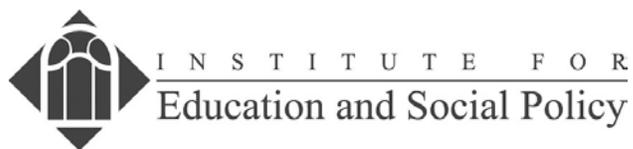


The **Research Alliance** for
New York City Schools



High School Choice in New York City: A Report on the School Choices and Placements of Low-Achieving Students



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Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year in New York City, close to 80,000 middle school students participate in the ritual of choosing and applying to the City’s public high schools. Armed with the 600-page *Directory of NYC Public High Schools* and help from parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and community groups, these students rank up to 12 high school programs they would like to attend, choosing from nearly 700 programs at more than 400 schools citywide.

School choice policies aim to improve achievement by enabling families to choose a school that they believe will best serve their child’s needs. In New York City, choice and the development of a diverse portfolio of options have played central roles in the Department of Education’s high school reform efforts. These reforms have targeted both the supply and demand sides of the choice system. On the supply side, the DOE closed underperforming schools and opened hundreds of new school options. On the demand side, the DOE centralized the school assignment process and provided students and their families with extensive information about their choices.

The potential for choice to bring about large-scale improvement and narrow achievement gaps between low- and high-performing students depends on the choices students and their families make and on their actual school placements, which balance student preferences and school admissions criteria. Our report, *High School Choice in New York City*, takes a close look at the choices and placements of

Key Findings

- Low-achieving students were matched to schools that were lower performing, on average, than those of all other students.
- These differences in placements were:
 - Driven by differences in students’ initial choices—low-achieving students’ first-choice schools were less selective, lower-performing, and more disadvantaged;
 - *Not* a consequence of low-achieving students being less likely to receive their first choice—overall, lower-achieving and higher-achieving students were matched to their top choices at the same rate.
- Both low- and higher-achieving students appear to prefer schools that are close to home. Thus, differences in students’ choices likely reflect, at least in part, the fact that lower-achieving students are highly concentrated in poor neighborhoods, where options may be more limited.

New York City’s most educationally vulnerable students: those scoring among the bottom 20 percent on the state’s math and English tests. Focusing on data from 2007 to 2011, the report examines the characteristics of these low-achieving students and how their schools choices and placements compared to those of higher-achieving peers. This summary highlights the report’s key findings and their implications for school choice policies and future research.

Though many low-achieving middle school students go on to succeed in high school, the overwhelming majority do not. For example, only 42 percent of low-achieving students (using our 7th grade test score threshold to define “low-achieving”) graduated on time between 2009 and 2011, as compared with 76 percent of all other students. A majority of these low-achieving students were male and black or Hispanic; they were also more likely to be English Language Learners or receiving special education services (or both) than their higher-achieving peers. Importantly, these students were concentrated in some of the City’s poorest communities, with one in four living in just 10 zip codes located in Brooklyn and the Bronx.

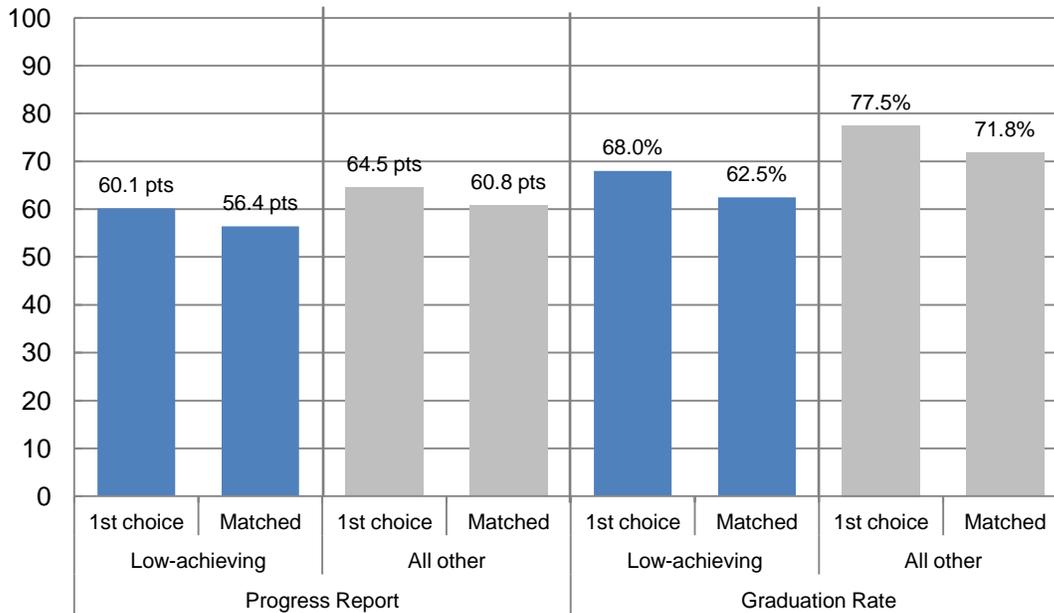
Low-Achieving Students’ First-Choice Schools and Placements

Our analysis of students’ choices and placements revealed several noteworthy patterns:

- **Low-achieving students were matched to high schools that, on average, performed worse—with lower attendance and graduation rates and lower Progress Report scores—than the schools attended by their higher-achieving peers.** Further, low-achieving students were matched to high schools with higher concentrations of low-achieving and low-income students.

Figure ES-1 on page vi displays Progress Report scores and graduation rates for the lowest-achieving students’ first-choice and matched schools, alongside comparable statistics for all other students. Focusing on matched schools, it shows that graduation rates were lower, on average, in high schools attended by low-achieving students (63 percent vs. 72 percent for their higher-achieving peers). Along the same lines, low-achieving students’ matched schools fared worse on the City’s Progress Report than those to which their higher-achieving peers were matched (56 vs. 61 points, out of a possible total of 100).

Figure ES-1: Average Academic Performance of First-Choice and Matched Schools, for Low-Achieving and All Other Students, 2007-2011



- **Differences in placements reflect differences in students' choices and the options available to them in their local communities.** Like their higher-achieving peers, low-achieving students tended to choose schools close to home. However, on average, the schools they ranked first were less selective, lower-performing, and more disadvantaged than the top choices of their higher-achieving peers.

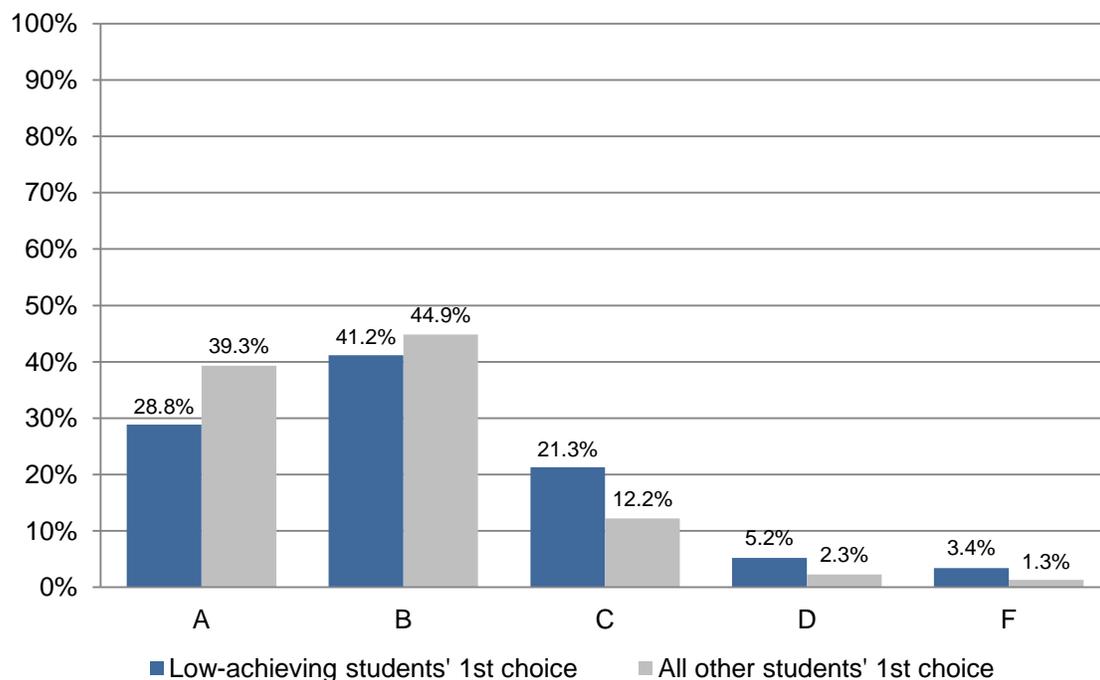
Figure ES-1 illustrates how differences in the characteristics of matched schools were present in students' initial choices. For example, the average graduation rate was lower in the first-choice school of low-achieving students (68 percent) than that in the first-choice school of their higher-achieving peers (78 percent). Similarly, Figure ES-2 on page vii shows that the lowest-achieving students were less likely than their higher-achieving peers to select a school that had received an "A" on the Progress Report (29 percent vs. 39 percent) and were more likely to select one that earned a "C," "D," or "F" (30 percent vs. 16 percent).

- **Overall, lower-achieving and higher-achieving students are matched to their top choices at the same rate.** About 53 percent of both

groups received their first-choice school. The exception to this finding is that low-achieving students were less likely to be matched to a selective (screened or audition) school than their higher-achieving peers, though a smaller share of low-achieving students listed a selective school as their first choice.

- **For both groups of students, the school ultimately attended was, on average, lower-performing and more disadvantaged than their first-choice school.** This reflects the fact that most students tend to rank relatively higher-performing schools first—an indication that quality matters to students—and not all students get their first choice. The *differences* between first-choice schools and final placements, however, were comparable for low-achieving and other students. This implies that the gaps between groups in first-choice schools carry forward to final school assignments.
- **Although gaps persist between the schools low-achieving students and their higher-achieving peers rank first and attend, the overall performance of high schools in New York City has improved over time.** For example, the average graduation rate at low-achieving students' first-choice schools increased more than 15 points between 2007 and 2011. The

Figure ES-2: Progress Report Grades of First-Choice Schools, 2007-2011



same was true for schools ranked first by their higher-achieving peers. Thus, while differences remain in the performance of schools attended by these two groups, low-achieving students are choosing and attending schools with better outcomes than in years past.

What Are the Implications of These Findings?

This study was not an evaluation of high school choice in New York City, and cannot tell us to what extent the choice system itself is responsible for low-achieving students attending better schools over time. At this point, we also have little say about *why* students chose the schools they did. Choice allows families to identify schools they believe are best for them, by whatever criteria they set. Academic performance is a factor, but location, curricular fit, safety, and familiarity all play a role as well. We make no claims here whether students are making the “right” choices or not.

Rather, we view this study as an important first step toward understanding the choices and school assignments of the City’s lowest-achieving students. Our results document systematic, and sometimes large, differences in the performance and composition of schools attended by the lowest-achieving and all other students. Given that, overall, both groups of students were equally likely to be assigned to their top choices, these differences are largely the result of differences in their initial choices. Such findings raise at least two important questions for policymakers, educators and researchers to consider regarding the choice process and, specifically, the choices of low-achieving students:

1. Can school choice policies address the concentration of low-achieving students in disadvantaged communities? School choice policies provide an avenue for students to enroll in schools citywide, but in practice, students are constrained by familiarity with a school and their willingness to travel. All students appear to prefer higher-performing schools and schools that are close to home (selecting first-choice schools that are about a half hour away on average). However, low-achieving students tend to live in disadvantaged communities, where need is concentrated and the supply of high-performing schools is low. The good news is that the supply of schools across the City appears to be improving. Yet, we need to learn more about the distribution of higher-performing schools, particularly the extent to which they

are available in the communities where many of NYC's low-achieving students live. Likewise, additional research is needed about strategies to help low-achieving students get access to higher-performing schools outside of their communities.

It is worth noting that many high schools give admissions priority to students residing in the same borough or geographic school district. Such priorities make sense, as they ensure students have access to schools in their own neighborhood if they wish to attend them. At the same time, because of the concentration of low-achieving students in certain neighborhoods, this clustering may put them at a disadvantage when applying to schools citywide. These students may, for example, find it more difficult to be admitted to oversubscribed, high-quality schools with geographic priorities outside of their neighborhood or borough. This remains an unstudied issue worthy of attention.

2. To what extent does NYC's system of selective and non-selective high schools isolate lower-achieving students? Our analysis finds that low-achieving students are less likely to rank selective high schools as their top choice, and those who do (nearly a third) are less likely to be admitted. Choice offers students the opportunity to attend a school that best meets their needs, and very rigorous programs may not be a good match for lower-achieving students, who may be unprepared for such coursework. At the same time, the system has the potential to persistently stratify low- and high-achieving students into different schools—stratification that is driven by both geographic and performance-based admission criteria. Greater attention should be paid to the geographic distribution of selective and non-selective schools, as well as the way admissions methods shape choices and the allocation of students across schools. Expanding access to academically mixed educational option schools may be one viable strategy for reducing the isolation of lower-achieving students in certain schools.

New York City's lowest-achieving students are, on average, attending higher-quality high schools than in years past, and graduating from NYC high schools in higher numbers. Whether or not these gains are attributable to the City's policy of universal high school choice, however, is an open—and difficult—question. The Department of Education has made great strides in streamlining the choice process, providing students and their families with more information about their options,

and making school assignments fairer and more transparent. At the same time, there are limitations to what choice alone can accomplish. As evident from this study, students face constraints that shape the set of schools they can and do consider. Any improvements seen here may be driven at least as much by changes in supply—new schools that the district has brought to the neighborhoods that need them most—as by changes in demand.

Given the over-representation of low-achieving students in the poorest sections of the City, it is critical that the district continue efforts to bring targeted improvement to these communities. Helping low-achieving students and their families become fully informed about their options should remain a high priority as well. It is also important that sufficient resources be made available to help students with their choices, including an adequate number of knowledgeable guidance counselors with the time to devote to students needing the most support. Finally, the district should take steps to ensure that low-achieving students are not being concentrated in schools that give them little exposure to higher-achieving students. Promoting more high-quality educational option programs may be one way to accomplish this.

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