often unfamiliar with the selection system.

Waiting for School Decisions

After submitting their applications, students awaited responses for several months. Many of our student focus group participants attended school interviews in the spring, and most said they had to write an essay or prepare a portfolio in preparation for the interview. One student provided this description of the interview process: “It was stressful. Everyone was telling me to sit up straight, have good posture, be polite. It was hard.”

Currently, there are no districtwide guidelines for what criteria are appropriate for schools to use during the interview and audition process; thus schools have a great deal of control over this component of the selection system. The lack of established criteria for what makes a successful interview

How Students and Parents Experience High School Selection

Support for Families During the Application Process

Insufficient Support:

- Most students and parents reported receiving little support from a school counselor, other school-based staff, or community-based organization (CBO) staff.
- Only one counselor was assigned to each of Philadelphia’s K-8 schools, some of which enrolled more than 520 students. Therefore, larger schools were at a disadvantage in the support they could provide to eighth graders during their research and application process.
- Several parents and students reported that a counselor had changed a student’s list of choices without consultation before entering it into the system.
- While many students were involved in enrichment programs outside the school, this was not a source of information or counseling about applying to high schools. CBO staff members were generally unfamiliar with the Philadelphia high school selection system.

Issues/Recommendations:

- The counselor-to-student ratio needs to be improved and/or academic counseling resources need to be directed at critical times to seventh graders (alerting them to the process and the importance of seventh grade records) and eighth graders (particularly during the fall selection process).
- Districtwide guidelines and professional development should be provided to counselors to ensure that students’ choices are being processed accurately.
- Providing CBOs and other enrichment program staff with relevant information and training could create additional channels of support to students and parents as they navigate the selection process.

was not the only area in which schools could exercise discretion. Principals could accept students regardless of the outcomes of the formal admissions process. For example, schools that admit by lottery were permitted to admit students independent of the lottery after the formal process had been completed. A senior District official said this was a common practice: “Children are constantly trying to get into schools after the application process. It’s a constant negotiation regarding their space allocation and can we assign more children.” The counselor at one of Philadelphia’s citywide admission schools explained, “If you don’t get accepted in the lottery, you can have your principal call to lobby and make your case—you could be a really good student that needs a second look and we’ll review them again.”⁸²

“People are always asking for favors and trying to skirt around the process... . You have to be somewhat diplomatic depending on who’s calling.” - Principal

The gap between filling out the application in the fall and hearing the results in the late spring and summer posed a problem for some students. For many students, waiting almost the entire school year to hear whether they had been admitted to one of their desired schools felt interminable. One student said, “You just kept thinking about whether you were going to get accepted and then you wait.” More importantly, by the time they learned where they had been accepted it was too late for students to consider alternatives, such as charter, private or parochial schools.

Inequities in Access Due to Informal Advocacy

As described above, we observed that final decisions about high school admission in Philadelphia were sometimes made by individual principals at the school level and were sometimes subject to the pressures of individual parents. However, the option to phone school administrators directly was not mentioned in the District’s materials. Thus, only especially knowledgeable and/or persistent parents were aware that they might gain admission to a school for their child by contacting the principal directly, or by asking their middle school principal or counselor to do so.

We found that some principals disliked that they played such a central role in the admissions process because, they said, political and District officials often took advantage of principals’ ability to admit students. For example, a principal at a special admission school said the admissions system was “flawed” and complained about the political pressure he felt to admit certain students:

People are always asking for favors and trying to skirt around the process... . You have to be somewhat diplomatic depending on who’s calling. If it’s the senator from your district calling for somebody, you try to listen, not to be abrupt, especially if it’s someone friendly to education, or I’ll get a call from [the District central office], somebody downtown wants something.

⁸² This counselor observed that the principal had admitted too many students through informal processes: “The numbers just started climbing. The principal got calls from principals and he’ll accept. I think he’s hoping some students who did accept from the beginning won’t follow through.”

How Students and Parents Experience High School Selection

Waiting for Admission Decisions

Timing Concerns:

- Students submitted their choice of up to five schools in November, but had to wait until April and beyond before receiving notification letters.
- By the time notification letters were received, it was often too late to consider alternatives such as charter, private, or parochial schools.

Additional Admission Considerations:

- Some selective schools invited students for an interview or audition during December-January. However, there were no districtwide guidelines or criteria for conducting or evaluating the interviews, and information about these supplemental application requirements was not in the *Directory*.
- Principals could accept students regardless of the outcomes of the formal admissions process, making informal advocacy an important factor in final decisions.

Issues/Recommendations:

- Students should be advised early in the process about how to apply separately to charter, private, or parochial schools.
- District guidelines for interviews and auditions would help make these practices more equitable.

However, another principal described this aspect of the process from a different perspective:

Interviewer: Who in central office do you go to when you need something?

Principal: I have lots of friends in high places. I truly do... . Right now my niece is trying to get into a [special admission school], [the principal is] saying he can't take her because her TerraNova scores aren't as high as where he wants, but he tells me email [central office staff member] and maybe she can do a direct admit from the region, so you do have friends.

In addition, after some admitted applicants decided to attend other schools, principals at less-sought-after schools had to spend valuable time in late summer and early fall re-reviewing applications and offering admission to students who were not initially admitted.

Research on parental involvement in education indicates that while all parents want children to succeed in school, upper-middle class parents are most

adamant in advocating on behalf of their children and insisting that schools provide them certain opportunities.⁸³ Consequently, inequities in information access result in inequities in admissions patterns. District officials said that the persistent students and families had a greater chance of gaining admission to a school after being deselected or waitlisted:

If you were waitlisted at a place you could get in... students who want to and whose parents advocate for them [can get in]. It is the children who just assume they're going to their neighborhood high school or haven't been pushed in any way [who do not get in anywhere].

Our findings therefore support prior research suggesting that parents and students who are able to use their social networks to contact school leaders or District officials directly may improve their access to selective admission schools, while less-connected parents and students have reduced access to selective admission schools.⁸⁴

Like Philadelphia, several other urban school districts implement a high school application and admissions process, yet each district's system functions differently. In order to contextualize Philadelphia's high school selection system, in the box on pages 46 and 47 we provide a brief description of the process in New York City (NYC) and compare it to Philadelphia's system. A district's system of matching students with schools is "the cornerstone" of its choice plan.⁸⁵ Although we do not claim that NYC has an ideal process, this example illustrates an alternate approach to high school selection in another large urban district.

⁸³ Lareau, 2000.

⁸⁴ Smrekar & Goldring, 1999.

⁸⁵ Toch, T., & Aldeman, C. (2009). *Matchmaking: Enabling mandatory public school choice in New York and Boston*. Washington, DC: Education Sector.

How Students and Parents Experience High School Selection

Inequities in Access Due to Informal Advocacy

Unequal Access and the Domino Effect:

- Individual school principals have the latitude to accept students even if they have not been selected for admission through the formal process.
- Persistent parents, through their own advocacy or by contacting others to speak on their behalf, can often manage to have their child accepted after admission letters have been sent out.
- The informal advocacy channel strongly favors middle and upper-middle class parents and students, both because they have more information about school processes and because they are more likely to push for a preferential placement decision.
- As a consequence of these late changes, schools are forced to make adjustments to their own enrollments well into the summer.

Issues/Recommendations:

- Reducing or eliminating the opportunity for parents and other advocates to alter decisions by appealing directly to school principals would not only make the process more equitable, but also reduce the domino effect of inefficiency experienced across multiple schools when late and arbitrary changes are made to school enrollments.
- Models from other cities should be evaluated for ideas that might usefully be applied to Philadelphia.

New York City: An Alternative Approach to High School Admissions

A centralized high school matching process has been implemented in NYC since 2003 when an economics professor was hired to redesign the system based on the National Resident Matching Program, the system used to match medical students with residency programs. Prior to 2003, New York City's high school choice system was very similar to Philadelphia's.⁸⁶

In NYC, all eighth grade students must apply to up to 12 high schools in ranked order, compared to five in Philadelphia. In contrast to Philadelphia, there are no neighborhood high schools in NYC.⁸⁷ Instead of being assigned to a default school, applicants in NYC who are not matched in the first round of admissions continue the selection process. In this supplementary round, students select from schools that have remaining slots, which are often lower-performing schools or those that are too new to have established a positive reputation.

High school options in both NYC and Philadelphia include some schools and programs that have selective admissions criteria and others that do not. In NYC there is a third type of admissions, as some NYC high schools admit students through the Educational Options (Ed. Opt.) program.⁸⁸ Applicants to Ed. Opt. schools are grouped into three categories according to their seventh grade standardized reading scores: high, middle, and low. Sixteen percent of students admitted to an Ed. Opt. program are from the low group and 16% are from the high group, while 68% of accepted students are admitted from the middle group.⁸⁹ Therefore, Ed. Opt. schools enroll students who represent a wide range of academic performance in the city.⁹⁰

Another key difference between NYC and Philadelphia is the number of offers of admission a student may receive. In NYC, students are admitted to only one school. Students enroll in their highest-ranked school that also highly ranked them. NYC stopped making multiple offers of admission to students when the system was redesigned in 2003. The designers of New York's matching system determined that the cost of not giving students multiple offers was small because under NYC's previous system, the majority of applicants decided to attend their first ranked schools. Moreover, they concluded that "in a system without excess capacity the cost of giving some students multiple offers is that multiple students get no offers."⁹¹ In fact, after the elimination of multiple acceptances, the number of NYC applicants who were not matched

⁸⁶ Abdulkadiroglu, A., Pathak, P. A., & Roth, A. E. (2005). The New York City high school match. *Practical Market Design*, 95(2), 364-367; Gootman, E. (2005, March 5). More students admitted to high school of choice. [Electronic version]. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on March 20, 2009, from <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B00E7D9163FF937A15750C0A9639C8B63>

⁸⁷ While there are no neighborhood high schools to which students are automatically assigned, there are "zoned" schools. Students who live within a geographic area are guaranteed admission to their zoned school if they apply to that school.

⁸⁸ See: <http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/High/Admissions/Methods.htm> for a description of New York City high school admission methods.

⁸⁹ In each category (low, middle, high), school personnel rank 50% of the students and a computer randomly selects the other 50%. The Ed. Opt. program is designed to enroll students that represent the range of academic performance in the city. In an Ed. Opt. program, all students who score in the top 2% on the seventh grade standardized reading exam are automatically matched to their first choice school.

⁹⁰ As we have demonstrated, in Philadelphia, students with higher academic and socioeconomic needs are concentrated in the District's neighborhood high schools. We offer New York City's Ed. Opt. program as one example of a district's attempt to address this problem, but an analysis of schools citywide demonstrates that inequities still exist; NYC high schools serving the highest proportions of Black and Latino students were recently evaluated as the lowest performing (Medina, J., 2009, November 18. Evaluations of schools fail to adjust for demographics. *The New York Times*, p. A29.). Wake County in North Carolina provides another model. In Wake County, high school reform in the 1980s resulted in a system of mostly specially themed nonselective high schools that "were soon filled with economically and racially diverse student enrollments," thereby avoiding the concentration of high poverty, ELL, and special education students in a subset of neighborhood high schools (Kahlenberg, R. D., 2009. Turnaround schools that work. *Education Week*, 29[2], 28, 32, p.32).

⁹¹ Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, & Roth, 2005, p. 366.

⁹² Education Sector. (2009, March 30). The unmatched. Retrieved March 30, 2009 from <http://www.quickanded.com/2009/03/unmatched.html>. After the supplementary round in 2009, 791 students were assigned to schools by the NYC Department of Education. See: Toch & Aldeman, 2009.

to any of their selected schools (during the first round of admissions) has steadily decreased from nearly 35,000 students in 2003 to fewer than 7,500 in 2009.⁹² Toch and Aldeman point out that prior to redesigning their systems, both NYC and Boston had “priority matching systems” (like Philadelphia’s) which theoretically prioritized giving as many students as possible their first choice, but which in reality included counseling many students to change their first-choice schools to improve their chances of being accepted, thereby undermining the integrity of these choice systems.⁹³ Under NYC’s (and Boston’s) new system, “the mathematical formulas...have been rewritten to eliminate the advantages (and stresses) of trying to calculate schools’ popularity” so that both systems now “allow students to list their true preferences.”⁹⁴

NYC and Philadelphia also differ in who makes final admission decisions. In Philadelphia, admission decisions are school-based and principals have considerable power and discretion. In NYC, the Department of Education (DOE) is responsible for making final admission decisions while schools have a reduced role in such decisions. After schools rank their student applicants, the DOE manages the process of matching students to schools and does not do favors “as a matter of policy.”⁹⁵ There are potential advantages to this kind of system. For example, some scholars have argued that a district-managed selection process is more likely to produce equitable outcomes than a school-managed process.⁹⁶ However, some NYC parents lament that centralization has reduced their access to decision makers and made it more difficult to transfer out of unsatisfactory schools.⁹⁷

Overall, NYC’s admissions process has been more successful in matching students to desired schools than Philadelphia’s system. It is particularly notable that 51% of NYC students were admitted to their first-choice school.⁹⁸ However, newspaper coverage of the high school admissions process in 2009 revealed that students who were not matched in the first round of admissions (approximately 9% of applicants) felt disappointed and mistreated.⁹⁹ Moreover, it is important to note that an increase in options and choice does not necessarily result in increased access to high-quality high schools. Improved selection systems are only beneficial when they allow more students to enroll in high schools that meet their academic needs.¹⁰⁰ As Toch and Aldeman argue, “Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from the new Boston and New York assignment plans is that school choice requires meaningful choices.”¹⁰¹

⁹³ Toch & Aldeman, 2009.

⁹⁴ Toch & Aldeman, 2009, p. 4.

⁹⁵ Toch & Aldeman, 2009, p. 4.

⁹⁶ Moore, D. R. & Davenport, S. (1988). *The new improved sorting machine*. Madison, WI: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools; West, A. (2006). School choice, equity and social justice: The case for more control. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 54(1), 15-33.

⁹⁷ Cramer, P. (2009, March 16). For high school students, school choice is hard to come by. [Electronic version]. Gotham Schools. Retrieved March 26, 2009, from <http://gothamschools.org/2009/03/16/for-high-school-students-school-choice-is-hard-to-come-by/>; Cramer, P. (2009, March 25). For 86,000 high school applicants, the waiting is finally over. [Electronic version]. Gotham Schools. Retrieved March 26, 2009, from <http://gothamschools.org/2009/03/25/for-86000-hs-applicants-the-waiting-game-is-finally-over/>

⁹⁸ Cramer, 2009, March 25; New York City Department of Education, 2008. Our data set does not allow us to determine the number of students matched to their first choice school in Philadelphia. However, we do know that the number of students matched to *any* school is less than 50%.

⁹⁹ Cramer, 2009, March 25; Hottman, T. (2009, April 1). Parents cry foul over high school placements. [Electronic version]. NY1. Retrieved April 1, 2009, from http://ny1.com/content/top_stories/96608/parents-cry-fowl-over-high-school-placements/Default.aspx; Kolodner, M. (2009, May 5). Education department fails to place thousands of students in any school on their list of picks. [Electronic version]. *New York Daily News*. Retrieved May 5, 2009, from http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/education/2009/05/05/2009-05-05-education_department_fails_to_place_thousands_of_students_in_any_high_school_on_.html

¹⁰⁰ See Hemphill, C., Nauer, K., Zelon, H., & Jacobs, T. (2009, June). The new marketplace: *How small-school reforms and school choice have reshaped New York City’s high schools*. New York: Center for New York City Affairs Milano, The New School for Management and Urban Policy.

¹⁰¹ Toch & Aldeman, 2009, p. 5.

Conclusion

Our analysis of District application and enrollment data revealed that, in Philadelphia, students are not choosing their high schools as much as schools are selecting students. Despite the fact that the vast majority of District eighth grade students attempt to choose a school by participating in high school selection, most students are not admitted to any of their preferred schools. We identified several characteristics of the selection system that contribute to its failure to provide genuine choice to most high school applicants.

First, we found that the high school admissions process was complex and difficult to negotiate, given the limited information that is available about the process. While the District made important efforts to provide students and parents with information, the materials lacked valuable information that families needed in order to participate successfully in high school selection. Indeed, the fact that high school selection criteria rely heavily on seventh grade academic and behavioral performance strongly suggests that students and parents should be provided with information and preliminary guidance early in the seventh grade year, or before. Moreover, we found that counselors and teachers were not widely available to help students and parents access and make sense of information as they engaged with the selection system. Research suggests that lower-income families, in particular, are at a disadvantage when there is not clear, accessible information and guidance through formal channels of communication.

Second, students applied to schools because they thought those schools were of higher quality than their assigned neighborhood school. Because there were not enough available slots in preferred schools to meet student demand, the majority of students ended up attending their default neighborhood school. Our findings suggest that creating a more equitable system of high-quality high school options may require redesigning and implementing more controls on the selection system. Scholar Anne West has argued that “systems where there are some ‘controls’ on the choice process should be facilitated to address equity and social justice considerations that can benefit individuals and communities... . Education is about more than individual academic success and excellence—it is also about ensuring equity of access to different schools.”¹⁰² New York City’s Ed. Opt. program is one mechanism for controlling choice in such a way that students of all levels of academic performance have comparable access to high-quality schools.

¹⁰² West, 2006.

Finally, we determined that the decentralized and school-based nature of Philadelphia’s selection system may increase inequity and the degree to which school leadership, rather than students and families, have choice. There was minimal District oversight of the process by which schools “deselected” and admitted students. Some families were able to gain admission to schools through informal paths, such as contacting principals directly, that were not explained in school District materials. As a result, children of more informed and well-connected parents had greater opportunity to access schools. The District has made some attempts to eliminate these problems by proposing, for example, greater centralization of the process and the elimination of multiple acceptances. A parent group, however, successfully resisted this proposal, arguing that “there is great importance in having multiple acceptances and putting the final choice of high schools in the parents’ and students’ hands.”¹⁰³ On the other hand, research in New York City indicates that a more centralized process without multiple acceptances could increase choice by allowing more students to access their preferred school through the District’s formalized application and admissions process.¹⁰⁴

Philadelphia high schools are organized in a tiered system in which neighborhood high schools enroll the majority of high-needs students. Among the three admissions categories, neighborhood schools have the highest concentration of special education students and students who are learning English. Neighborhood schools also enroll the highest proportion of students who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch. In the end, neighborhood schools must enroll any student from within their feeder pattern. In contrast, selective schools begin the school year having hand-picked their ninth graders through a rigorous and detailed, though sometimes inconsistent, process.

Philadelphia’s high school selection process has serious implications for what happens in the ninth grade and is a major component of the transition to high school. The transition process continues when students arrive at high schools, many of which are implementing a variety of interventions to help freshman make the adjustment to high school and progress towards graduation. The next chapter will describe the implementation of these interventions in high schools across the District’s tiered system.

¹⁰³ Gym, H. (2007, October 4). Changes in high school selection process. [Electronic version]. Retrieved June 30, 2009, from http://parentsunitedphila.googlepages.com/alerts_1007

¹⁰⁴ Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, & Roth, 2005.

Chapter Three

Interventions to Support Ninth Graders

While Chapter Two considers the high school selection process, this chapter explores the range and depth of in-school supports ninth graders receive to help them succeed in high school. Specifically, we discuss five interventions which the District used to support ninth graders: student orientations; ninth grade academies and ninth grade teacher teams; double dosing of math and English; using individual student data; and strategically assigning strong teachers to ninth grade.¹⁰⁵ We also discuss how implementation of these interventions is affected by the District's admissions process and enrollment patterns, and, most notably, the particular implementation challenges faced by nonselective neighborhood high schools.

Each of the five interventions has an underlying purpose (see box). The purposes are determined by our analysis of interview data as well as previous research on ninth grade interventions. Although we identify each intervention with a primary purpose, each intervention in fact can have multiple purposes and in some cases the primary purpose may be open to debate among practitioners. With the exception of double dosing, which is given only to students who have fallen behind, each intervention is typically implemented for all ninth grade students within a school.

Five Interventions for Philadelphia Ninth Graders	
Intervention	Primary Purpose
Student orientations	Establish a single school culture
Ninth grade academies and ninth grade teacher teams ¹⁰⁶	Build personalization and teacher collaboration
Double dosing of math and English	Accelerate learning/catch students up to grade level
Use of individual student data	Monitor academic progress and provide tutoring
Strategically assigning teachers to ninth grade	Improve instruction in ninth grade

In the course of this research, we noted that many central office and regional staff, as well as school leaders, were familiar with past reform initiatives such as the Talent Development High School Model and small learning communities (SLCs).¹⁰⁷ These reforms were intentionally designed to reduce the student dropout rate and improve ninth grade student outcomes, especially

¹⁰⁵ Other interventions such as extending the school day have been used with success in many charter schools, but are not exclusive to ninth graders. For more on interventions used in middle and high school grades generally, see: Christman, Brown, Burgess, Kay, Maluk, & Mitchell, 2009.

¹⁰⁶ The District does not recommend the ninth grade academy model for all high schools. This is discussed further in the section on ninth grade academies and ninth grade teacher teams in this chapter.

¹⁰⁷ In 2009-10 Talent Development and SLCs were again being implemented in select neighborhood high schools.

in large neighborhood schools. Research-based interventions frequently associated with these past reform initiatives are still used across all types of District high schools, and many elements have also been adopted by charter high schools.¹⁰⁸ Over the past 20 years, however, changing priorities with rotations of new District leadership, coupled with limited resources, have resulted in these interventions functioning in isolation from one another, rather than as part of an overall reform strategy.

We found that interventions to support ninth grade often did not work in concert with each other.

Studies of the Talent Development model, as well as research conducted by Kerr and Legters on Maryland’s public high schools, affirm that it is important that interventions be connected to a focused and sustained strategy—or testable theory of action—and that they be mutually reinforcing.¹⁰⁹ In Philadelphia, we found that interventions to support ninth grade often did not work in concert with each other. Furthermore, interventions in Philadelphia appeared in some cases to be weakened by their surface implementation. We use the word “surface” here to mean that they are often implemented without sufficient planning, with little or no professional development, and without a mechanism for assessing their effectiveness. Each of the five interventions used in Philadelphia high schools has its merits. Indeed, research on the transition to ninth grade for low-income students suggests that each of these interventions can be an effective strategy for improving ninth grade student outcomes.¹¹⁰ However, an overall strategy for supporting ninth graders requires that greater attention be paid not only to strengthening each intervention individually, but also to assuring that the interventions work together in concert. It is also important for school leaders and District leaders to see these interventions as components of a strategic focus on improving the ninth grade educational experience.

¹⁰⁸ In this chapter we are able to report on fieldwork conducted in charter schools as well as in District high schools.

¹⁰⁹ Kemple, Herlihy, & Smith, 2005, June; Kerr, K. A. & Legters, N. E. (2004). Preventing dropout: Use and impact of organizational reforms designed to ease the transition to high school. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 221-242). Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

¹¹⁰ Kerr, K. A. & Legters, N. E., 2004; Ascher, C., & Maguire, C. (2007). *Beating the odds: How thirteen NYC schools bring low-performing ninth-graders to timely graduation and college enrollment*. Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform; Neild, R. C. & Farley-Ripple, E. (2008). Within-school variation in teacher quality: The case of ninth grade. *American Journal of Education*, 114, 271-305.

Data Sources

Data sources used in this chapter include:

- Interviews with school-level personnel, including principals, assistant principals, CEOs/CAOs, teachers, school growth coaches, and other staff
- Interviews with regional superintendents and other regional staff
- Interviews with central office staff
- Observations conducted at student orientations in 12 high schools
- Observations of selected regional principal meetings
- Student survey designed and administered by the School District of Philadelphia
- Teacher survey designed and administered by the School District of Philadelphia

Neighborhood high schools must wait until the beginning of the school year, and beyond, before knowing exactly who their students will be.

How Selection Practices and Enrollment Patterns Impact Interventions

As we discuss each intervention below, we also report on the factors that appear to present challenges to the effective use of that intervention. A number of these challenges result from the systemic influence of the selection process. As described in Chapter Two, the high school selection process results in a low incidence of students being assigned to one of their preferred high schools and a high concentration of special needs and low-performing students in neighborhood high schools. Another unintended consequence is that neighborhood high schools must wait until the beginning of the school year and beyond, before knowing exactly who their students will be.

Table 3.1 **Late Ninth Grade Enrollment**

	Neighborhood	Citywide Admission	Special Admission
Ninth graders who start on the first day of school	83%	98%	99%
Ninth graders who start after the first day	17%	2%	1%

Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Administrative Data
N=14,209 ninth graders

Table 3.1 indicates that while enrollments were basically set at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year in special admission and citywide admission schools, this was not the case for neighborhood high schools. In neighborhood high schools, 17% of ninth graders started after the first day of school: 7% enrolled by October, an additional 3% by December, and the remaining 7% in January or later in the school year. This churn, at least in part, is an artifact of the selection system—enrollment at the neighborhood high schools does not settle until enrollment at the selective schools and charter schools has settled.

In addition to the difficulty of identifying who their incoming ninth graders will be and being able to obtain information on them before the fall, neighborhood high schools also face the challenge of unstable enrollments. Selective high schools (special admission and citywide admission high schools) and charter schools typically have a higher degree of control over which students get admitted, and therefore have increased chances of having a stable student population.¹¹¹ Neighborhood high schools have to take in any student from their catchment area at any time. Neighborhood schools typically have much more mobile populations with students filtering in and out—because they move into, or out of, the catchment area—throughout the course of the year.

At some orientations for both charter and selective admission high schools, we heard staff warn the students that they would be sent back to their neighborhood school if they did not behave in accordance with school rules. Indeed, neighborhood high schools have to take students who are expelled from selective admission and charter schools as well. In addition, neighborhood high schools often have to take students returning from disciplinary schools and the juvenile justice system. As one neighborhood high school principal remarked, “Any given day, we might have five to seven new students enrolled, coming back from incarceration.”

The unpredictability and instability in enrollment create additional challenges in neighborhood high schools that influence the schools’ ability to support ninth grade students through the interventions discussed in this chapter.

¹¹¹ Another factor which facilitates a stable student population in charter schools is that a number of charter schools serve middle grades (and for some, elementary grades as well) in the same schools as high school grades, allowing them to better anticipate the needs of their ninth graders because many, if not most, ninth graders are returning students. In addition, although charter schools admit students using a lottery process, many charter schools get to know incoming students by inviting prospective students and their families to open houses, and by scheduling individual meetings with students and families after the lottery. This process, possible in part because the entering number of students is small—in contrast to the much greater number of eighth graders entering most neighborhood high schools—not only aids personalization but also can serve to increase the control a charter school has over which students come to the school. For example, one charter school administrator reported that at their open houses, school staff emphasize to students and their families the school’s high, college-focused expectations, and tell students that if the school doesn’t sound like the right fit for them, they should not attend.

In addition to the difficulty of identifying who their incoming ninth graders will be and being able to obtain information on them before the fall, neighborhood high schools also face the challenge of unstable enrollments.

Intervention 1 - Student Orientations: Establishing a Single School Culture

All the schools in our sample held an orientation at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year for ninth graders, and in the case of some charter schools for all grades. For some schools this was a new practice.

Administrators and teacher leaders of District schools reported that holding ninth grade orientations were strongly encouraged by central office and regional staff. The purpose of holding orientations was to communicate to students the expectations of high school and to set a positive tone for school climate for the school year.

Previous research points to the important influence that setting high expectations for student success has on improving student outcomes. High schools that emphasize preparing students for college have been found to make greater-than-expected gains with previously underperforming students.¹¹² In a study of New York City high schools that were particularly successful with low-achieving students, researchers noted the importance of communicating to students *starting in ninth grade* that they were expected to go to college after graduating from high school.¹¹³

For this study, we observed ninth grade orientations at twelve high schools, including five charter schools.¹¹⁴ We found that Philadelphia high school orientations communicated a range of messages to their ninth graders about college-going expectations. These messages appeared to correlate with admissions type. We observed that staff at selective high schools communicated an expectation that their students would graduate *and* go on to college, whereas staff at most neighborhood high schools communicated more pessimistic messages to students about their chances of graduating from high school and going on to college. Messages about college-going, however, were sometimes oblique. At one large citywide admission high school, for example, talk about going to college occurred when the teacher-coordinator of Student Government told students that they ought to “think about getting involved in opportunities such as student government because colleges and trade schools love to see applicants who get involved in extracurriculars, especially in leadership roles.”

¹¹² Robinson, S., Stempel, A., & McCree, I. (2005). *Gaining traction, gaining ground: How some high schools accelerate learning for struggling students*. Washington, DC: Education Trust.

¹¹³ Ascher & Maguire, 2007. See also: Cooper, R. & Liou, D. D. (2007). The structure and culture of information pathways: Rethinking opportunity to learn in urban high schools during the ninth grade transition. *The High School Journal*, 91, 43-56.

¹¹⁴ Student orientations were observed at six high schools in our sample (our four focal schools, plus two charter schools). For another RFA project, we observed student orientations at an additional six high schools (three District and three charter schools), outside our sample regions. We report data from all 12 orientations together in this report in order to draw from a larger sample of schools. See: Christman, Brown, Burgess, Kay, Maluk, & Mitchell, 2009.

Typically, however, administrators and/or staff at selective District high schools communicated a more direct expectation that students would attend college. For example, at one selective high school, students were told, “Ninety-five percent of our graduates go on to college.” Four of five charter school orientations we observed were similar to the selective high schools in this regard, communicating optimistic messages about high school graduation and college-going.¹¹⁵ For example, an administrator at one charter high school told all ninth graders, “You will graduate in four years, and you will go to college.” At another charter school, the principal visited each ninth grade classroom and enthusiastically asked students as a group, “Where are you going in four years?” Students were thus prompted to answer equally enthusiastically and in unison, “College!” This ritual was modified and repeated for each grade level.

In contrast, at one neighborhood high school, an administrator told all ninth graders at the student orientation assembly, “College is not for everyone.” At other neighborhood high schools, well-intentioned messages from adults communicated their *hope* that students would graduate from high school, but implied that this was not necessarily *expected* and was even unlikely, and mentions of *college* were notably absent. One teacher told ninth graders at a neighborhood high school, “You are going to be here for four years—for some of you—I hope.” This teacher then went on to inform students of the low graduation rate among Black students nationwide and told them, “I don’t want to see that.” At another school’s orientation, one faculty member expressed how happy (and surprised) she would be to see students complete high school by telling them, “I’m gonna cry [with happiness] if I see you graduate.” These teachers’ comments suggest that teachers want the best for their students and hope to see them be successful; at the same time, their messages contrasted sharply with the optimism of college-going expectations communicated at the selective high school orientations and four of the five charter school orientations we observed. It is also notable that the most optimistic message heard by our research team at a neighborhood high school orientation was communicated not by school staff, but by a staff member from an outside partner organization, who told students that upon their graduation from high school, “You are either going to go to college or get a job. We’re here to make sure you’re ready.” On a more promising note, this message was followed by specific supports from school staff, as the roster chair and a teacher spoke to students about the importance of ninth grade academic performance for college admission, and students were shown a slide of what courses were needed for promotion from ninth to tenth grade.¹¹⁶

One neighborhood high school faculty member expressed how happy (and surprised) she would be to see students complete high school by telling them, “I’m gonna cry [with happiness] if I see you graduate.”

¹¹⁵ The fifth charter school has as its mission to serve at-risk youth who have not been successful in a traditional high school setting. At the student orientation at this charter school, there was less emphasis on college, although its importance was mentioned by a guidance counselor who spoke to the students (Christman, Brown, Burgess, Kay, Maluk, & Mitchell, 2009).

¹¹⁶ The RFA researcher observing this orientation noted, “On the other hand, it was difficult to hear many of the speakers, so much of the information being presented was likely not heard by students.”

Given that so many high-poverty urban schools have low rates of high school graduation, college attendance, and college graduation, it is not surprising that some orientation presenters alluded to the challenges that incoming ninth graders may face on the road to high school graduation and post-secondary education. However, research has shown that setting high expectations helps students take concrete steps to achieve their educational goals.¹¹⁷ This may be particularly important for ninth graders in Philadelphia, the majority of whom indicated in a District-administered survey that they aspire to attend college.¹¹⁸ As **Table 3.2** illustrates, although ninth graders planning to complete college *plus a graduate degree* were concentrated disproportionately in special admission schools, the majority of ninth graders at all types of Philadelphia public high schools want to complete a four-year college degree at minimum.

Thus, ninth grade is an opportune time for schools to provide both motivational encouragement and concrete supports to help incoming ninth graders achieve their college-going aspirations. If one of the primary purposes of student orientations is to establish a single-school culture, the opportunity to set the tone of a college- and career-oriented school culture should not be lost. In addition, it is helpful for students to know what resources are avail-

Table 3.2 What is the highest level of education you plan to complete?

	Neighborhood	Citywide Admission	Special Admission
High school	12%	10%	3%
VoTech/2-yr degree	11%	14%	5%
4-yr degree	31%	27%	31%
Grad degree	25%	28%	43%
Don't know	22%	21%	19%

Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Student Survey
N=2,759 ninth graders

¹¹⁷ Stein, G. L., & Hussong, A. (2007). Social and academic expectations about high school for at-risk rural youth. *American Secondary Education*, 36, 59-79.

¹¹⁸ On the 2007-08 districtwide student survey, 70% of first-time ninth graders reported that they plan to pursue education after high school, and 60% planned to complete *at least* a four-year college degree. See Table 3.2 for a breakdown by admission type.

able to them if they run into problems during the school year, whether academically or socially, so they can seek out extra support promptly when they need it. The majority of school orientations we observed did not include such information. For example, at only three of the twelve orientations were students provided with information about tutoring supports that would be available if needed during the school year. Two of these schools were charter schools, while the third was a small neighborhood high school where partner organizations participated in the orientation and told students of the services they provided to help students get into college.¹¹⁹ This small neighborhood high school was an exception to the general pattern regarding student orientations, and as this chapter will show, in many other areas as well.

Smaller school size appeared to facilitate an orientation that was more personalized and academically focused.

In addition to the explicit expectations communicated to students, adults also communicated *implicit messages* about academic expectations through the types of activities planned for student orientation. Smaller school size appeared to facilitate an orientation that was more personalized and academically focused. However, some large high schools also intentionally created smaller settings for students to meet with faculty members to have their questions addressed. For example, a few schools across all admissions types gathered students into classrooms for workshop-style orientations. In these smaller settings of 30 or fewer, students were more likely to ask questions than they were in an auditorium with the entire ninth grade class.¹²⁰

A well-organized orientation also appeared to facilitate greater student participation. At one charter school, workshops took place over two mornings and teachers were given advance training on the workshop curriculum. Although the focus of these workshops was to teach the school's mission and code of conduct, students were asked to engage in reading, writing, class discussion, role play, and partnering with fellow classmates in order to complete selected activities. Students also had opportunities to ask questions of their teachers in these smaller group settings. This level of student engagement and substantive learning as part of the orientation process did not occur at most schools. By contrast, a large citywide admission school began its orientation in a large auditorium. Although students were given the opportunity to ask questions of four Student Council members in front of

¹¹⁹ A range of cultural, service, university, and other nonprofit organizations serve as partner organizations to Philadelphia schools assisting with a wide variety of school improvement efforts. Some corporations and other entities have “adopted” schools and also provide schools with a variety of forms of school assistance.

¹²⁰ The selective high schools also appeared to have an advantage in establishing personalized relationships with students, as most selective high schools and most charter schools created opportunities to meet with incoming students as part of the admissions process. Additional research is needed to learn whether building these relationships with students and families in advance may have also encouraged higher student attendance at orientations for these schools compared to neighborhood high schools. Another concern is that, due to high student turnover at the beginning of the school year at many neighborhood high schools, many incoming ninth graders miss attending orientation.

the whole incoming ninth grade class, not a single student raised his or her hand with a question.

Finally, the types of activities planned for orientation also communicated implicit messages to students about what would be expected of them in high school. Some schools placed emphasis on what athletic and other extracurricular activities were available to students, but neglected to communicate to students what elective academic courses were available to them. In addition, a few schools provided students with an opportunity to get to know one another during orientation through an “ice-breaker” activity, while another school designed an activity which appeared to encourage competition between students but did not appear to build community or provide students with an opportunity to get to know their classmates or their teachers. In the second instance, a large citywide admission high school staged one part of its orientation in the gymnasium, and called students down by homeroom number to compete in a game of musical chairs against students from other homerooms. Students passively resisted this activity, staying in their seats on the bleachers when their homerooms were called. With significant prodding from teachers and student government representatives from the upper grades, enough students were gathered for the game to take place, although the vast majority of students simply watched.

At student orientations, administrators and teachers have a captive audience of ninth graders. When well designed, these orientations can begin to build school community, develop a sense of student belonging, and establish a shared schoolwide culture of high academic expectations.

Intervention 2 - Ninth Grade Academies and Ninth Grade Teacher Teams

There are several ways in which schools can provide a personalized learning experience. Research in Philadelphia and other urban districts suggests that, in comparison to large high schools, the structure and size of small high schools facilitates a personalized learning experience where students feel known, welcomed, and supported.¹²¹ In some districts, large high schools are being restructured into individual small high schools or into small learning communities (SLCs) to improve personalization. SLCs, however, thus far have a more ambiguous track record than small schools in improving student outcomes, and in some instances—including Philadelphia, which committed significant resources to the creation of SLCs in neighborhood high schools during an earlier reform initiative—SLCs have not been sustained

¹²¹ Hartmann, Reumann-Moore, Evans, Haxton, Maluk, & Neild, 2009; Cotton, K. (1996). School size, school climate, and student performance. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Library. Retrieved March 11, 2009 from <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/10/c020.html>; Cotton, K. (2001). *New small learning communities: Findings from recent literature*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Student Orientations

Purpose

To communicate expectations and set a positive school climate.

Extent of Use

All schools in the sample held ninth grade orientations, some for the first time. (Some charter schools held orientations for all students in the school.)

Recommendations

Student orientations appeared to be most successful when:

- Students had the opportunity to ask questions in small groups (e.g., workshops of not more than 30 students).
- Adults provided motivational messages to students regarding high school graduation and college graduation.
- School staff provided information about support resources at the school that would help prepare students to be successful in college, trade school, and the workplace.
- Activities were designed with a particular community-building or academic purpose in mind.
- The orientation was well-organized, with administrators, teachers, and staff clear on their respective roles and prepared to answer commonly asked student questions.
- The orientation was designed so that all students in the audience could hear and/or see the presentations.

If organized with these goals in mind, orientations can set high expectations and provide students with the practical information they need to develop a college-going identity and/or career orientation from the beginning of ninth grade.

Neighborhood School Challenges

Administrators and faculty at the neighborhood high school orientations observed did not typically communicate high expectations to students regarding graduating from high school and attending college. While communicating a desire to see students succeed, adults also signaled doubts because of discouraging student outcomes in years past. Some large citywide schools also appeared to struggle with this issue. The high degree of mobility and uncertainty at the beginning of the school year in neighborhood high schools also is problematic, potentially undermining the motivation of both students and adults to invest in relationship-building.

over time.¹²² Alternatively, large schools can implement a ninth grade academy model where all ninth graders are grouped together, while tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders are grouped into SLCs or themed academies.

A ninth grade academy, one of the interventions in the Talent Development model, is designed to create a more personalized learning environment for ninth graders and includes the following key components: a physically separate space in the building, ninth grade teacher teams, a ninth grade academy leader, and common planning time for the teacher teams and the academy leader to discuss their ninth graders' academic progress.

Sustained implementation of a ninth grade academy structure in large urban high schools (three years or longer) has been shown to correlate with improved student outcomes, including better attendance and tenth-grade promotion rates¹²³ as well as reduced dropout rates.¹²⁴ The purpose of the ninth grade academy is to personalize the learning experience for students and provide ninth grade teachers with ongoing opportunities to collaborate. By definition, a ninth grade academy includes ninth grade teacher teams. Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg explain the purpose of this model and what it entails:

To create a space where students are well known by their teachers and peers and where they are less likely to be bullied or harassed by upperclass students, the Ninth Grade Academy is located in a physically separate section of the school building. Teachers in this school-within-a-school structure are divided into teams made up of math, English, social studies, and science faculty who teach the same group of students. These teams of teachers, led by a Team Leader, meet frequently throughout the year to discuss the academic progress of their ninth graders.¹²⁵

In our sample of Philadelphia high schools, we found that the ninth grade academy model was not commonly used. Principals and teachers at only two high schools—one neighborhood school and one citywide school—reported having a ninth grade academy, and the principal at a third described having many key elements of the ninth grade academy model, but did not call it

¹²² Research suggests that the potential of small learning communities to significantly improve student outcomes is limited in comparison to that of small schools; the characteristics associated with increased student achievement commonly found in small schools, such as personalized teacher-student relationships, often fail to be fully realized in small learning communities (Cotton, 2001).

¹²³ Kemple, Herlihy, & Smith, 2005.

¹²⁴ Kerr & Legters, 2004.

¹²⁵ Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008, p. 55. See also: McPartland, J., & Jordan, W. (2004). Essential components of high school dropout-prevention reforms. In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation rate crisis* (pp. 269-288). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

such. At one of these neighborhood high schools, which was a former Talent Development school, current administrators were familiar with the Talent Development model and still articulated an association with the model. Ninth grade teachers met together as an academy, but not in any routine or regular way. The meetings that did occur typically happened during a lunch period at this school. An administrator explained:

When we started the Talent Development model, one of the prime focuses was the Ninth Grade Success Academy. We incorporated that. . . . We tried to take a little bit of the middle school concept and incorporate that with the high school concept in terms of the climate. . . . We tried to make it a family type of thing in ninth grade. We utilized at that time [separate] floors in the building for our ninth graders. [We emphasized] nurturing and caring. . . . I think it was something that helped the students, helped them feel good about going to school. Our attendance started to move up. It helped as far as the academics because there were kids who actually wanted to be in school. That model was beneficial to the school. We still utilize that. And it's still called the Ninth Grade Success Academy.

At the large citywide high school ninth grade teacher teams met during common planning time and were led by a ninth grade academy coordinator. The academy coordinator, however, acknowledged, “I’m department chair and the ninth grade academy leader. I only teach seniors now.” In this case, the ability of the academy leader to provide guidance to ninth grade teachers may have been limited because this teacher was not teaching any ninth grade students. Nonetheless, school leaders at this school did articulate the goals of the model as cultivating personalization and identifying students when they need extra help. One administrator explained:

The model is a school within a school. Students know the ninth grade academy leader. All concerns go through this academy leader. This makes it more like a small school for them. There are only 400 students [in the ninth grade academy]. This way no child is invisible.

The administrator went on to explain that ninth grade teachers have common planning time in order identify students who are having problems and take steps to avert student dropout:

If [you are a teacher and] a student fails two to three tests from you and you don't do anything about it and it keeps happening, when that pattern occurs in two to three classes a day, it creates a cycle of failure; that's where we lose our ninth graders.

The principal at another citywide high school described having a “ninth grade track” which shared many of the key elements of the ninth grade academy. According to the principal, ninth grade teachers had common planning time. The school also had a designated ninth grade counselor, provided a separate physical space in the building for ninth graders, and assigned each ninth

grader an advisor who stayed with the student all through high school. When asked if the school had a ninth grade academy, the principal responded:

No. [But] we have a ninth grade track. We expose them to different trade explorations. Ninth graders are all on one floor. They all have one counselor. Those are the academy aspects. I also have the advisor follow the students for four years. This year, my senior advisors will be shifting back to the ninth grade. . . . Yes, I have a track of teachers who stay with the ninth grade. They chose to be there. They do the CSAP¹²⁶ with the kids. [They are] a good nurturing group. They have common planning time. . . weekly.

This school aligned closely with a ninth grade academy model, but did not define it as such.

Mixed Reactions from High School Administrators

While few schools appear to be implementing a ninth grade academy model, school leaders at most large high schools in our sample described experimenting with a ninth grade academy and/or small learning communities in the recent past. In fact, the only large high school where this was not the case was the one special admission school in our sample, which is not surprising as the model was designed for large high schools with low student promotion and graduation rates.¹²⁷ School leaders at large high schools that did not currently have a ninth grade academy, however, generally had negative perceptions of the model, even if they had not been at the school when it was implemented. For example, one administrator at a neighborhood high school said, “Right now we have ninth graders in all four of our academies [SLCs]. They have had [a ninth grade academy] here before, and the majority of people didn’t like it. I don’t know what it looked like here.” A second administrator at another neighborhood high school echoed:

Administrator: No, they did away with that [ninth grade academy model]. It isolated them and made them crazy. It’s best to disperse them throughout the building.

Interviewer: It made the teachers crazy or the students crazy?

Administrator: It made everybody crazy from what I understand. I wasn’t here [then] and I don’t do it that way.

Some administrators critiqued the ninth grade academy model because they felt that it hindered a successful transition into high school. For example, one neighborhood high school administrator perceived the model as condoning student immaturity:

¹²⁶ CSAP refers to the District’s Comprehensive Student Assistance Process, a systemic mechanism of identification, intervention, referral assistance, and follow-up for students who need extra support.

¹²⁷ Kerr & Legters, 2004.

I don't totally agree with the ninth grade academy model. We had that last year, and a lot of the K-8 behaviors still manifested themselves. A lot of rambunctiousness. I think they [ninth grade students] need to be acclimated and intertwined with the rest of the community. It didn't lend itself [to that purpose].

In contrast, an administrator at the neighborhood high school that uses a ninth grade academy believed that the model provided needed support for students transitioning out of their middle school years. This administrator said, “A ninth grader is just a kid who has been out of eighth grade for two months. A lot of kids still have K-8 tendencies; it takes them a while to transition in.” Thus, there is lack of agreement among high school administrators in the District about whether the ninth grade academy model helps or hinders ninth graders’ success.

No Clear District Strategy

In sum, while ninth grade academies have been demonstrated to be a successful intervention in large neighborhood high schools in Philadelphia¹²⁸ and elsewhere in the past, the model has not been sustained in the District. Our research revealed no clear strategy from the central office about which schools should be implementing the model, although there is certainly recognition on the part of central office staff members that the model is not necessarily one that all high schools should adopt. As one central office leader put it, “I am a big proponent of the ninth grade academy but it may not work for all schools.” In this context, support for the ninth grade academy model among high school administrators is inconsistent at best, and negative perceptions are common among those who do not use it.

Reports from schools that are implementing this intervention suggest that teachers in a ninth grade academy are better able to identify struggling students—and to intervene before a “cycle of failure” develops—if they meet regularly in ninth grade teacher teams led by a ninth grade academy coordinator. In Philadelphia high schools, however, the ninth grade academy is often implemented without these key elements—in many cases teachers are not meeting regularly or do not even identify as a team. This lack of coordination may undermine the power of the intervention. Furthermore, the research conducted in Maryland public high schools which found a relationship between the ninth grade academy model and a reduced dropout rate found that this correlation existed when the ninth grade academy model had been in place for *at least three years*.¹²⁹ In Philadelphia high schools, reforms such as the ninth grade academy have not been left in place long enough to test their efficacy.

¹²⁸ Kemple, Herlihy, & Smith, 2005.

¹²⁹ Kerr & Legters, 2004.

Support for the ninth grade academy model among high school administrators is inconsistent at best, and negative perceptions are common among those who do not use it.

Small Learning Communities (SLCs)

At the same time that a number of administrators rejected the concept of a ninth grade academy, some embraced the SLC concept, and we observed at least one regional superintendent actively encouraging principals at neighborhood high schools to apply for SLC grants.¹³⁰ The intent of the SLC model is two-fold: to provide students with a more personalized experience, where they are known by teachers and fellow students, and to engage students in themed curricula that are related to their interests and/or career goals.¹³¹ Content related to the SLC theme is sometimes integrated fully into the curriculum, while in other cases, it is featured only in one elective course.

Allowing students to choose a theme of interest could, theoretically, increase students' sense of agency in their schooling. However, in Philadelphia high schools, students are often assigned to an SLC other than their first choice, or are given no choice at all in their SLC assignment. The roster chair at a Career and Technical Education (CTE) high school¹³² described the problem:

RFA Interviewer: Have you seen a problem in the past when students do not get the shop [or SLC] they choose?

Roster Chair: That is a problem. I have lists of students who keep telling me that they have the wrong shop, but . . . that was the shop that was left.

Thus, while themed SLCs are intended to build student engagement, they sometimes increase student frustration by assigning students to topic areas of little interest to them. This is particularly true in neighborhood schools, where ninth graders often enroll late in the summer or well into the school year, giving administrators little option but to assign students without first asking their preference. SLCs are relatively common in neighborhood high schools, and integral to Philadelphia's CTE high schools, so the assignment of students to an SLC or a "shop" of their preference is a challenge that is important to solve.

Particularly in large neighborhood high schools, coupling the ninth grade academy model with an SLC model for tenth through twelfth graders may help increase the likelihood that students are assigned to a themed SLC of their choosing. School administrators might find it easier to collect and process the SLC preferences of ninth graders already enrolled at the school than the preferences of incoming eighth graders arriving from multiple

Themed SLCs are intended to build student engagement, but in neighborhood high schools ninth graders often enroll late in the summer or well into the school year. This gives administrators little option but to assign students without first asking their preference.

¹³⁰ Small Learning Communities Grants are grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education to support the planning and implementation of small learning communities in large neighborhood high schools. See: <http://www.ed.gov/fund/grants.html>.

¹³¹ Cotton, 2001.

¹³² Career and Technical Education schools are explained in Chapter One.

middle schools. The three high schools that used a ninth grade academy model or ninth grade track allowed students to express their SLC preference prior to starting their tenth grade year. At large neighborhood high schools in particular, the combination of these interventions may assist school leaders and faculty in building a more personalized school climate for students and in monitoring students' academic and social progress.¹³³

While the combination of a ninth grade academy and ninth grade teacher teams may be a promising intervention for improving personalization in large neighborhood high schools, in Philadelphia this intervention has not been used in a widespread manner. SLCs may also be effective at improving personalization and graduation rates with the proper supports in place. Our findings suggest the need for greater knowledge across the District about the strengths and weaknesses of these interventions and under what conditions these interventions are most effective. In addition, school leaders of neighborhood high schools may need more guidance from the District in implementing these interventions fully and aligning them with a schoolwide strategy for improving ninth grade instruction.

Intervention 3 - Double Dosing of Math and English: Accelerating Student Learning

Given that the typical Philadelphia ninth grader enters high school with math and English skills below grade level, practitioners and researchers alike have recognized the need for reforms designed to address this issue. In a study of a sample of “high impact” high schools across the country, researchers observed that the high schools that made “greater-than-expected gains with previously underperforming students” assigned students to grade-level classes as well as remedial/support classes so they would not fall behind.¹³⁴ In Philadelphia-based research conducted with ninth graders in neighborhood high schools, Neild and Balfanz point out that a standards-based curriculum often assumes that ninth graders have stronger reading and math skills than they actually have, and does not provide time or support in the curriculum to help them catch up, thereby setting students up for further failure.¹³⁵ They suggest that reforms must consider the nature and scale of needs at neighborhood high schools, and should offer additional resources for teaching students who enter ninth grade with skills at the fifth- and sixth-grade levels.

¹³³ During the years of the Philadelphia Collaborative (1988-1995) there was disagreement over whether a pure SLC model or combination academy-SLC model was likely to produce better results. If the high school selection process ended earlier, e.g. in March, this would provide neighborhood high schools with a longer lead time to place students in SLCs, and could facilitate students being enrolled in an SLC of their choosing.

¹³⁴ Robinson, Stempel, & McCree, 2005, p. 3.

¹³⁵ Neild & Balfanz, 2006.

Ninth Grade Academies and Ninth Grade Teaching Teams

Purpose

To personalize the learning experience for students and provide ninth grade teachers with ongoing opportunities to collaborate. Especially appropriate for large schools with a high percentage of low-performing students.

Extent of Use

Not commonly used in the Philadelphia sample. Only one neighborhood school and one citywide school reported having a ninth grade academy; a third reported a ninth grade track. (Several administrators reported negative perceptions of ninth grade academies from their schools' past experiences with the model.)

Key Components

A ninth grade academy includes the following key components:

- a physically separate space in the building
- ninth grade teacher teams
- a ninth grade academy leader
- common planning time for the teacher teams and the academy leader to discuss their ninth graders' academic progress.

Issues

There was lack of agreement about whether the model helps or hinders student success (i.e., whether it provides valuable transition support or simply delays acclimation). There was also no clear central strategy about which schools should implement the model. Inconsistency existed across schools using the model in how teacher teams met and worked together. Schools might benefit from these issues being discussed strategically by administrators, central office, and regional staff.

Advantages

When they meet regularly, teacher teams can identify struggling students earlier and intervene more effectively. Maryland school research has shown a correlation between the ninth grade academy model and reduced dropout rates when in place for at least three years.

Ninth Grade Academy + Small Learning Communities (SLCs)

Some schools are beginning to experiment with combining a ninth grade academy model and SLCs in upper grades to improve both ninth grade transition and the enrollment of students into SLC areas of their choice.

Neighborhood School Challenges

Ninth grade teacher assignments are often changed during the first several months of school due to fluctuating enrollments, making it more difficult to establish effective ninth grade teaching teams. And while one important goal of establishing ninth grade academies in neighborhood high schools is to increase the level of personalization between teachers and students, this goal is difficult to achieve when teacher assignments are apt to change. Changing teacher assignments and rosters that don't build in common planning time undercut the formation of teacher teams that can focus on the progress of their shared students.

Aware of the need to improve ninth grade student outcomes, and drawing from one component of the Talent Development High School Model, the District implemented double-dosed ninth grade math and/or English classes for students who were below grade level in these subject areas. While the District has a history of experimenting with block scheduling, where *all* classes last a double period, double dosing refers to back-to-back periods of two different classes in the same subject area. Double-dosed classes may be 80 to 90 minutes, depending on a school’s particular schedule. One class is the regular ninth grade course in math or English. The other is a remedial-level math or English class. It was the intention of the District that every ninth grader assigned to a double dose of math and/or English would take *both* the grade-level course and the remedial-level course throughout the school year. The intended goal of double dosing is to accelerate learning—to increase course passage rates in English I and Algebra I and thereby help students catch up to ninth grade reading and math levels.

Although high schools that were part of the Talent Development model had previously implemented double dosing, double-dosed courses of math and English were scaled up districtwide in 2007-08. Ninth grade students assigned to double dosing were rostered to either “intensive” or “strategic” English and/or math, based on their reading or math grade level, in addition to ninth grade English and/or Algebra I. In 2007-08, this intervention was being implemented in every school in our sample.¹³⁶ A central office staff member described to us how students were assigned, using reading (a double dose of English) as an example.

There are two different groups of kids. Intensive intervention [is designed for students whose] reading levels are below fourth grade. Strategic are kids whose reading levels are fourth grade and above and would benefit from strategies—that’s the Reading Advantage [program]. Strategic is [for kids whose reading level is] above fourth grade but below eighth grade.

Double Dosing by School Type

Previous research has noted that “the majority of ninth graders at nonselective urban high schools enter with academic skills several years below grade level,” and found Philadelphia to be consistent with this pattern.¹³⁷ In Philadelphia in 2007-08, we found that the majority of ninth graders at *both neighborhood high schools and citywide admission high schools* were below

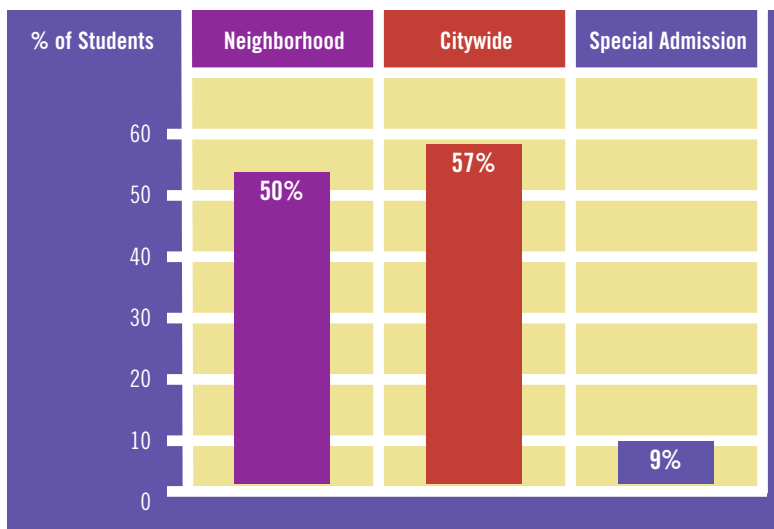
¹³⁶ Even at the one special admission high school in our sample, 10% of ninth graders were enrolled in double-dosed math. We do not have data on whether any ninth graders at the special admission high school were enrolled in double-dosed English.

¹³⁷ Neild & Balfanz, 2006, as cited in: Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008, p. 547.

grade level in math, as indicated by their assignment to an intensive or strategic math course.¹³⁸ **Figure 3.1** shows first-time ninth grader enrollment in intensive and strategic math classes for the 2007-08 school year in District high schools according to school admission type. These students were enrolled in another math class at the same time, thereby receiving a double dose of math.¹³⁹ Analysis of District data reveal that over half of all first-time ninth graders in neighborhood high schools and citywide high schools were enrolled in double-dosed math courses in 2007-08, compared with less than 10% of first-time ninth graders in special admission schools.

Our qualitative research revealed that charter high schools were likely to be using double dosing for ninth graders as well, as three of the four charter schools in our sample were providing double dosing in math and English to their ninth graders.

Figure 3.1 First-time Ninth Graders Enrolled in Intensive or Strategic Math



Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Administrative Data
N=14,274 first-time ninth graders

¹³⁸ The research by Neild and Balfanz (2006) compared data using these categories: magnet high schools, vocational high schools, and neighborhood high schools. They found that the majority of first-time ninth graders in both neighborhood high schools and vocational high schools had math and reading comprehension scores below the seventh grade level, although some individual schools were exceptions to this pattern in both categories. Neild and Balfanz include vocational schools in their definition of nonselective schools. We refer to vocational schools as citywide schools, as these schools do have citywide admissions criteria.

¹³⁹ Our analysis focuses on math course enrollment and performance for two reasons. First, math is a key indicator of students' likelihood of high school graduation and college preparation since it is a subject with a hierarchical course sequence. Algebra course-taking and passage in ninth grade is a standard high school academic measure. Second, English courses in SDP administrative data were not clearly named and we could not determine a "core" ninth grade English course to analyze.

School Leaders' Perceptions of Double Dosing

Based on the first year of implementation in District high schools system-wide, many administrators and teacher leaders had developed negative perceptions of double dosing as a means to improve student achievement and learning. Negative reviews such as these comments from two principals at District high schools were common:

I don't like it. I think students lose focus. It's too long. If you don't have really strong teachers, you lose them. Our students who had the longer periods didn't do as well on the Benchmarks...compared to other schools. When we have our School Stat meetings, others [i.e., other principals] are complaining about the block period also.

Teachers are not maximizing use of the 80 minutes. . . . The block kids score worse than kids taking a course in a regular 50-minute period.

This second principal noted that she looked at the scores for one cohort of students in the blocked math and English courses from one year to the next. She found that these students continued to score below grade level the following year and did not show gains over time.

We heard similar sentiments from a principal in a neighborhood high school, who said, "The kids don't need the basic skills, they just need more intense algebra. Students get bored. . . . If they aren't good at a subject, why do you give it to them twice? The kids see it as a punishment."¹⁴⁰ This principal argued that double dosing has exacerbated students' disengagement with school, as it has forced struggling students to take a double dose of a subject that they dread.

In contrast, administrators at the three charter schools where double dosing was used did not give such negative reviews to this intervention, and did not cite evidence of students being bored or disengaged by the additional curricular time spent on math and/or English. This may be because administrators at charter schools were typically the person(s) who made the decision to introduce double-dosed courses, as opposed to being required by the central office to offer this intervention. However, some administrators cited feeling conflicted over the tradeoffs involved with this decision, aware that more classroom time spent on math and English results in less time for other courses. One charter school administrator explained why the school uses double dosing and how it impacts students' coursework:

[When we assess our ninth graders] we find them on average to be at a fifth grade math scores level and a fifth grade reading level, though some students are below that. We are trying to bring them up to eleventh grade level by March of eleventh grade.¹⁴¹ Our students aren't

¹⁴⁰ This interview was done for another RFA high school study (Christman, Brown, Burgess, Kay, Maluk, & Mitchell, 2009); the quote does not appear in the published report.

¹⁴¹ This refers to the time the PSSA is given to eleventh graders.

ready for Algebra I [when they start ninth grade]. So that's part of our improvement plan. Their first math class will be pre-algebra, to try to close that gap. . . . So what gets sacrificed? Do arts and music get sacrificed? Yes they do. So they [also] take two math classes in their junior year. Algebra II and a full credit class in PSSA Test Prep. I think it's a good thing for juniors, but again, it's another elective option lost. . . . The realities of what we're faced with in terms of making AYP and that PSSA, that dictates what we have to do.

Thus, this administrator implemented double-dosed math in both ninth and eleventh grade.¹⁴² This administrator's comments also highlight the challenges that both charter and District school leaders face in balancing the demands of the PSSA with other factors, such as student engagement. As this administrator concluded of the PSSA and the pressures to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): "It handcuffs us a lot in practice [but]. . . I think we should be held accountable, we should be graduating kids who are literate, kids that can do math."

Challenges in Implementing Double Dosing

The frequency of negative reviews of double dosing from school leaders at District high schools—and the contrast with reviews from charter school leaders—may be due in part to limitations in how the intervention was implemented. One of the limitations associated with this new form of double dosing in its first year of implementation was that the teachers assigned to these classes were not given professional development in how to use the 80-90 minute block of time from either a content approach or a teaching strategies approach. One principal explained:

One of the shortcomings of this double dosing was the lack of a structured curriculum. Everyone was doing their own thing. . . . I'm glad to say that this [coming school] year. . . we're told there will be some very locked-in structure. For the strategic English it will be Reading Advantage. Teachers will be trained over the summertime, which was an area that was really lacking—the PD [professional development].

However, this principal also went on to note that, based on personal observation, the majority of high school teachers did not attend District-run professional development the previous summer because it was voluntary. In contrast, under the Talent Development model professional development for double dosing was integrated into the school year, as well as occurring during the voluntary summer and after-school times; because teachers had elected to have Talent Development in their schools, there was increased motivation to participate even in the voluntary sessions.

“One of the shortcomings of this double dosing was the lack of a structured curriculum. Everyone was doing their own thing. . . . I’m glad to say that this [coming school] year. . . we’re told there will be some very locked-in structure.” - Principal

¹⁴² This school was not double dosing English at the time of this study, but a half-year PSSA test prep requirement in ninth grade and a full-year PSSA test prep requirement in eleventh grade covered both math and reading comprehension skills.

A central office leader corroborated that in its first year of implementation, teachers were given little guidance on the curriculum for double-dosed classes (in both math and English). This individual also noted that the District was making efforts to correct this situation and was providing teachers with curriculum materials in the second year of implementation: “We’ve listened to the schools that said we really do need a planning and scheduling timeline that reflects the intervention. So we’ve done that this year.” Unfortunately, the experience with double dosing in the first year has already soured many school-level educators to this intervention.

There were other problems with implementation of this intervention as well. First, although it was the District’s intention that double-dosed ninth graders take both classes back-to-back all year long, school staff frequently rostered students into the remedial course in the fall semester, and the grade-level course in the spring semester. (This, in fact, was the Talent Development model of double dosing, which may explain why some school staff made this mistake.) Secondly, double-dosed classes frequently had over 30 students, and some teachers believed that this was too large a class size for students who were below grade level and needed more intensive support to catch up. Sharing this concern, one central office staff person commented:

In my mind, [the intervention] almost has to be a 90-minute block; otherwise it’s diluting the program and it won’t have the impact it’s supposed to. We also didn’t roster kids properly there, we rostered full class sizes. Really, the program can only handle 18-20 kids, so it’s a cost issue. We can buy materials, but if we don’t staff schools properly, then those materials [are not enough]—they don’t teach the kids.

Third, there was a perception among principals that too often students were mismatched with the courses they really needed, a complaint we heard at one of the regional principals’ meetings we attended. Central office leaders were aware of this critique. As one central office leader reflected:

As far as rostering is concerned for intensive and strategic, I hear a lot of different things like schools don’t pay attention when rostering to whether kids are [in need of] strategic or intensive and kind of roster to whatever fits [into the student’s schedule]. I don’t know [for certain] if that’s the case or not, but that’s what I’ve heard. In some cases I’ve heard that schools don’t get the information on time, on whether a kid is strategic or intensive. They would get that from their eighth grade performance [data].

In large part due to rostering challenges, beginning in the 2008-09 school year, central office reconfigured the double-dosing intervention, dropping “strategic” math and “strategic” English as an option, and offering only “intensive” math and “intensive” English for students below an eighth grade level in each subject. This change alleviated the concern that students per-

forming below grade level were sometimes placed in intensive or strategic based on convenience rather than based on their academic level. But it also meant less differentiation in instruction to meet students' needs.

In sum, double dosing ninth graders in math and English is widespread in most nonselective District high schools, as well as in citywide admission high schools. Our small sample of charter schools suggests that double dosing is being used frequently in charter schools as well. While it is most common in the ninth grade, it is also used in the eleventh grade at some charter schools. In most cases, however, neither school-level staff nor central or regional office staff have collected outcome data which could help them evaluate the true effectiveness of this intervention. As one central office staff person noted when asked about strategic and intensive coursework for ninth graders,

I don't think we ever had any clear baseline data, so it's hard to know what impact it has had based solely on collection of data. We haven't done a very good job of collecting data around that. . . . It should have been delineated in the grant as to who and how [data would be collected].

Unfortunately, without baseline data and without a District mandate to assess the outcomes of this intervention, schools do not have the information they need to assess whether or not double dosing is having the desired impact on student outcomes. This type of research is important because in Chicago, research recently revealed that a policy of double dosing ninth grade algebra was not having the desired impact on reducing ninth grade failure rates in algebra.¹⁴³ Lacking districtwide outcome data on this intervention, school leaders at Philadelphia's District high schools relied on their own observations of the policy's impact on student learning and motivation. Most believed that the policy was not having the desired impact on student outcomes, and consequently these school leaders did not want to see double dosing continue. In contrast, most charter school administrators spoke optimistically of the potential of double dosing, and had recently decided to implement it. Moving forward, it is important for both District and charter schools to collect data on the impact of double dosing, and publicly share their findings about the intervention's effectiveness.

¹⁴³ The study, conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, found that double dosing algebra did not reduce failure rates in ninth grade algebra. However "the grades of most ninth graders in the double-dosed classes rose with the policy—but not among the lowest-performing students in those courses" (Cavanagh, S., 2009. 'Double dose' of algebra found to lift scores, not passing rates. *Education Week*, 28[29], p. 8). Philadelphia's double dosing, however, is structured differently than Chicago's double dose of algebra, with one period of algebra and one period of remediation in Philadelphia's model, and two periods of algebra in Chicago's model. The Chicago findings, therefore, may not apply to Philadelphia. For more on the Chicago study of double-dosed algebra, see: Nomi, T., & Allensworth, E. (2009). 'Double-dose' algebra as an alternative strategy to remediation: Effects on students' academic outcomes. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 2(2), 111-148.

Double Dosing of Math and English

Purpose

To help low-performing ninth graders catch up to grade level in the key subject areas of math and English by providing back-to-back class sessions, one at a remedial level and one at grade level.

Extent of Use

Widespread; implemented districtwide in 2007-08. In practice at all District high schools and three of the four charter schools in this study's sample. (Also used in eleventh grade in some charter schools.)

Reactions

The generally negative reactions among District school leaders may have been due to challenges related to first-year implementation and to the accompanying lack of clear guidance and supports from central office. We found more positive responses from charter schools where implementation decisions were school-based rather than directed by central office.

Key Issues

- Lack of professional development (both content and teaching strategies) for teachers leading double-dosed classes.
- Lack of structured curriculum.
- Confusion and/or miscommunication around structure: central office intended the remedial course and the grade-level course to be given back-to-back each day, but many schools gave these classes consecutively for a double period (remedial course in the fall, grade-level course in the spring) or each day but not back-to-back.
- Mismatch in assigning classes. Initial breakdown of "intensive" (below fourth grade level) and "strategic" (fourth to eighth grade level) was discontinued after 2007-08 due to scheduling issues.

Recommendations

Steps taken to correct first-year implementation issues should be continued. Accurate baseline data and assessment measures are needed to determine whether this intervention is succeeding in its purpose.

Neighborhood School Challenges

Enrollment instability poses scheduling challenges. For *both neighborhood schools and citywide schools*, high percentages of ninth grade students are performing below grade level and therefore need double-dosed classes (e.g., more than 50% were enrolled in intensive/strategic algebra classes in 2007-08). In addition, neighborhood high schools often have the greatest difficulties getting data on their incoming students in a timely manner (if at all) and therefore have trouble rostering their new students into the appropriately leveled courses in math and English. While some rostering challenges have been ameliorated by combining "strategic" and "intensive" levels into one level, this may come at the cost of weakening teachers' ability to differentiate instruction.

Intervention 4 - Use of Individual Student Data

Previous research suggests that in high schools that are successful in graduating low-income, disadvantaged students, school staff commonly use data to track student progress, identify student weaknesses and strengths, provide feedback on curricula, and shape academic interventions.¹⁴⁴ Specifically for incoming ninth graders, schools can also use student performance data to place students in appropriate level courses at the beginning of the school year.¹⁴⁵ Once the school year has begun, ninth grade students' academic performance has been found to improve when there is careful monitoring of report card grades and attendance data, and interventions put in place when the monitoring indicates that students are falling behind.¹⁴⁶

Across the schools in our sample, administrators emphasized the value of using student performance data to monitor academic progress and support ninth grade students who are struggling. However, there was a range across schools as to how student performance data were used for this purpose. We found that some schools were better positioned than others to proactively support ninth graders' academic progress in this way. Neighborhood high schools faced particular challenges in this area, in large part due to the high school selection process. Size is also a factor, with smaller schools at an advantage over larger schools in the implementation of this intervention.

Use of Student Data in the Beginning of the School Year

Researchers have noted the importance of using student performance data to place ninth grade students into appropriate courses and design targeted interventions for students identified as at-risk.¹⁴⁷ This is especially critical for schools in which the ninth grade class is extremely diverse in terms of academic needs. While all of the sampled schools attempted to use student performance data to be proactive in addressing student needs, selective admission and charter schools, which could project enrollment and had information about incoming students, had a clear advantage over neighborhood schools whose enrollment lists were less certain up until, and even after, the start of the school year.

Selective admission and charter schools, which could project enrollment and had information about incoming students, had a clear advantage over neighborhood schools.

¹⁴⁴ Ascher & Maguire, 2007; Robinson, Stempel, & McCree, 2005.

¹⁴⁵ Placing students in "tracked" math and English courses is the norm in Philadelphia. Schools' ability to place ninth graders in appropriate level courses, including double-dosed courses, is largely determined by the information they have about incoming ninth graders before the first day of school.

¹⁴⁶ Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Allensworth, E. (2009). *The on-track indicator and the high school transition*. PowerPoint presented at the Annual Meeting of the Consortium for Chicago School Research, Chicago, IL; Christman, J. B., Neild, R. C., Bulkley, K. E., Liu, R., Michell, C., & Travers, E. (2009). *Making the most of interim assessment data: Lessons learned from Philadelphia's managed instruction system*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

¹⁴⁷ Ascher & Maguire, 2007.

It was also common for schools to use students' middle school performance data to place students into courses. The varying ability of high schools to use middle school data to meet student needs is in part an artifact of the selection process. Selective admission schools were at the greatest advantage and neighborhood schools at the greatest disadvantage in their ability to obtain accurate information about incoming ninth graders. Selective admission schools receive student information earlier than any other type of school because it is a requirement of the admissions process. This information includes the academic and behavioral history of each student, such as report card data, attendance data, and/or test score data.

Although charter schools do not have ready access to student data, we found that the charter recruitment and application process means that charter school staff often have a list of incoming ninth graders well before the fall.¹⁴⁸ Through formal channels, charter schools receive very limited information about incoming ninth graders prior to the beginning of the year. Unlike District schools, they do not have access to SchoolNet, an online data system managed by the District with the academic and behavioral history of each student.¹⁴⁹ Charter school administrators, instead, reported trying to contact the students' eighth grade schools directly to get student data. Often, however, this route to student information was not reliable.

In lieu of these formal information channels, charter schools relied on parents for information. For example, one charter leader reported that it is the "burden of the parent to get information." In fact, most charter schools required students and families to bring in student report cards and PSSA results once the student was enrolled. We also found that charter schools were proactive in their efforts to get to know their students prior to the beginning of the year and their small size likely enabled them to do so. One charter CEO described his school's extensive intake process for incoming freshmen. "We do individualized meetings with parents and students. We can't be inconsistent. We have to start this individualized approach at the intake process. We have to put our money where our mouth is." However, there is variation among charter schools as to how much data they are able to collect on their incoming students.

Unlike selective admission and many charter schools, neighborhood high schools often do not know which students are coming prior to September and therefore have difficulty obtaining accurate student information.

¹⁴⁸ This is relevant for charter schools that enroll mostly new students in ninth grade. At one K-12 charter school in our sample, 75% of ninth graders had also attended the school in eighth grade.

¹⁴⁹ The District's website describes SchoolNet as an Instructional Management System, and different information can be accessed on this site by teachers, parents, and students. See: <http://phila.schoolnet.com>

Theoretically, staff in neighborhood schools can anticipate which students are coming by knowing the feeder pattern for their school. In one small neighborhood high school, for example, the principal reported that staff used the feeder pattern to determine which students were coming and even arranged interviews with nearly all incoming ninth graders and their families in an effort to get to know their new students. The small size of this high school facilitated this administrator's ability to meet incoming students.¹⁵⁰ At another neighborhood high school, declining enrollment has meant that administrators have been forced to actively recruit students from numerous middle schools in Philadelphia. This principal also reported interviewing all incoming students. In contrast, administrators at large neighborhood high schools reported that planning based on the feeder pattern is often unreliable as many students end up attending schools outside of their feeder pattern. Given this reality, many administrators reported that they generally only rely on SchoolNet to pull up information once the students arrive in September.

Although SchoolNet is potentially a useful source of student information, relying solely on SchoolNet for proactive planning is problematic. At one neighborhood high school, for example, staff were not very confident in SchoolNet and reported that the information gleaned from SchoolNet was very spotty because of "uneven access and uneven input."

Another obstacle reported by school staff was the lack of time and capacity to use SchoolNet. A common challenge reported across schools was that teachers were not always trained in how to use SchoolNet and often did not set aside time to use it. Teachers generally depended on the school growth coach and/or department heads to do this work.¹⁵¹ However, the large numbers of students enrolling in ninth grade combined with multiple demands on school leaders made it very difficult for them to do this work by themselves prior to the start of the school year. One School Growth Coach conveyed these difficulties, stating, "The truth is they just arrive. We are too immersed in the spring with our current students and don't look at data until [new ninth graders] arrive." In contrast, the principal at a small neighborhood high school expressed more confidence in staff's ability to access and use SchoolNet for proactive planning, such as course placement, presumably because of the smaller size of the incoming freshman class.

¹⁵⁰ It is important to note that at this small neighborhood high school, the ninth graders came from only two feeder schools whereas in the large neighborhood high schools, ninth graders came from four or five feeder schools. Therefore, it is presumably easier for this small school to establish a connection with the feeder schools.

¹⁵¹ School growth coaches were discontinued in the 2008-09 school year, which likely left this task to department heads.

Another potential source of student information that neighborhood high schools have access to is the “pupil pocket,” which has individual student attendance, grade retention, achievement, and other data and follows students from school to school. However, neighborhood high school administrators noted that pupil pockets arrive over a period of months and are usually too late to be of much use in planning for new ninth graders.

Even if they were proactive in gathering data on incoming students, staff at neighborhood high schools were typically faced with high student turnover at the beginning of the school year, which hindered the ability of these schools to plan for course enrollment and rostering. A striking difference between selective admission and charter schools in comparison to neighborhood schools is the predictability of the roster in the first few months of the school year.¹⁵² In neighborhood high schools a number of school staff spoke about “leveling” as a significant problem. Because of the degree of student mobility, particularly during the first month of school, student rosters and course assignments are often changed to accommodate all students while maintaining a relatively uniform class size (leveling) across all classes. A neighborhood high school instructional leader reflected on the dramatic impact of leveling, commenting: “We restart the year in October. I mean that literally. There are cases on October 15th where a teacher may have almost what looks like a different class. It’s a very chaotic beginning.”

Late-hour changes to the student population in a school also can mean that staffing is affected. A neighborhood school that is under-enrolled may find, come September, that some faculty positions are cut as a result. A roster chair concerned about this issue noted, “That’s unsettling to me. I might create a roster, and then completely need to redo it. So I’ll make it, then figure out as closely as possible what we can do. But when you disrupt the students, that does affect them.” In contrast, staff at the selective admission and charter high schools did not mention leveling or last-minute staffing cuts as an issue.

The early student information that selective (special and citywide admission) high schools receive—primarily, students’ names and their prior achievement records—helps them to place ninth graders and provide appropriate academic supports. Although charter schools have difficulty obtaining formal information about students, knowing who will be attending before the school year begins, combined with their small size, allows the schools to dedicate staff resources toward getting to know students’ academic needs prior to September. The fact that most neighborhood schools enroll large numbers of students and enroll students by “default” without first receiving applications

“We restart the year in October. I mean that literally. There are cases on October 15th where a teacher may have almost what looks like a different class. It’s a very chaotic beginning.”

- Instructional leader, neighborhood high school

¹⁵² At neighborhood high schools, 17% of ninth graders enrolled *after* the school year had begun, compared with only 1% of special admission ninth graders (see Table 3.1 on p 52.).

means that these schools are less certain who will be in their ninth grade class prior to the first day of school, and creates challenges in their ability to access student information and make connections with students that would allow them to be proactive in providing supports to ninth graders. It also may mean that some students miss receiving notification of student orientation because school staff do not know all students who are coming, or may result in some students not attending orientation because they are still hoping to attend a different high school. The unpredictability and instability in the ninth grade population even after the school year has begun creates additional obstacles for neighborhood schools to overcome.

Monitoring Student Academic Progress

In their report, *Beating the Odds*, Ascher and Maguire note that in high schools that “beat the odds,” school and district-generated data are used continuously throughout the year in order to monitor students’ academic performance and design targeted interventions for those students who are falling behind.¹⁵³ Indeed, student data are most useful when they are part of a cycle that includes implementing specific interventions based on an analysis of the data.¹⁵⁴ This section will discuss the ways in which sample schools monitored students’ academic progress through grades and attendance data throughout the year. While administrators across school types mentioned using data in this way, some schools—more typically selective admission and charter schools—reported a more structured and intentional process for monitoring ninth grade students’ performance. This intervention appeared to be implemented in a much more fragmentary manner in neighborhood high schools, which weakened its potential in these schools. Furthermore, the follow-up and the design of specific interventions for students identified as falling behind were much less developed in neighborhood high schools.

Course grade monitoring. There was a range across schools in the extent to which ninth grade report cards and interim assessments were reviewed throughout the year, usually by a team of teachers and/or counselors, and used to determine appropriate supports for struggling students. At some schools, this did not happen at all. Other schools reported flagging students who were falling behind for particular interventions. For example, at one neighborhood high school, the leadership team met weekly to identify students who needed additional support. However, it was unclear what the follow-up was for these students. Other schools, including two charter

¹⁵³ Ascher & Maguire, 2007.

¹⁵⁴ Christman, Neild, Bulkley, Liu, Mitchell, & Travers, 2009; Halverson, R. R., Prichett, R. B., & Watson, J. G. (2007). *Formative feedback systems and the new instructional leadership* (WCER Working Paper No. 2007-3). [Electronic version]. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research. Retrieved on July 16, 2007 from <http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/publications/workingPapers/index.php>

Use of Individual Student Data in Beginning of School Year

Purpose

To place students in appropriate level courses when school starts.

Extent of Use

Wide range across schools in availability and use of student data.

Sources of Data for Initial Student Placement

- Middle school performance data (academic and behavioral) – For selective schools, often required as part of admission process.
- SchoolNet – District high schools can access data on Philadelphia’s SchoolNet system, but most neighborhood schools wait until September, when their student population is more established. Some staff lack confidence in the reliability of information, citing “uneven access and uneven input.” Others report lack of time and capacity to use the system. Charter schools do not have access to SchoolNet.
- “Pupil Pocket” (attendance, grade retention, achievement, other data) – Follows students from school to school, but often arrives at neighborhood schools too late for planning purposes.
- Students and/or parents – Most charter schools require families to supply student report cards and PSSA results once enrolled. Individual meetings with students and parents often are part of the intake process for charter school students. Interviews were also used by one small neighborhood school.

Neighborhood School Challenges

A significant outcome of the school selection process (which results in high mobility and last-minute student enrollment changes at neighborhood high schools) was that neighborhood high schools started the year without the benefit of information that could help them make better placement and programming decisions.

schools and one citywide admission school, used interim assessments between report card periods. These interim assessments provided students with mid-marking period reports or even weekly reports on their progress in each subject. The results of these assessments were used to determine tutoring placements for students. This practice has been designed to provide struggling students with a chance to catch up before failing the quarter.¹⁵⁵

Attendance monitoring. The literature on predictors of graduation among ninth graders point out that poor school attendance is highly predictive of course failure during the ninth grade year.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, to improve ninth grade academic performance, schools need to design targeted interventions that improve student academic behaviors, including attendance.¹⁵⁷ In our sample, intense monitoring of ninth grade attendance was notably absent at most schools. While many schools reported having data on general attendance trends by grade, monitoring of individual students and follow-up for those students did not happen on a regular basis. A few schools reported making phone calls to students with chronic lateness and absences. At one neighborhood high school, for example, staff talked of making phone calls to students who were chronically truant, but the staff were unaware of specific interventions put in place to improve attendance.

A few charter schools had a more personalized approach to monitoring attendance and improving attendance for those students with chronic attendance problems. For example, at one charter school, staff reviewed attendance data for individual students and made home visits for those with poor attendance. At another charter school, chronically late and absent students received a 6 a.m. wake-up call in addition to home visits made by the school social worker.

The lack of attendance monitoring and follow-up in our sample schools is alarming given the importance of this intervention for improving ninth grade course passage.¹⁵⁸ This is perhaps of greatest concern at the neighborhood high schools, where according to District data, over half of first-time ninth graders miss 20 or more days of school.

Providing Academic Supports to Students

In order for high schools to be successful with all ninth grade students, it is critical for there to be a network of academic supports available to ninth

¹⁵⁵ Allensworth & Easton, 2007.

¹⁵⁶ Allensworth & Easton, 2007.

¹⁵⁷ Allensworth, 2009.

¹⁵⁸ Allensworth, 2009.

grade students.¹⁵⁹ This includes academic counseling with all students and more intensive supports such as tutoring for those students who are most academically at risk. As mentioned above, continuous review of individual student performance data provides the basis for supporting students. While all schools in our sample provided academic support to students in some form and to some degree, our interviews suggest there was a range across schools as to the depth and robustness of the supports. In particular, the level of academic supports provided at neighborhood high schools was typically weaker in comparison to those provided at the selective admission and charter schools. We discuss academic counseling and tutoring supports in more detail in the next two sections.

Academic Counseling. Research suggests that the guidance provided by high school counselors is one of the most essential components of student support services.¹⁶⁰ Academic counseling for ninth graders is particularly important for helping students progress in their courses and stay on a college-going track.¹⁶¹ For students with limited out-of-school resources, academic counseling is especially critical as it transmits high-stakes information regarding the steps that students need to take to successfully complete high school and earn post-secondary degrees.¹⁶²

The ability of counselors to be proactive with ninth graders greatly depends on the ratio of counselors to students and whether the counselors have sufficient time to focus on ninth grade. In schools where counselors have manageable case loads and are core members of the academic team, they are better able to focus on ninth graders' academic as well as socio-emotional needs and can be particularly instrumental in providing academic guidance and support.¹⁶³

We found striking differences across school types in the ways guidance counselors worked with ninth graders. At the small schools in our study, including a selective admission high school, several charter schools, and a neighborhood high school, the counselors typically reported a manageable caseload—approximately one counselor for 120 students. At two of these schools, a charter school and a selective admission school, there was even a counselor specifically for ninth grade. In stark contrast, at the large neighborhood high schools as well as at one large citywide admission school,

For students with limited out-of-school resources, academic counseling is especially critical as it transmits high-stakes information regarding the steps that students need to take to successfully complete high school and earn post-secondary degrees.

¹⁵⁹ Asher & Maguire, 2007.

¹⁶⁰ Cooper & Liou, 2007.

¹⁶¹ Cooper & Liou, 2007; Robinson, Stempel, & McCree, 2005; Corwin, Z. B., Venegas, K. M., Oliverez, P. M., & Colyar, J. E. (2004). School counsel: How appropriate guidance affects educational equity. *Urban Education*, 39(4), 442-457.

¹⁶² Cooper & Liou, 2007.

¹⁶³ Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, Colyar, 2004; Robinson, Stempel, & McCree, 2005.

student-to-counselor ratios tended to be overwhelmingly high. A counselor at a large citywide admission high school noted, “I have close to 600 students that I am responsible for.” Across all neighborhood high schools in Philadelphia, the average ratio is 500 students to one guidance counselor.¹⁶⁴

Smaller caseloads allow counselors to play more of an academic counseling role with ninth graders. At a few schools, including two charter schools and a citywide admission school, the counselors scheduled meetings with students who were failing after every report card period. The counselors then met with these students individually to discuss their academic progress and plan specific interventions in the areas where they needed help.

In contrast, counselors in schools with poor student-to-counselor ratios worked primarily with ninth graders who had severe behavioral and socio-emotional issues, while academic counseling happened mostly with upperclassmen. One counselor at a neighborhood high school reflected, “This is the first year I’ve noticed—there’s less [guidance] counseling and more social work involved. . . . We deal with social problems more than educational problems.” At another neighborhood high school, a few staff noted that guidance counselors only met individually with those ninth graders who had not accumulated enough credits at the end of the year to be promoted to tenth grade, and otherwise focused on upperclassmen. This echoes Corwin’s findings that “institutionally, when counselors are overloaded, academic planning and college guidance activities with older students often take precedence over ninth and tenth graders.”¹⁶⁵ If the importance of ninth grade as a foundational year is to be truly recognized, then this pattern is very concerning. Meeting with ninth graders only after they have failed several courses is too late for many students to recover, and thus does little to mitigate their risk of dropping out.

The conditions for counselors at large high schools are indeed challenging, and their expertise is much needed. As **Table 3.2** showed, a 2007-08 District student survey found that the overwhelming majority of ninth graders across all types of high schools want to complete at least a four-year college or university degree (see p. 56). Nonetheless, at large neighborhood high schools, students’ access to ongoing academic counseling and information on college is quite limited. This is especially problematic given that neighborhood high school students enter high school the most academically behind. Finally, while large caseloads mean that counselors feel pressured to focus primarily on the needs of upperclassmen, ninth graders stand to benefit greatly from early guidance on what steps they need to take to be successful in high school and in college.

Meeting with ninth graders only after they have failed several courses is too late for many students to recover, and thus does little to mitigate their risk of dropping out.

¹⁶⁴ Fiedler, E. (2009, June 29). Philadelphia Futures helps teens prepare. WHYY News and Information. [Radio broadcast]. Philadelphia: WHYY. Available at <http://whyy.org/cms/news/education/2009/06/29/philadelphia-futures-helps-teens-prepare/11323>.

¹⁶⁵ Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, Colyar, 2004, p. 13.

The District's recent strategic plan recognizes the need for more counselors. It proposes assigning one grade-level counselor for every 200 high school students, who would remain with the same counselor for all four years.¹⁶⁶ The 2009-10 school year began with additional counselors in neighborhood high schools.¹⁶⁷ As the District works to train and place more counselors in high schools, it will be particularly important to ensure that the academic needs of ninth graders are addressed along with the needs of upperclassmen, including providing guidance on what courses are required for graduation and college preparation, and close monitoring of interventions to address student needs.

Tutoring. In addition to the academic support provided by guidance counselors, research suggests the importance of providing intensive instructional support, most commonly tutoring, to those students who are falling behind. While the majority of schools in our sample did provide some form of tutoring to students, the depth and robustness of the tutoring in neighborhood high schools was notably less than at the selective admission and charter schools.

The 2007-08 District teacher survey corroborated this. While a majority of teachers in all school types reported that tutoring services exist in their schools, the percentage was highest at special admission high schools where nearly all (97%) of the teacher respondents agreed or strongly agreed that tutoring services exist (**Figure 3.2**). More significant differences between school types appeared when teachers were asked whether "all students have access to instructional supports." A notably lower percentage of teachers in neighborhood high schools (59%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement than did teachers in citywide and special admission schools (75% and 90% respectively).

For tutoring programs to be successful at improving students' academic performance, research suggests that tutoring ought to be: 1) mandatory for students who need it, as determined by student performance data,¹⁶⁸ and 2) run by classroom teachers or trained tutors.¹⁶⁹ Only two high schools in our study

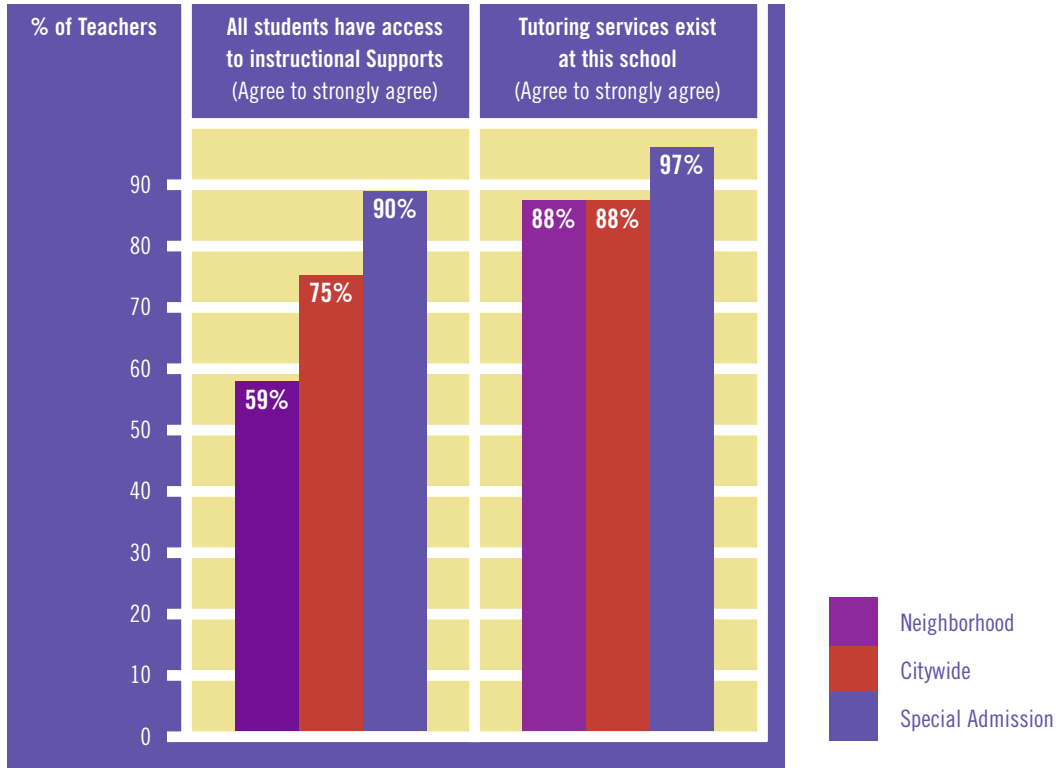
¹⁶⁶ The School District of Philadelphia. (2009b). *Imagine 2014*. Philadelphia: Author. Available at: <http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/offices/s/strategic-planning>.

¹⁶⁷ Graham, K. A. (2009, September 6). Changes are ready for Phila. students: More counselors, teachers, and activities will greet them Tuesday, all part of a five-year blueprint. [Electronic version]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Retrieved October 8, 2009, from <http://www.philly.com/inquirer/education/57578517.html?empid=15585797>. In reality the District lowered the student-to-counselor ratio in high schools to 300:1.

¹⁶⁸ Robinson, Stempel, & McCree, 2005.

¹⁶⁹ Wasik, B. A. (2008). Using volunteers as reading tutors: Guidelines for successful practices. *Reading Teacher*, 51, 562-570.

Figure 3.2 Teacher Perceptions of Academic Supports for Students



Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Teacher Survey
 N=1,886 high school teachers for first item
 N=1,753 high school teachers for second item

sample provided mandatory tutoring. Both were charter schools and had a “ninth period tutoring” or “extended day” model, in which students with low academic performance were required to stay for a longer school day in order to receive additional tutoring help. The principal at one of the schools noted that “students ha[d] the privilege of going home at 3:15 [p.m.] if they [were] doing well,” while students who were not excelling in their classes were required to stay until 4:15 p.m. School administrators intentionally did not refer to this final hour of the day as “after school”; instead, they emphasized to students that it was part of the school day and should be treated as such. Students who were required to stay for tutoring received extra help from their classroom teacher rather than from another adult or another teacher; this was intended to build teachers’ accountability for their own students.

In contrast, the other two charter schools in our sample, along with all of the District high schools, offered optional tutoring services to students who were struggling. Unlike at the charter schools, where staff have more flexibility around how to organize the school day, the way the school day is organized

Use of Individual Student Data to Monitor Progress and Provide Supports

Purpose

To monitor academic progress and attendance and to provide targeted interventions and supports as needed.

Extent of Use

In general, more structured and intentional monitoring in selective admission and charter schools; more fragmentary monitoring and less developed follow-up in neighborhood schools.

Monitoring Progress During the School Year

- Course grades – Wide range across schools in use of report cards and/or interim assessments for monitoring progress, identifying needs, and providing follow-up interventions. Some schools not monitoring at all.
- Attendance – Despite importance of attendance as a predictor of ninth grade success/failure, there was little evidence in sample schools of intense monitoring and follow-up for individual students, with the exception of some charter schools, which provide wake up calls and/or home visits.

Providing Academic Supports

- Academic counseling – The ratio of guidance counselors to students is crucial in providing effective academic supports. Smaller schools reported manageable caseloads of about 120 students per counselor vs. an average of 500 students per counselor in neighborhood high schools. Counselors in large schools reported working more on social and behavioral problems than academic counseling. Ninth grader access to counselors was also limited by pressures for counselors to focus on upper-classmen.
- Tutoring – Majority of schools provided some tutoring, but quality and access for students ranged widely. Research suggests tutoring is most effective when mandatory and run by classroom teachers or trained tutors. In all but two schools (both charter schools), tutoring was optional. Most schools did not monitor the effectiveness of tutoring.

Neighborhood School Challenges

While serving students with the greatest need of academic supports, neighborhood schools and large citywide schools are at the greatest disadvantage in accessing and using data effectively, as well as in academic counseling and tutoring staffing.

at District schools makes it very difficult for these schools to mandate tutoring. At several District high schools, administrators required that teachers stay after school at least once a week (twice a week at some schools) to be available for students who might come in voluntarily. At another school, an administrator reported that it was the responsibility of the student or the parent to request tutoring if the student was not performing well. At this school, teachers did not stay after school unless a request was made. Finally, at least one neighborhood high school in our sample did provide Saturday tutoring; this tutoring was optional for students and the tutoring services were provided by an outside partner rather than by classroom teachers. In addition, in a few neighborhood schools, struggling students had the option to participate in state-provided tutoring services. However, staff at these schools noted that very few students were taking advantage of this service.

In almost every case, school leaders did not report collecting evidence about the effectiveness of tutoring. However, at the schools with the most extensive tutoring supports, school leaders tracked students' progress on benchmark tests and/or on "practice" versions of the PSSA, which high school students in Philadelphia currently take in eleventh grade.

Intervention 5 - Strategically Assigning Strong Teachers to Ninth Grade

A growing body of research shows the positive difference good teaching can make in the achievement gains of students during the course of a single school year.¹⁷⁰ Although all students at every grade level need access to high-quality instruction, the academic and social challenges students face in the transition to high school makes teaching effectiveness a particularly salient ninth grade issue.

There is troubling evidence of a teaching effectiveness gap between ninth grade teachers and those who teach the upper grades, especially in high-poverty schools.¹⁷¹ In order to reverse this trend, schools must be able to intentionally assign strong teachers to teach ninth grade for the purposes of improving instruction and ninth grade student academic outcomes.¹⁷² Our findings suggest that in Philadelphia, high schools across all types – but particularly District schools – have struggled to ensure that strong teachers are placed in ninth grade. However, neighborhood schools appeared to have the most difficulty in assigning and retaining effective teachers in the ninth grade.

Although all students at every grade level need access to high quality instruction, the academic and social challenges students face in the transition to high school makes teaching effectiveness a particularly salient ninth grade issue.

¹⁷⁰ Borman, G. D., & Dowling, N. M. (2008). Teacher attrition and retention: A meta-analytic and narrative review of the research. *Review of Educational Research, 78*(3), 367-409.

¹⁷¹ Stein, L. (2009). Wanted: Better ninth-grade teachers. *Harvard Education Letter, 25*(1), 4-6.

¹⁷² Stein, 2009.

Research suggests that the ninth grade tends to have the highest concentration of less-qualified and less-experienced teachers when compared to any other grade level in high school.¹⁷³ Furthermore, Neild and Farley-Ripple found that ninth graders who are taught by uncertified and less experienced teachers are more likely to disengage from school.¹⁷⁴ Traditionally, the way teacher status systems in high schools operate means that more experienced teachers often have the option to teach upperclassmen, who also are generally regarded as easier to teach. As Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg put it,

Because teacher status systems within schools work to relegate the least desirable teaching assignments to the newest faculty, ninth grade teachers are more likely to be uncertified, new to teaching, and/or new to the school than those teaching upper-grades students.¹⁷⁵

Philadelphia is no exception. Recent research found that in District high schools, “Ninth graders are disproportionately assigned to uncertified teachers and teachers who are new to the school building.”¹⁷⁶ A central office staff member affirmed this problem, saying, “There is the culture in our schools that ninth grade is the worst grade to teach.”

This pattern of teacher assignments is very similar to the pattern we found in our sampled schools. The schools in our sample, particularly District schools, faced challenges in their efforts to ensure that strong teachers are in ninth grade. While many administrators emphasized the value of placing their strongest teachers in ninth grade, teacher placement was largely determined by seniority and teacher preference. Where school leaders could point to some strong ninth grade teachers, this seemed to be more by chance than the result of an intentional plan. For example, a few leaders noted that some teachers asked to teach ninth grade and those that did have done a good job. However, this does not reflect an intentional plan for teacher placement and does not guarantee that teachers will be successful with ninth graders. While staffing the ninth grade with strong teachers was a challenge across schools, neighborhood high schools faced the greatest difficulty with this. Neighborhood high schools are traditionally the hardest to staff, in part due to their large concentration of students with academic and behavioral difficulties. Data from the 2007-08 District teacher survey reveal that neighborhood high schools had lower percentages of teachers with at least four years

The way teacher status systems in high schools operate means that more experienced teachers often have the option to teach upperclassmen, who also are generally regarded as easier to teach.

¹⁷³ Stein, 2009.

¹⁷⁴ Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008.

¹⁷⁵ Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008, p. 547. See also: Kurz, D. (1987). Skimming and dumping at Penrose High: Career mobility and the perpetuation of inequality. In H. Robboy (Ed.), *Social Interaction* (pp. 409-419). New York: St. Martin's.

¹⁷⁶ Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008, p. 271. See also: Neild & Farley, 2004.

teaching experience than all other types of schools, particularly special admission schools (see **Table 3.3**). This finding corroborates other studies which indicate that the least experienced teachers tend to be concentrated in schools with the most disadvantaged students.¹⁷⁷

Table 3.3 Percentage of Tenured District High School Teachers by Admissions Type

	Neighborhood	Citywide Admission	Special Admission
Teachers with tenure (4+ years teaching experience)	73%	76%	83%

Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Teacher Survey
N=1,778 high school teachers

“We have a lot of turnover because [the teachers] are not prepared and leave. So the ninth graders have a lot of subs.”

- Instructional leader, neighborhood high school

One consequence of having newer teachers in ninth grade is the greater likelihood that they will leave. Teacher turnover from year to year is a prevalent problem in urban schools, and schools where teachers do not have the support they need to become acclimated to the culture of the school tend to have higher rates of teacher turnover.¹⁷⁸ As one instructional leader at a neighborhood high school pointed out, “We have a lot of turnover because [the teachers] are not prepared and leave. So the ninth graders have a lot of subs.”

Schools with high rates of teacher turnover also have greater difficulty creating and sustaining school improvement plans and sustaining a coherent education program.¹⁷⁹ In addition, high levels of teacher turnover hinder teachers from developing a strong sense of collective responsibility. This is noteworthy because a recent RFA study of elementary and middle grades in Philadelphia found that teachers’ sense of collective responsibility is positively correlated with student learning growth.¹⁸⁰ Additional research is needed to learn if the same pattern holds true in high schools. If so, it is concerning that in the 2007-08 District teacher survey, neighborhood high school teachers reported the lowest rate of teacher collective responsibility compared to citywide and special admission school teachers.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Useem, E., Offenber, R., & Farley, E. (2007). *Closing the teacher quality gap in Philadelphia: New hope and old hurdles*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

¹⁷⁸ Johnson, S. M. & Birkeland, S. E. (2003). Pursuing a ‘sense of success’: New teachers explain their career decisions. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(3), 581-617.

¹⁷⁹ Useem, Offenber, & Farley, 2007.

¹⁸⁰ Christman, Neild, Bulkley, Liu, Mitchell, & Travers, 2009.

¹⁸¹ This indicator measures teachers’ collective responsibility for the whole school. Specifically, the percentages are 14.6% at neighborhood high schools compared to 28.1% and 26.9% at citywide and special admission high schools respectively. For this analysis, N=2,006.

In addition to staffing problems, leaders in neighborhood high schools described a tension between placing their stronger teachers in ninth grade or in the eleventh grade, the year in which students take high-stakes standardized state tests. Generally, the trend was to strategically place the stronger teachers in eleventh grade, particularly in schools that were preoccupied with making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). A comment made by a central office staff member regarding her efforts to provide professional development to ninth grade teachers, half of whom were later reassigned to teach eleventh grade, reflected this tension: “When push came to shove, if schools needed teachers in what they saw as key academic positions [i.e., eleventh grade] where kids are tested, then teachers who signed up for ninth were [often] moved to eleventh.” We found evidence that principals were receiving conflicting messages from District staff about where to place their strongest teachers. For example, the principal of one neighborhood high school reported, “The District told me to put all of my good teachers in eleventh grade and [I did] and that was a mistake.”¹⁸²

“When push came to shove, if schools needed teachers in what they saw as key academic positions [i.e., eleventh grade] where kids are tested, then teachers who signed up for ninth were [often] moved to eleventh.”

- Central Office staff

Furthermore, because of the flux in student population in neighborhood high schools, it is common for teachers to be reassigned in the beginning of the year. When too many students zoned to attend a particular neighborhood school end up going to other schools outside of their neighborhood, then the number of staff assigned to the school is reduced. Usually school staff do not learn that students will not be attending the neighborhood school until the school year has already begun and course rostering has taken place. A roster chair explained that one year he had to completely redo the roster after finding out that they would lose some teachers due to lower than projected enrollments, illustrating that inaccurate enrollment projections have serious implications for staffing at neighborhood schools.

Stein points out that “challenging the status quo to strengthen the ranks of ninth grade teachers” is not easy.¹⁸³ Principals often have to balance this with the preferences of teachers. The math lead teacher at one neighborhood high school commented on the balance that principals and roster chairs are trying to achieve when they make decisions about teacher assignments:

Every year I say our strongest math teachers should be with ninth graders. I think the principal and roster chair have to balance this. Some of the better teachers don't want ninth graders, and they have other functions in the school. This is something I constantly talk to the principal about. Regardless of what this teacher wants, we need to give the students the best teacher available. And I'm an example of that. I said I would be willing to take ninth grade but [I was not assigned there].

¹⁸² This interview was done for another RFA high school study (Christman, Brown, Burgess, Kay, Maluk, & Mitchell, 2009); the quote does not appear in the published report.

¹⁸³ Stein, 2009, p. 5.

One strategy for helping to ensure that strong teachers are consistently placed in ninth grade is to offer incentives for teachers to teach ninth grade.¹⁸⁴ Neild and Farley-Ripple note,

Principals and other school leaders can help to create a sense of mission within the school around the transition to high school and can foster an understanding that the success of the school rests, in many ways, on the success of the ninth grade.¹⁸⁵

While one strategy is to create ninth grade teacher teams, an alternate promising strategy is to “demonstrate through teaching assignments that the ninth grade is everyone’s issue.” This may include the strategy of “upend[ing] the traditional teacher status system by making assignment to ninth grade a mark of recognition for success in the classroom.”¹⁸⁶

Several principals and other school staff reported their intention to do teacher assignments differently the following school year, in order to ensure that ninth grade teachers are strong. For example, at one school, a principal talked about plans to institute looping, a system in which teachers teach the same students throughout their four years in high school. The principal thought that this might make teaching ninth grade more attractive because teachers would get to know students and would have the opportunity to teach upperclassmen as the ninth grade students were promoted. A few other school leaders mentioned the possibility of allowing teachers to teach more desirable courses such as junior and senior Advanced Placement courses, in addition to ninth grade courses, as a way to make teaching ninth grade more attractive.

We found that some charter schools appeared to counter this trend of weak ninth grade teacher placements by adapting particular practices to help ensure that the ninth grade was staffed with strong teachers including:

- keeping a strong balance of young and veteran teachers in ninth grade,
- identifying struggling teachers early and providing extra support, and
- developing accountability systems to encourage teacher performance.

While the presence of these practices alone does not necessarily guarantee that ninth graders are receiving high-quality instruction, the use of these practices to help close the teaching effectiveness gap in high schools may be an important area for further inquiry.

¹⁸⁴ Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008.

¹⁸⁵ Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008, p. 301.

¹⁸⁶ Neild & Farley-Ripple, 2008, p. 301.

Strategic Assignments of Ninth Grade Teachers

Purpose

To improve the quality of instruction in the crucial ninth grade transition year.

Extent of Use

The value of assigning strong teachers to the ninth grade was recognized by administrators across schools, but there were many impediments to implementation in District high schools, especially large neighborhood schools. Charter schools appeared more able to control the quality of ninth grade teacher assignments.

Issues

The least experienced teachers were often concentrated in ninth grade, leading to less effective teaching, higher turnover rates, and greater difficulty creating and sustaining a coherent education program. Contributing factors included:

- Widespread perception that ninth graders are difficult to teach.
- Teacher placement often determined by seniority and teacher preference.
- Competition with eleventh grade (when students take high stakes standardized state tests) for placement of strongest teachers.

Recommended Strategies

- Offer incentives for teaching in ninth grade, such as the option to also teach other desirable classes (e.g., junior and senior Advanced Placement classes).
- Use a “looping” system of teacher assignments, so that teachers stay with students throughout high school.
- Identify struggling teachers early and provide support.
- Develop accountability systems to encourage teacher performance.

Neighborhood School Challenges

Ninth graders are often taught by the most inexperienced teachers because teacher status systems allow more experienced teachers to opt out of teaching ninth graders, frequently considered the most challenging group to teach in high school. This issue is exacerbated at neighborhood high schools, which have greater concentrations of inexperienced teachers when compared to other types of high schools. Neighborhood schools also have to contend with ninth grade teacher reassignments in the beginning of the school year as enrollment numbers settle out.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we discussed the use of multiple interventions to support ninth grade students in their transition to high school and examined implementation issues at selective and nonselective high schools. Overall, we found that, while all the high schools we studied were using at least one intervention to help ease the freshman year transition, the success of interventions was often compromised by their fragmented and “surface” implementation. In order to reduce freshman year course failures, we argue that schools must see these interventions as parts of a coherent strategy that 1) emphasizes the importance of the ninth grade year, 2) provides professional development to ensure fidelity of implementation, and 3) evaluates the interventions to analyze their effectiveness.

While there was considerable variation among schools of all types, our research suggests that Philadelphia’s tiered high school system has generally placed large neighborhood high schools at a significant disadvantage in supporting ninth graders. The large size of some citywide high schools creates challenges for these schools as well, but we found that the selection process has unique consequences for neighborhood high schools.

First, the selection process means that school staff at large neighborhood high schools often do not know who will be coming to their schools until the fall because their enrollment is open and numbers of students continue to fluctuate as the selective and charter school enrollments settle. Not knowing who will be coming compromises efforts at ninth grade orientation, delays the building of relationships with parents and students, and obstructs the early retrieval of data about student performance, which would allow for academic planning and appropriate student placement. In contrast, selective and charter schools are often better able to prepare for their incoming freshmen because they often enroll smaller classes of ninth graders, all of whom had to apply and accept offers of admission in order to be enrolled, and because these schools often require applicants and their families to provide performance data.

Second, the student body at neighborhood high schools continues to change as new students arrive well into the school year. This happens because students’ selected schools do not work out, they are new to the catchment area, or they are returning from a disciplinary school or the juvenile justice system. High student mobility compromises academic placement and often requires re-rostering in October, sacrificing a full month or more of instruction. Teachers’ time is regularly diverted from instruction to settling in new students.

Third, the capacity to monitor academic and attendance data, and to provide robust tutoring services to struggling ninth graders is weakest at neighborhood and large citywide admission high schools. The high student-to-counselor ratio hobbled the ability of the schools to closely monitor student data and to respond with appropriate interventions when freshmen were excessively absent or falling behind. In addition, the attention of counselors was often diverted to supporting upperclassmen. While tutoring services were available in most schools, often attendance was voluntary and the services were provided by an external partner, despite evidence that tutoring is most effective when mandatory and done by a teacher or trained tutor. The District teacher survey indicated that teachers themselves perceived instructional supports and tutoring services as significantly less accessible at neighborhood and citywide admission high schools than at special admission high schools.

Finally, because nonselective neighborhood high schools are at the bottom of the tiered admissions system, they are low status schools, and therefore too often schools that both students and teachers seek to avoid. Further complicating their low status, they often have reputations as being unsafe. This means that the District is challenged to attract and retain teachers in these schools. Because school culture often favors veteran teachers being able to choose their classes, the ninth grade is often staffed by new and inexperienced teachers, as veterans select the easier upper grades. This tendency is further exacerbated by pressures principals feel to improve test performance, often leading them to place their strongest teachers in the critical eleventh grade testing year. The combination of being low-status, a school culture that allows teachers to opt out of ninth grade, and pressures on principals to make AYP means that the ninth grade in large neighborhood schools can be a revolving door of substitutes and new teachers. This makes it especially hard for any reform effort aimed at improving freshman year outcomes to gain traction.

As this chapter indicates, to improve neighborhood high schools, the District must go beyond making changes at the school level and consider systemic changes. Reforming neighborhood high schools must incorporate an examination of how these schools are situated within the context of Philadelphia's tiered system of selective, nonselective, and charter schools. Ultimately, the way in which the school selection process positions neighborhood high schools has to be considered in any efforts to implement reforms for supporting the ninth grade transition in these schools.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

In recent years there has been increasing public acknowledgement of the problem of student dropout both locally and nationally. Philadelphia has been among those cities that have responded: District, city, and other education leaders have initiated reforms to change the course for young people at risk of not completing high school. It is good news for Philadelphia that over the past several years there has been some positive growth in the overall graduation rate. Building on this improvement will be an important task in the coming years, especially if the city is to meet Mayor Nutter's goal of cutting the student dropout rate in half by 2014.¹⁸⁷

Among those who have studied high schools and the problems of student dropout and low achievement, it is widely recognized that the transition to high school is a critical one for many students, especially those students who lack robust support systems outside of school. Many students enter high school underprepared, but even those who appear ready for high-school-level work often falter. The crucial need to better understand the experience of the transition to high school motivated this study. We have taken a fresh look at what constitutes the transition to high school, specifically looking at how that experience differs across the selective, nonselective, and charter schools that comprise Philadelphia's system of high schools.

Given the emphasis in Philadelphia over the past several years on increasing high school options, and the substantial percentage of students and families who participate in trying to select a high school, we suggest that the transition to high school begins with the eighth grade high school selection process and continues through the ninth grade, a year when schools implement interventions that are meant to help students acclimate to the challenges of high school. Although what we call school selection is most often referred to as "school choice," the choice nomenclature obfuscates the reality that there are too few seats for those applying. As a result, many students who participate in school selection do not get assigned to any of the schools to which they have applied. This means that schools get to select students, rather than vice versa. Students often end up in the very neighborhood high schools they were trying to avoid.

In Philadelphia, the ability of schools to support students in their freshman year—that is, to successfully implement interventions aimed at bolstering student promotion—is inextricably entwined with the District's high school

¹⁸⁷Mayor Michael A. Nutter's Office of Education. (2010). *Shaping an educated city: Two-year report on the mayor's education goals*. Philadelphia: Author.

selection process and tiered system of high schools. Our data indicate that the high school selection process contributes to the disadvantages that nonselective neighborhood schools face as they try to organize effectively to support ninth grade students. Although the school selection process is not the only contributing factor, unless nonselective neighborhood high schools are examined within the context of the larger system in which they function, any improvement or turnaround efforts are likely to fall short of achieving the related goals of dramatically reducing the student dropout rate and increasing students' preparedness for college and careers.

Reforming the High School Selection Process

The high school selection process is rarely a topic of discussion within the Philadelphia education reform community, but we recommend that it should be. The selection process could be made more fair and equitable. Doing so might lessen the deleterious effects the process is having on neighborhood high schools.

We have shown in this report that the selection process as it exists substantially contributes to conditions in neighborhood high schools that make them ever harder to improve. These conditions include:

- **Concentration of high needs.** We found differences in application and enrollment patterns that ultimately led to a higher concentration of students needing special academic and social support in neighborhood high schools.
- **High student mobility.** “Default” neighborhood high schools are hobbled by high student mobility as new students enroll throughout the school year, including those leaving selective and charter schools, returning from the juvenile justice system, and moving to the neighborhood. Teachers and school-based administrators are continuously settling in new students and having to begin their instructional program anew.
- **Re-rostering and loss of instructional time.** Uncertainty about enrollment numbers often results in the need for re-rostering. This shuffling of both students and teachers, such that classrooms do not settle down until mid-to-late fall, can cause the loss of many weeks of instructional time.
- **Inadequate student data for placement and planning.** Students do not apply to or interview at neighborhood high schools. This, in combination with the high levels of late enrollment, means that neighborhood high schools rarely have information about their students before the beginning of the school year. Because administrators and teachers are often unsure about who will end up attending their school, there is little incentive to search for and review data on their incoming students until after students arrive. As a result, neighborhood high school administrators and teachers are often limited in their knowledge of incoming students' academic needs.

The high school selection process is rarely a topic of discussion within the Philadelphia education reform community, but we recommend that it should be.

- **Large size.** The large numbers of entering ninth graders at most neighborhood high schools dissuade school staff from meeting with them before school begins. This means that the process of building personal relationships with students and their parents is delayed.
- **Less-experienced teachers and high teacher turnover.** The adverse conditions in neighborhood high schools make it hard to attract and retain highly effective teachers. The self-reinforcing problems of less-experienced teachers and high teacher turnover at neighborhood high schools undermines the important work of building the collegiality and instructional community among teachers which is required to produce collective responsibility. Collective responsibility for student learning among teachers is important because it is a strong predictor of increased student academic achievement.¹⁸⁸

The challenge, then, is twofold: 1) to make the selection process fairer in ways that 2) contribute to making neighborhood high schools better options for students. This would mean, at minimum, providing more accessible information about schools and greater transparency about the selection process. Information could be provided through both formal and informal channels, including working closely with community organizations. In 2009, both the District and community organizations took steps to provide more information to students and families. The District's *Directory of High Schools for 2010 Admissions* was more substantial than in past years, and included lists of feeder middle schools, admissions requirements, student enrollment numbers, and descriptions of extracurricular activities for all District high schools.¹⁸⁹ The *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, an independent newspaper, provided further data on District and charter high schools in a "Fall Guide" that students and their families could use to help them with the high school selection process.¹⁹⁰ In addition, a local nonprofit, the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition, published *A Directory of Philadelphia Charter Schools* with information and statistics on every charter school in the city.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Christman, Neild, Bulkley, Liu, Mitchell, & Travers, 2009.

¹⁸⁹ The list of feeder middle schools is provided only for neighborhood high schools, which unlike selective admission high schools admit students based on a feeder pattern. As in past years, the Directory does not include other information that could inform decision-making, including admission rates, graduation rates, test scores, student and teacher attendance rates, and suspensions. See: The School District of Philadelphia. (2009a). *A directory of high schools for 2010 admissions*. Philadelphia: Author.

¹⁹⁰ Data provided in the *Notebook's* "Fall Guide" included everything in the *Directory* as well as student racial demographics, percentage ELL students, percentage special education students, percentage receiving free or reduced-price lunch, teacher and student attendance rates, suspension rates, average SAT scores, graduation rates, and dropout rates. See: Socolar, P. (Ed.). (2009). The Notebook's fall guide [Special issue]. *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*. 17(1).

¹⁹¹ The directory includes charter schools with elementary, middle, and/or high school grades and provides demographic data, teacher years of experience, test scores, attendance rates, violent incidents, and descriptions of school mission, programs, and activities. See: Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition. (2009). *A directory of Philadelphia charter schools, 2009-2010*. Philadelphia: Author.

Although accessibility of information is key, more is needed than information to make the system equitable. The District needs the number of desirable openings to be commensurate to the number of students participating in high school selection. The District could investigate other means by which to match students with schools that would shift the balance of power and agency to students and families choosing schools, rather than schools selecting students. The example of New York City was offered in this report to provide another view of what selection might look like. New York City is still working on its process, but the vast majority of students are being assigned to one of their chosen schools.

In addition, New York City has a variety of ways in which students are assigned to schools. Although selective schools still exist, there are also public schools in New York City that intentionally admit a range of students of different academic achievement levels. If Philadelphia were to pursue reforms with similar objectives, it could help flatten its stratified system of high schools and de-concentrate struggling students in neighborhood high schools. If at the same time Philadelphia addressed the problem of school size, an issue for most neighborhood *and* citywide admission high schools, another source of disadvantage would be lessened. In combination, these changes might increase the ability of more schools to establish the conditions that make selective schools and charter schools—and, at least in this study, one small neighborhood school—able to ease the freshman year transition and keep students on track to graduation.

Other School Conditions and Freshman Year Interventions

The failure of neighborhood high schools to keep students on track to graduation in the ninth grade is not for lack of interventions during the transition to high school. Neighborhood high schools—like all types of high schools—have implemented a wide array of student supports. Across all types of schools, our research showed that these interventions were frequently not being implemented in ways that maximized their effectiveness, but this was especially true in neighborhood high schools.

Our findings suggest that school leadership across the District struggled to keep a strategic focus on the ninth grade, even though there was wide recognition that the freshman year is one in which students need extra supports. Interventions such as freshman orientation, ninth grade academies and teacher teams, double dosing, monitoring student data, and strategically assigning teachers to the ninth grade were implemented more as separate efforts than as part of a coherent, mutually reinforcing reform strategy. Many of these interventions were legacies of various reform initiatives of the past, now disconnected from any broader plan

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of action. With no unifying strategy, principals and teachers did not share a theory of action about how the interventions should work together to improve student outcomes, or have a systematic way to monitor their implementation and assess their effectiveness. The superficial implementation appeared to erode commitment to the interventions.

Other factors also served to undercut freshman year interventions.

These factors included the following:

- The high-stakes PSSA tests were given in the eleventh grade and therefore many principals felt compelled to allocate key resources, such as the best teachers, to eleventh grade.
- In large schools, counselors often had responsibility for hundreds of students and were managing crises and social and behavioral issues rather than helping to set and support academic expectations. In the face of scarcity, their priority was to focus on the needs of eleventh and twelfth graders, particularly to assure that those who had persisted that far would graduate. Ninth graders therefore received less attention from counselors.
- Finally, school culture privileged teacher seniority, allowing experienced teachers to opt out of teaching ninth grade. This meant the ninth grade was too often a revolving door through which new and inexperienced teachers were constantly coming and going. This makes any reform strategy difficult to sustain.

In sum, although the selection process and stratified system of schools are not the only factors affecting school conditions, our findings do suggest that if the District wants to substantially alter the pattern of dropout and low achievement, it must address more than school-level conditions. We found an interrelationship between high school selection and school capacity. While school strategies for either incremental improvement or quick turnaround typically have focused on the school level, our data reveal that the districtwide school selection process substantially affects school capacity, with adverse consequences especially for neighborhood high schools.

Principals and teachers did not share a theory of action about how the interventions should work together to improve student outcomes.

Recommendations

Alter the Selection Process

- Superintendent Arlene Ackerman and many community leaders are focused on how to improve neighborhood high schools. It is important that these efforts go beyond simply trying to ameliorate schools that are desperately lacking in their ability to improve, despite the hard work and commitment of many administrators and teachers. With the mobilization of the District, city, and public around the student dropout problem, the political moment is right to open up conversation about how to change the high school selection process so it offers more students real options, and contributes to, rather than minimizes the opportunity for real reform of the neighborhood high schools.
- To avoid some of the greatest disadvantages to neighborhood high schools, the high school “choice” process might conclude as early as March each year, providing *all* schools with ample opportunity to prepare for their September freshman class. In addition, if all schools, including neighborhood high schools, had an admissions procedure, this might ensure that these schools received student data ahead of the beginning of school, allowing neighborhood high schools to better plan for the needs of individual students.
- Forming a School Reform Commission Committee of District, city, and community representatives to study—and perhaps visit—other urban districts to examine how they are enacting school choice might inform a public conversation about Philadelphia’s selection process. Lessons learned in other districts about how to meet the challenges of fairness and equity could inform a discussion of what would work in the Philadelphia context. This would include an examination of strategies for distributing students with different achievement levels and different learning needs across a broader range of schools.
- The selection process itself could be made more transparent. The District, as well as advocacy and community groups, should identify ways to increase the type and accessibility of information about high schools and the way the selection process works (including applications to charter schools), so students and families can make more informed choices.
- To increase the fairness of the process, school counselors should provide information about the selection process earlier, so parents and students are aware of the importance of seventh grade performance and behavior to their options for high school.

Build a Strategic Focus on Freshman Year Supports

- Awareness of the importance of the high school transition needs to be translated into a concrete, coherent, and well-coordinated plan. If more students are to pass their ninth grade courses, persist to graduation, and be successful in their post-secondary careers, the School District of Philadelphia needs a well-supported set of mutually reinforcing freshman year interventions, most especially in the neighborhood high schools.
- Such a strategic focus must be developed while maintaining attention on the eleventh and twelfth grades, not at the expense of those grades.
- The interventions need to work in concert, teachers need to receive the professional development and supports to implement them well, and the implementation of these interventions needs to be monitored.
- Interventions need to be in place for long enough that assessments can be made of effectiveness so that appropriate adjustments take place.

Continue to Promote Personalization through Smaller School Size, Small Learning Communities, and Ninth Grade Academies

- We have noted throughout that school size also can make a difference in the success of a school. In our sample, the schools in which we observed greater personalization, higher expectations, and a greater ability to focus strategically on the ninth grade were most often small schools, regardless of school type. We observed these positive supports in a selective high school, one small neighborhood high school, and charter schools, all of which had fewer than 700 students.
- Our observations are confirmed by *Going Small: Progress & Challenges of Philadelphia's Small High Schools*, another RFA study, which found that small high schools across all admissions types are showing signs of improvement in school climate and discipline, and in some areas of academic achievement. These improvements were especially notable in nonselective neighborhood high schools.¹⁹²
- Although creating more small schools is not currently a District priority, the size factor appeared instrumental to school capacity to focus on ninth graders, and we recommend that it—and other means to create greater personalization—should not disappear from reform plans for the remaining large neighborhood high schools.

Strengthen School Capacity

- To be effective, efforts to improve the ninth grade need to address human capital issues that undermine ninth grade instructional quality. Some principals have tried to address this challenge by creating incentives for teaching

Awareness of the importance of the high school transition needs to be translated into a concrete, coherent, and well-coordinated plan.

¹⁹² Hartmann, Reumann-Moore, Evans, Haxton, Maluk, & Neild, 2009.

in the ninth grade. These efforts should be shared and assessed. In addition, modifying the selection process and flattening the tiered system of high schools through improved admissions policies might well make most schools more desirable.

- Throughout this report we have noted that interventions have been introduced without adequate professional development for teachers. Professional development targeted to build capacity to implement interventions could help both in implementation and in building a sense of collective responsibility for the success of ninth graders.
- Ultimately, unless neighborhood high schools are no longer viewed by teachers as low-status schools that they want to avoid, efforts to attract and retain talented staff are likely to fail. In addition, past RFA reports have advocated for stronger school-based hiring practices, strong school-level leadership to build collegiality and instructional community, provision to principals of the tools they need to recruit qualified teachers and accountability for doing so, and robust incentive packages to attract effective teachers and retain them.¹⁹³ Steps to improve safety in schools and their immediate surroundings would strengthen the quality and reputation of high schools, particularly neighborhood high schools.
- The District has pledged more counselors to improve the counselor-to-student ratio and encourage a focus on academic advising. This strategy should be monitored and evaluated to ensure that having additional counselors in high schools—and particularly in neighborhood high schools—begins to create a climate of higher expectations for the future of the students.
- The high degree of student mobility in neighborhood high schools is a result, in part, of their status as “default” schools, where students are assigned when they move to a neighborhood, return from incarceration, or leave a selective or charter school. Reducing the churn of students in the neighborhood high schools should be an objective of modifying the selection process and tiered system of schools. Students new or returning to the system could be distributed across all types of schools—or at least a wider array of schools. Charter schools and selective schools, once students are admitted, could be required to keep them, at least until the school year is complete, rather than returning them to their neighborhood high school.

Continue to Build a Knowledge Base for Action

- As this report has indicated, it is important to acknowledge the interrelationship among schools and how schools affect each other, as well as to examine school-level conditions. This report has pointed out the structural challenges that the current system-wide selection process and tiered system of high

Ultimately, unless neighborhood high schools are no longer viewed by teachers as low-status schools that they want to avoid, efforts to attract and retain talented staff are likely to fail.

¹⁹³ Useem, Offenberg, & Farley, 2007; Neild, R. C., Useem, E., & Farley, E. (2005). *The quest for quality: Recruiting and retaining teachers in Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

schools create for neighborhood schools. Further research is needed, however, to understand the effects of past and continued diversification of high schools on the distribution of students across the system. A systematic longitudinal examination of student characteristics in public high schools would inform the District and public on whether high school policies are decreasing inequities.

- Throughout this report, we have pointed out the importance of assessing the implementation and effectiveness of freshman year interventions. Reform initiatives should be accompanied by evaluations that provide school, regional, and central office staff with data that can help them assess their efforts and make appropriate adjustments.
- Students, parents, and others might well be interested in knowing a high school's track record for sending graduates to college and careers. Collecting data on college going and college graduation and on job placement and advancement for alumni at all high schools could be valuable information for school selection and other purposes.

A Call to Action

Philadelphia, like so many other urban areas, cannot afford to falter in its efforts to address the problem of student dropout. Much is at stake—for children and families, and for the future of the nation's cities. Fortunately, the School District of Philadelphia is well positioned to take action to address these challenges.

- The District has a deep and rich history of high school reform to draw on, including initiatives to improve the critical freshman year transition to high school.
- With its school reform partners, the District has built a solid base of knowledge about student dropout, and it has the capacity to track individual students and their progress.
- Philadelphia has a civic, political, and community base attuned to the student dropout problem and ready to act to improve the outcomes for young people, especially among those who are currently attending neighborhood high schools.
- The federal government and some foundations are providing significant resources to address the problem of student dropout, and improve the system of public high schools.

The experience, resources, knowledge, and political will that exist in the city around the issue of student dropout make Philadelphia well poised to mobilize to make the kind of system and school-level changes needed to improve outcomes for the city's youth.

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Appendix A Philadelphia's Tiered System of High Schoolsⁱ (class of 2008)

School Name	4-yr Grad Rate ⁱⁱ	Dropout Rate	School Name	4-yr Grad Rate	Dropout Rate	School Name	4-yr Grad Rate	Dropout Rate
31 Neighborhood High Schools			13 Citywide Admission High Schools			27 Charter Schools with High School Gradesⁱⁱⁱ		
Audenried	NA	NA	Bok	76%	15%	Arise Academy	NA	NA
Bartram	47%	33%	Communications Technology	78%	13%	Boys' Latin of Philadelphia	NA	NA
Carroll	NA	NA	Constitution	NA	NA	CHAD (Charter H.S. for Architecture & Design)	NA	NA
Edison	40%	41%	Dobbins	75%	13%	Community Academy of Phila	NA	NA
Fels	54%	30%	Douglas	72%	24%	Delaware Valley Charter	NA	NA
FitzSimons	42%	41%	Mastbaum	73%	16%	Eastern University Academy	NA	NA
Frankford	44%	37%	Motivation	88%	3%	Esperanza Academy	NA	NA
Franklin, Benjamin	46%	23%	Phila. HS for Business & Technology	84%	13%	Franklin Towne Charter	NA	NA
Furness	35%	46%	Phila. Military Academy at Elverson	NA	NA	Freire Charter School	NA	NA
Germantown	33%	39%	Phila. Military Academy at Leeds	61%	23%	Hope Charter School	NA	NA
Gratz	45%	33%	Randolph	74%	24%	Imhotep Institute Charter	NA	NA
High School of the Future	NA	NA	Robeson	55%	30%	Mariana Bracetti Academy	NA	NA
Kensington Business			Swenson	84%	9%	Maritime Academy Charter School	NA	NA
Kensington CAPA	39%	45%	16 Special Admission High Schools			Mastery - Lenfest Campus	NA	NA
Kensington Culinary			Academy at Palumbo	NA	NA	Mastery - Pickett Campus	NA	NA
King	43%	35%	Arts Academy at Rush	NA	NA	Mastery - Shoemaker Campus	NA	NA
Lamberton	72%	15%	Bodine	95%	5%	Mastery - Thomas Campus	NA	NA
Lincoln	43%	36%	CAPA (Creative and Performing Arts)	95%	3%	Mathematics, Civics, and Sciences Charter	NA	NA
Northeast	66%	20%	Carver	94%	3%	Math, Science, and Technology Community Charter	NA	NA
Olney East			Central	93%	4%	Multi-Cultural Academy	NA	NA
Olney West	32%	45%	Franklin Learning Center	NA	NA	New Media Technology	NA	NA
Overbrook	52%	31%	GAMP (Girard Academic Music Program)	96%	2%	Philadelphia Academy	NA	NA
Rhodes	44%	25%	Lankenau	86%	10%	Phila. Electrical and Technology	NA	NA
Roxborough	68%	21%	Masterman	98%	2%	Preparatory Charter School of Mathematics, Science, Technology and Careers	NA	NA
Sayre	42%	37%	Parkway Center City	88%	7%	Sankofa Freedom Academy	NA	NA
South Philadelphia	38%	42%	Parkway Northwest	84%	11%	Truebright Science Academy	NA	NA
Strawberry Mansion	56%	29%	Parkway West	81%	13%	World Communications	NA	NA
University City	50%	36%	Philadelphia High School for Girls	89%	7%			
Vaux	35%	35%	Saul	83%	13%			
Washington	61%	23%	Science Leadership Academy	NA	NA			
West Philadelphia	45%	42%						

Source: Socolar, P. (ed.). (2009). The Notebook fall guide [Special issue]. *Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, 17(1), pp. 16-17.

This table reflects District high schools as of September 2009. Our list differs slightly from the District's most recent *Directory of High Schools* (see: The School District of Philadelphia, 2009a). First, the *Directory* includes the Academy of Process Technology (at Bok High School) and Northeast Magnet (at Northeast High School) as special admission high schools. These selective programs are small learning communities within high schools and are therefore not included in our list. Secondly, the *Directory* lists Kensington High School as one school instead of listing the three Kensington small high schools separately (Kensington Business, Kensington CAPA, Kensington Culinary), and lists Olney High School as one school instead of listing the two Olney high schools separately (Olney East and Olney West). In addition, we list Douglas and Motivation as citywide admission high schools, but beginning in the fall of 2010, Douglas will be a neighborhood high school and Motivation will be a special admission high school (The School District of Philadelphia, 2009a). High School of the Future is currently three-fourths neighborhood and one-fourth citywide admission. The school is listed as a citywide admission high school in the District's *Directory* to signal that students from across Philadelphia may apply. However, we list High School of the Future as a neighborhood high school because the majority of its students are admitted based on feeder pattern. Finally, William Penn High School is scheduled to close in May 2010 for major renovations and to reopen in fall 2012. William Penn is not listed in this table as it has yet to be decided whether it will reopen as a neighborhood high school or with a new admissions status. See: Graham, K. A. (2009, June 25). William Penn High closing in Phila. put off. [Electronic version]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Retrieved September 14, 2009, from http://www.philly.com/inquirer/education/20090625_Wm__Penn_High_closing_in_Phila__put_off.html. Also note that this table does not include disciplinary nor alternative high schools, nor does it include Widener Memorial School, a K-12 school for students with special needs.

ⁱⁱ Each school's graduation rate and dropout rate do not necessarily add up to 100%, because at some schools a percentage of students may have been held back a year or more—not having graduated in four years, but not having dropped out of school either.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dropout and graduation rates comparable to those calculated for District schools are not available for charter schools.

Appendix B Differences Among High Schools by Admissions Typeⁱ

	Neighborhood	Citywide Admissions	Special Admissions
Total high schools (2007-08)	31 ⁱⁱ	13	15
First-time 9th graders	9,888	2,022	2,364
School-Level Characteristics			
Largeⁱⁱⁱ	21 (68%)	4 (31%)	3 (20%)
Persistently dangerous^{iv}	10 (32%)	none	none
Corrective Action II^v	21 (68%)	2 (15%)	none
80% or greater Yancey Index (2008-09)^{vi}	24 (77%)	4 (31%)	none
First-time 9th Graders: Demographics^{vii}			
Black^{viii}	65%	70%	55%
Latino	19%	14%	8%
White	11%	11%	23%
Asian	5%	4%	13%
Males	54%	48%	38%
Females	46%	52%	62%
English Language Learners	13%	11%	9%
Special Education	20%	14%	4%
First-time 9th Graders: Math Enrollment^{ix}			
Below algebra	8%	7%	5%
Intensive or Strategic	50%	57%	9%
Algebra or higher	79%	92%	96%
First-time 9th Graders: Algebra Passage^x			
Passing algebra or higher	71%	80%	93%
A/B in algebra or higher	22%	30%	48%

Source: 2007-08 School District of Philadelphia Administrative Data, unless otherwise noted

ⁱ Data in this table are for high schools enrolling students in 2007-08. The data include William Penn High School, slated to close for two years in 2010, but do not include Audenried, a neighborhood high school, nor the Arts Academy at Rush, a special admission high school, both of which opened in 2008-09. Data on charter high schools are not available.

ⁱⁱ The High School of the Future is a hybrid in which 75% of its students come from the surrounding neighborhood and the remaining 25% of its students are selected by lottery from applicants across the city. Since the school is primarily a neighborhood high school, we include it in the neighborhood category in this report.

ⁱⁱⁱ Percentages reflect the proportion of schools in each category with over 700 students.

^{iv} Percentages reflect the proportion of schools in each category that appeared on the list of "persistently dangerous schools" compiled by the Pennsylvania Department of Education for the 2007-08 school year.

^v Corrective Action II status is given to schools that have not met Annual Yearly Progress goals on standardized tests for 6 years in a row. Percentages reflect the proportion of schools in each category that have been in Corrective Action II status for at least two years, at which point the District is mandated to plan toward their restructuring. Source of data: PA Department of Education, 2007-08 school year.

^{vi} The Yancey Index was developed by Dr. William L. Yancey and then adopted by the School District of Philadelphia as a way of estimating the percentage of students who are income-eligible (below 250% of poverty) to receive free or reduced-price lunch, regardless of whether they apply for the lunch program (The Reinvestment Fund, 2007). The percentages reported here reflect the proportion of schools in each category that had a Yancey index of 80% or greater in 2008-09.

^{vii} Percentages reflect the proportion of first-time ninth graders at each school type that belong to the specified subgroup. For ethnicity, gender, and special education subgroups, N=14,274. For ELL percentages, N=12,184.

^{viii} The District uses "African American" as a racial category, but we use "Black" in this report because this category includes Caribbean and African immigrants as well as native-born African Americans. Also, "American Indian" and "Other" are not included here as fewer than 1% of students in each school type identified in these categories.

^{ix} Percentages reflect the proportion of first-time ninth graders (N=14,274) at each school type enrolled in three levels of math courses. These three levels of math courses are not mutually exclusive. Students are commonly enrolled in more than one math course in order to help them catch up academically. See Chapter Three for an explanation of "double dosing."

^x Percentages reflect the proportion of first-time ninth graders enrolled in algebra or higher (N=11,933) who received at least a D and at least a B.

Appendix C Methodology

Transition to High School was a mixed methods study. Qualitative research activities were conducted between May 2007 and August 2008. Quantitative data sources were from 2006-07 and 2007-08 District data sets. Qualitative and quantitative data analysis included (1) a **districtwide** investigation of the high school selection process and ninth grade interventions to support the transition to high school, (2) a school-level examination of the high school selection process and ninth grade interventions in **two sample regions**, encompassing principal interviews at fifteen schools (including four charter schools with high school grades) and in-depth faculty/staff interviews at four focal schools, and (3) an inquiry into perspectives on the process of high school selection among students, parents, and staff affiliated with a range of **community-based organizations**. **Table C.1** lists the sources of qualitative and quantitative data from all three arenas that were used in compiling this report.

Sample Selection for Qualitative Data Collection

Two sample regions (see **Table C.2**) were selected in consultation with the District's chief academic officer. These regions were selected because of their contrasting patterns of high school development, one region representing an area in which there had been a spurt of new high schools, and the other a region in which not much development of new high schools had occurred. Taken individually, neither region is representative of the School District of Philadelphia as a whole. Nonetheless, the high schools in these two regions together present an array of the types of schools and student populations served in the District overall.

Table C.1 Sources of Data

Type of Research	
District-Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District data on attendance, TerraNova test scores, and final course grades for seventh graders in the 2005-06 school yearⁱ • District records of high school application and enrollment data for students entering ninth grade in the 2007-08 school year • District demographic, attendance, and math course grade data for first-time ninth graders in the 2007-08 school year • District teacher and student survey data for the 2007-08 school year • A review of the District website (www.phila.k12.pa.us) and relevant District documents, including the District's <i>Directory of High Schools for 2007 Admissions</i> and <i>Imagine 2014</i> • Observations at the 2007 High School Expo • Observations at a District professional development session for ninth grade teachers and a District roundtable on college preparation and access • Thirteen individual interviews with District central office staff
Region-Based and School-Based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with eight regional staff members • Interviews with the principal (or CEO) at 15 high schools, including four charter high schools • Fifteen individual interviews with members of the leadership teams at four focal schools (English and math lead teachers, counselors, school growth coaches, and roster chairs) • Observations of ninth grade orientations at each of four focal high schools and at one charter schoolⁱⁱ • Observations of three regional meetings of principals
Community-Based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with 17 community or nonprofit leaders and parents from nine community organizations • Four student focus groups, with four to six students each

ⁱSeventh grade data are relevant to our study because selective admission high schools use seventh grade data to determine whether a student applicant meets their criteria.

ⁱⁱWe also included in our analysis of ninth grade orientations seven observations done for a different RFA study: Christman, Brown, Burgess, Kay, Maluk, & Mitchell, 2009.

Table C.2 Comparison of Sample Regions to District

	Region A	Region B	District ⁱ
First-time 9th graders	1,655	2,248	15,112
Number of Schools by Type			
Special Admission	6	1	15
Citywide Admission	4	1	13
Neighborhood	4	5	31
Number of Schools by Size			
Large	4	6	28
Small	10	1	31
% of First-time Ninth Graders			
White	12%	6%	13%
Black	78%	63%	64%
Latino	5%	24%	16%
Asian	4%	6%	6%
American Indian	<1%	<1%	<1%
Other	1%	1%	1%
Special Education	13%	18%	17%
ELL	4%	15%	12%
20+ absences	34%	48%	46%
1 or more suspensions	16%	23%	26%
Taking algebra or higher	92%	84%	80%
Passing algebra or higher	87%	79%	77%

ⁱQuantitative data are for high schools enrolling students in 2007-08. The data include William Penn High School, slated to close for two years in 2010, *but do not* include Audenried, a neighborhood high school, nor the Arts Academy at Rush, a special admission high school, both of which opened in 2008-09. Charter high schools are not included because only limited data on charter schools are available in District administrative data sets.

Through interviews with principals, we examined practices to support the ninth grade transition to high school in 15 District and charter high schools, including eight in Region A and six in Region B (see **Table C.3**), plus one additional District neighborhood high school outside the two focal regions.¹⁹⁴ Within each region, we made an effort to select examples of a variety of high schools according to admissions type, including nonselective neighborhood high schools, and selective citywide and special admission high schools. This nomenclature of admissions types, used throughout this report, reflects the District’s terminology. In addition, we examined transition practices in four charter schools with high school grades, three in region A and one in region B, because charter schools are growing in number and we believed it was important to learn more about the ways in which public schools that function outside the District’s authority handle the transition to high school.

We also intentionally selected high schools that varied in size. In our report, we use “small” to describe schools with fewer than 700 students and “large” for schools with more students. Seven hundred students is the number that the District has used to designate a school that is “small.”¹⁹⁵ The District also uses designations of “medium size” schools (up to 1,000 students) and “large” schools (more than 1,000 students). In this report we do not distinguish between medium and large and call any school with greater than 700 students “large.”¹⁹⁶ While most of our school-based data were drawn from this sample of 11 District-managed and four charter high schools, in a few instances we drew on examples from district-managed high schools outside of our sample (and outside of our two regions) based on other high school studies that RFA conducted during the same time period as this study. These instances are indicated in the text or in footnotes.

Table C.3 Fifteen Sample High Schools by Admissions Type

	Neighborhood	Citywide Admission	Special Admission	Charter
Region A	2	3	0	3
Region B	3	1	1	1
Region C (Pilot)	1	0	0	0

¹⁹⁴ The one high school that falls outside the two focal regions was observed in the exploratory phase of this study.

¹⁹⁵ The School District of Philadelphia, 2006.

¹⁹⁶ Our analyses indicate advantages for students making the transition to “small” schools, but we do not have data which distinguish between “medium” and “large” size schools.

Within the 11 District-managed high schools, we identified four focal schools, two in each region, where we conducted additional in-depth research. These high schools—two neighborhood schools and two citywide admission schools—were selected based on reports from regional staff that these were high schools that were focused on school improvement and were also paying particular attention to ninth grade issues. At these four schools, in addition to interviewing the principals, we interviewed English and math department heads, school growth coaches, roster chairs, and counselors, and observed each school's ninth grade orientation. As noted previously, we also included observations from seven additional ninth grade student orientations, drawn from RFA's research for a study of *Effective Organizational Practices for Middle and High School Grades*.¹⁹⁷ (See **Table 1.1** in Chapter One for a complete list of interviews and observations.)

Qualitative Research Methods and Analysis

Qualitative research activities included the observations, focus groups, and individual interviews described above, as well as a review of relevant District documents and the District's website. Field notes were recorded for all observations, and then read and discussed by team members. Interviews followed semi-structured protocols, usually with two researchers present, one conducting the interview and the other taking notes. In addition, all interviews were audio-recorded in order to check the interview write-ups. In some instances interviews were transcribed in their entirety. All interviews were read by the research team members. Using ATLAS.ti qualitative software, team members coded interviews for information about the school selection process and the implementation of ninth grade interventions.

To examine *ninth grade interventions*, team members wrote analytic memos describing each school in terms of the following aspects: school characteristics, the process of entering ninth grade, ninth grade academic and other interventions, organization and staffing of the ninth grade, rostering, the use of data and monitoring of student progress, school improvement priorities, and the accomplishments and challenges at the school. Research team members also developed analytic memos from observation notes of ninth grade orientations. The analytic memos were discussed by the entire team, and data matrices were developed which facilitated comparisons across schools. Relevant District documents were reviewed as well, such as the *High School Plan for Content Area Literacy*.

For the examination of the *school selection process*, qualitative research was also conducted among parents, students, and staff affiliated with 12 different community-based organizations (CBOs) that were located in the study's two sample regions. This phase of data collection occurred during the summer of 2008. We initially interviewed senior staff in youth-serving organizations in order to learn how these or other CBOs were supporting students through the transition to high school. Upon finding that many senior CBO staff were

¹⁹⁷ Christman, Brown, Burgess, Kay, Maluk, & Mitchell, 2009

unfamiliar with the selection process and with high schools, we changed our strategy to focus on interviewing staff who were providing direct services to youth on the verge of making the transition to high school. In many cases, direct-service providers were also parents of students who had recent personal experiences with the transition.

In addition to interviewing CBO staff, we held focus groups with students who were involved with CBO programs and, when possible, conducted phone interviews with these students' parents. We focused on students who were entering ninth or tenth grade in the fall of 2008 because they had recently participated in the selection process or in the transition through ninth grade. Because they were participating in community-based programs, the students in our focus groups probably represent a somewhat more advantaged subset of Philadelphia youth, who were more likely to have strong support systems and more likely to attend selective high schools. However, there were some significant differences within and among the groups in terms of their experiences with high school selection and ninth grade, which helped inform our study.

After coding interviews using ATLAS.ti, team members developed two analytic memos related to school selection. The first examined how *District staff* regarded the process, criteria for admissions, fairness of the system, recruitment strategies, competition, racial and economic diversity, and access to information. The second memo described how *parents and students* perceived their options, their criteria for selecting a school, their access to information, and the roles of the counselors, teachers, parents, and outside community organizations in the school selection process. District documents reviewed included the *Directory of High Schools for 2007 Admissions*, the 2007 "High School Admissions Form," and flyers for the 2007 High School Expo as well as websites of select school districts in other cities that also have a process of high school selection.

Quantitative Research Methods and Analysis

The quantitative analyses presented in this report are primarily cross-tabulations of the three high school admission categories (special admission, city-wide admission, and neighborhood) and the variables of interest. Charter high schools are not included in quantitative analyses in the report because charter school data were not available from the District on our variables of interest. Data for quantitative analyses were drawn from a number of District administrative data sources, including student demographics, enrollment, academic records, high school applications, and districtwide teacher and student surveys. (See **Table 1.1** in Chapter One.)

Due to our interest in the transition to high school, we focused on first-time ninth grade students attending District high schools in the 2007-08 school year. We also analyzed seventh grade data for this cohort of students (from the 2005-06 school year) because students' test scores, behavior, grades, attendance, and lateness in *seventh grade* determine whether they will meet selective admissions criteria when they apply for high school the following

year. We analyzed high school application data for admission in the 2007-08 school year to determine student interest in the three school types. We then analyzed the rate at which these applicants were admitted and enrolled in each school type.¹⁹⁸ We also calculated the percentage of applicants who met the stated admissions criteria for each school type to determine the likelihood of “qualified” and “under-qualified” applicants being admitted and enrolling at a high school of their choice.

In addition, we analyzed a variety of student outcomes among first-time ninth graders by school type, including attendance, lateness, mobility, and math-course enrollment and passage. We then conducted subgroup analyses for applications, enrollment, and all ninth grade outcomes to determine differences by race/ethnicity, gender, special education, and English language learner (ELL) status.

Finally, we analyzed data from districtwide teacher and student surveys administered in 2007-08. These surveys asked questions about a variety of teacher practices, school and District reforms, school climate and culture, and academic issues. We ran cross-tabulations of the three high school types with several variables from the survey. We also created several scales to analyze constructs that were encompassed in multiple questions. A detailed description of all variables follows on page 119.

Quantitative Sample Size

Sample size for quantitative data reported in this study differed by the source of the data. School District data account for 15,112 first-time ninth graders in District-managed public schools in the 2007-08 school year. Data on enrollment, attendance, special education status, gender, race/ethnicity, and math-course enrollment were available for 14,274 first-time ninth graders. There were substantial missing data for the English language learner (ELL) status variable. All missing values were excluded from our analysis so the sample size for all ELL analyses is 12,184. Additionally, District data included a final math course grade in 2007-08 for 11,933 of the first-time ninth grade students.¹⁹⁹ We do not know why the remaining students did not have a math course grade.²⁰⁰

For our analysis of application and enrollment at special admission, citywide admission, and neighborhood high schools outside of applicants’ feeder patterns, we used District high school application and enrollment data for

¹⁹⁸ As noted in Chapter Two, the District does not retain a record of schools where students were accepted but chose not to enroll. Therefore, we were unable to calculate acceptance rates and instead analyzed the number of students who were offered admission at a high school *and* chose to enroll.

¹⁹⁹ We look at math data in this study because it is possible to compare math-taking and passage across schools. It is not possible to make similar comparisons with English courses because there is a much wider variety of English courses offered, and it is impossible to judge comparability of course content across schools.

²⁰⁰ We performed several data checks to figure out this anomaly of students enrolled in math courses having no course grade. These students also did not have a math grade in other marking periods.

students entering ninth grade in the 2007-08 school year. This data set accounted for 10,522 eighth grade applicants.

In addition, for our analysis of whether applicants met admissions criteria for special and citywide admission high schools, we used 2005-06 data for all District seventh graders. Seventh graders' attendance, test scores, and grades must meet admissions criteria to qualify for selective admission schools two years later. Our sample size for analyses of seventh grade data was 17,490. The sample sizes are not the same for 2005-06 seventh graders and 2007-08 ninth graders because some students left the District and some students are missing data on the key variables in our analysis.

Finally, although the 2007-08 District teacher and student surveys were conducted districtwide, response rates were not 100 percent. The 2007-08 District teacher survey was completed by teachers in grades K-12, but we only analyzed data for the 2,006 high school teachers who completed it. The 2007-08 student survey was administered to 10,573 high school students districtwide, including 3,359 ninth graders. The sample of respondents is over-representative of students from selective admission high schools and under-representative of males relative to the District as a whole, which may bias the results. The number of teachers and students who completed particular items on the surveys varied, and is footnoted where individual items are used in this report.

Variables Examined

School Type Variables

High school type: We constructed a variable to represent the District's three school types (special admission, citywide admission, and neighborhood). For the majority of analyses by high school type, we assigned each student to the school that they attended for the most number of days during the 2007-08 school year. However, for the mobility analysis, we used the school where students began ninth grade and determined where they moved chronologically throughout the school year.

Student Subgroup Variables

Race/ethnicity: We used the four biggest race/ethnic groups in the District administrative data—Black, White, Latino, and Asian. Other categories include American Indian and Other, but the first-time ninth grade enrollment for these groups was less than one percent.

Gender: We analyzed differences between males and females.

Gender*race/ethnicity: We analyzed interactions between the race/ethnicity and gender variables.

Special education: We defined special education students as those students in the District data who were listed as “served,” “unserved,” and “exited.” The “served” and “unserved” categories mean that students are classified as

special education but may or may not be receiving supports and services; the District typically uses these two categories in its analyses of special education students. We also thought it was important to include students who were “exited” from special education services at some point during their ninth grade year.

English language learner (ELL): We used the dichotomous District classification of ELL status in our analysis.

Application and Enrollment Variables

Application: We constructed a dichotomous variable to indicate whether or not a student applied to any high school. We also constructed a set of dummy variables to indicate whether students applied to any special admission, city-wide admission, or neighborhood high school outside their feeder pattern.

Enrollment: We constructed a dichotomous variable to indicate whether or not a student received and accepted an offer of admission at any school to which they applied. We also constructed a set of dummy variables to indicate whether students accepted an offer of admission at a special admission, city-wide admission, or neighborhood high school.

Admissions Criteria Variables

Citywide admissions criteria: We created a dichotomous variable to indicate whether each student met the admissions requirements at citywide admission high schools. To be classified as “yes,” a student had to meet three of the following four criteria in seventh grade: no more than ten unexcused absences, no more than five latenesses, no out-of-school suspensions, and all As, Bs, and Cs on their report card.

Special admissions criteria: Determining whether students met the special admission high school criteria was more complicated because each school in this category sets its own requirements. We created a set of variables to test each special admission high school’s criteria, but found that the stated requirements were often vague (see **Table C.4**, e.g., “excellent test scores” or “satisfactory attendance”) and that regardless of how the criteria were specified, fewer than 5% of students met the special admissions criteria. Chapter Two provides more detail regarding the variation in stated admissions criteria at special admission high schools, and our decision to classify them into “most stringent,” “less stringent,” and “least stringent” categories. Three coding decisions are worth noting.

(1) We considered the TerraNova language, reading, and math scores for all schools’ test score requirements, except for the few schools that specified using the PSSA for 2007-08 admissions. In the latter case, PSSA reading and math scores were used. In both cases, we considered students to have met the criteria if they met the stated test score requirements on all subject tests (three for the TerraNova and two for the PSSA). We excluded the TerraNova science scores to maintain comparability across schools that used the TerraNova and those that used the PSSA.

Table C.4 Variation in Stated Admissions Criteria at Special Admission High Schools

Test Scores	# of Schools
88% or above on the TerraNova	3
85% or above on the TerraNova	1
80% or above on the TerraNova	2
75% or above on the TerraNova	2
70% or above on the TerraNova	1
Excellent on the TerraNova	1
Basic or above on the PSSA	3
Proficient or advanced on the PSSA	1
Excellent on the PSSA	1
Course Grades	# of Schools
As and Bs, with 1 C	4
As and Bs in major subjects, with 1 C	4
As and Bs in major subjects	2
B average	2
B average in major subjects	1
As, Bs, and Cs, with As and Bs in math and science	1
Strong grades	1
Attendance (absences and latenesses)	# of Schools
Excellent	8
Good	3
Satisfactory	1
No more than 10 absences or latenesses	2
No more than 10 absences and 5 latenesses	1
Behavior	# of Schools
Excellent	4
Good	2
Satisfactory	1
No problems or no negative report	6
Not specified	2

N=15 special admission high schools

(2) We considered course grades in all “major subjects”—reading, writing, math/algebra, social studies, science, and physical education. We included physical education because it is among the set of courses in which almost every student is enrolled. According to the admissions criteria at some special admission high schools, a C in any course could disqualify a student from admission. We therefore also analyzed the data for students’ entire transcripts. The number of “expressive arts” courses (including art, computers, health, study skills, and a large variety of other listings) that students took varied from one to 15. It is important to note that students enrolling in additional courses increase their opportunities to get the one C that could disqualify them from attending some special admission schools.

(3) We used unexcused absences as an indicator of attendance, and out-of-school suspensions as a proxy for negative behavior; students with one or more suspensions in seventh grade were considered as not meeting the behavior criteria.

Ninth Grade Variables

Math course enrollment and passage: Students receive three marking period grades as well as a separate final math grade; our analysis used the final math grade. We looked at grades in algebra or higher, below algebra, and intensive or strategic math courses. Intensive and strategic math courses are a specific intervention in the District intended to accelerate learning for students who arrive in ninth grade underprepared for high school math coursework. Students are assigned to one of these “catch up” courses in addition to algebra, an intervention often referred to as a “double dose” of math for ninth graders.

Student engagement in ninth grade: We analyzed attendance and behavior indicators to gain a basic understanding of student engagement across school types—using absence, lateness, and suspension rates. We considered students’ total number of absences and latenesses in their ninth grade year. We also constructed variables for “high absences” and “high latenesses” for students with 20 or more absences or latenesses during the school year.

Truancy is defined as 20+ unexcused absences during a school year in the District, but we considered the total number of absences (excused and unexcused) in our analysis as an indicator of both engagement and opportunity to learn. For suspensions, we focused on whether or not a student had any out-of-school suspensions during the school year.

Mobility: We used student enrollment data to conduct two types of mobility analyses. First, we constructed a variable indicating the school at which each student began the school year and additional variables indicating the school(s) to which each student moved during the school year. From these variables, we were able to analyze mobility into and out of schools by high school type. Second, we constructed a variable to indicate whether students enrolled in their respective schools on the first day of school. If they did not enroll on the first day, we created a set of variables to indicate how late into the school year they arrived (within one month of the start of school, within two months, within three months, or more than three months after the beginning of the school year).

Teacher Survey Variables

Teacher tenure: An item on the District teacher survey asked teachers to report whether or not they had tenure, meaning that they had taught for four or more years in the District.

Instructional supports: One survey item asked teachers to report the extent to which “all students have access to instructional supports.” The responses were on a four-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

Tutoring services: One survey question asked teachers to report the extent to which “tutoring services exist at this school.” The responses were on a four-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

Responsibility for the whole school: This construct was created from a set of survey items regarding collective responsibility. The item’s heading asked: “How many teachers in this school...” It was followed by seven sub-items, four of which related to teachers’ sense of collective responsibility for the school and the remainder of which related to teachers’ responsibility for their own professional development. The four sub-items that we included in our scale were: “help maintain discipline in the entire school, not just their classroom,” “take responsibility for improving the school,” “feel responsible for helping each other do their best,” and “feel responsible when students in this school fail.” Responses were on a five-point Likert scale from “None” to “All.” The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is 0.86. After creating the scale, we calculated the average of each respondent’s score on the questions and then analyzed this average scale score by school type.

Student Survey Variable

Highest level of education students plan to complete: One item on the District student survey asked students to indicate the highest level of education they planned to complete, from the following options: “high school diploma,” “technical/vocational school certificate,” “two-year college degree—AA,” “four-year college degree—BA/BS,” “graduate degree—MD/MA/PhD/MBA/JD,” or “I do not know.”

About the Authors

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