Beyond Parent Management: The Role of Students and Schools in Philadelphia's High School "Choice" Process

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Beyond Parent Management: The Role of Students and Schools in Philadelphia's High School "Choice" Process

Abstract
This dissertation is a multiple methods study that examines the role of both students and schools in Philadelphia's high school application process. First, district administrative data of a cohort of eighth grade students in 2008-09 and school characteristics is used to examine students' odds of high school application and admission. A two-level hierarchical generalized linear model is used to account for the clustering of students within sending schools and to determine the relative contribution of individual and school characteristics. Students who meet the seventh grade record criteria have higher odds of application and admission, but race, gender, special education status, and English language learner (ELL) status are also significant predictors. Further, students in K-8 schools have higher odds of application, and students in high poverty and persistently dangerous schools have lower odds of admission, controlling for other factors.

Second, interview data of sending school counselors, parents, and students and observations of high school-related activities at 10 schools is used to answer questions about who manages the application process. Counselors employed two distinct strategies. In the "clearinghouse approach," counselors were willing to help students, but the burden of information and decision-making is on families. In contrast, counselors who used the "brokering approach" raise students' high school awareness in seventh grade and meet individually with students and their parents in eighth grade to decide where the child should apply, given their seventh grade record and interests. Students whose parents have less than high school education and students from immigrant families particularly benefit from the institutional supports of the brokering approach because they otherwise navigate the high school application process independently. Thus, the counselor approach is one mechanism through which schools can mitigate or exacerbate individual differences in information and the likelihood of high school application and admission.

Overall, this study reveals that individual and sending school characteristics matter more than the school choice literature suggests. Students' seventh grade record limits their high school options, but students with equal qualifications have unequal odds of admission in this system based on their background characteristics and school characteristics.

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ABSTRACT

BEYOND PARENT MANAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS IN PHILADELPHIA’S HIGH SCHOOL “CHOICE” PROCESS

CLARISSE L. HAXTON
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This dissertation is a multiple methods study that examines the role of both students and schools in Philadelphia’s high school application process. First, district administrative data of a cohort of eighth grade students in 2008-09 and school characteristics is used to examine students’ odds of high school application and admission. A two-level hierarchical generalized linear model is used to account for the clustering of students within sending schools and to determine the relative contribution of individual and school characteristics. Students who meet the seventh grade record criteria have higher odds of application and admission, but race, gender, special education status, and English language learner (ELL) status are also significant predictors. Further, students in K-8 schools have higher odds of application, and students in high poverty and persistently dangerous schools have lower odds of admission, controlling for other factors.
Second, interview data of sending school counselors, parents, and students and observations of high school-related activities at 10 schools is used to answer questions about who manages the application process. Counselors employed two distinct strategies. In the “clearinghouse approach,” counselors were willing to help students, but the burden of information and decision-making is on families. In contrast, counselors who used the “brokering approach” raise students’ high school awareness in seventh grade and meet individually with students and their parents in eighth grade to decide where the child should apply, given their seventh grade record and interests. Students whose parents have less than high school education and students from immigrant families particularly benefit from the institutional supports of the brokering approach because they otherwise navigate the high school application process independently. Thus, the counselor approach is one mechanism through which schools can mitigate or exacerbate individual differences in information and the likelihood of high school application and admission.

Overall, this study reveals that individual and sending school characteristics matter more than the school choice literature suggests. Students’ seventh grade record limits their high school options, but students with equal qualifications have unequal odds of admission in this system based on their background characteristics and school characteristics.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a transitional period in the life course in which adolescents have increasing independence, but also benefit from adult guidance in making decisions and navigating social institutions. The high school application process in Philadelphia provides a window into the role of students, parents, and schools in adolescents’ educational decision-making and outcomes. The transition to high school in Philadelphia and other large, urban districts is not just an orderly procession of eighth grade students from their local middle school to their catchment area, neighborhood high school. Instead, eighth graders apply to high schools in a system of “universal choice” (Elmore, 1991; Elmore & Fuller, 1996) in which all families have the opportunity to participate in high school choice and all schools are technically choice schools. The high school application process has become a normalized part of the transition to high school in Philadelphia, and the number of high school options has increased over time. However, not all high schools are equal, and it is important to consider how choices are made and the consequences of “choice” for all students.

The choices that exist today have evolved over several decades through the layering of reform efforts in Philadelphia, each with its own rationale and purpose (Gold et al., 2010). Central High School was established in 1838 and was the second public secondary school in the country. The Philadelphia High School for Girls was established in 1848 and was the second public secondary school for women in Pennsylvania. These two high schools, along with a set of schools introduced in the 1970s as “academic magnets” with selective scholastic criteria and another set of schools created from 2003
to 2008 as part of a small schools initiative, comprise Philadelphia’s most selective tier of high schools. Small high schools span the three admission categories, but are concentrated in the most selective tier (Hartman et al., 2009). In addition, Philadelphia has a history of vocational high schools that dates to the 1930s and expanded with the founding of the non-profit organization Philadelphia Academies, Inc. in 1969, which partners with local industries to establish career-focused programs within the district’s neighborhood high schools. Today called career and technical education (CTE), these schools have less selective admission criteria and comprise a second tier of high schools in the district. The final tier of high schools is the traditional, non-selective, neighborhood high schools.

As the logic model (Figure 1.1) shows, information influences whether students decide to complete a high school application form and where they decide to apply. Application decisions influence students’ likelihood of admission and thus their enrollment options, and the high school a student attends influences their educational opportunities and outcomes.

Figure 1.1 Logic model of the high school application process

This dissertation examines the multiple step process through which students are sorted into high schools. It focuses on the eighth grade application process and admission outcomes as a critical point in the transition to high school that is overlooked when
researchers analyze high school outcomes without questioning how students in districts with extensive choice options ended up in their high schools.

Understanding the complex nature of application decisions and admission outcomes in the high school “choice” process requires a multiple methods approach. The quantitative research questions examine student and school characteristics and require a multilevel model to account for the nested nature of the data. The qualitative questions and data allow for an examination of contextual factors within families and schools that are not measured in the administrative data. The multiple methods nature of this study provides a policy relevant examination of the adequacy and equity of information and support for all students, the relative balance of parent and student management in native-born and immigrant families, the extent to which sending school counselors contribute to family decision-making in this process, and the number of quality high school options as a limiting factor for the equity of educational opportunities in the district.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

The structure of the high school application process requires the examination of student characteristics and permits analysis of whether schools influence choice outcomes. Unlike lottery-based choice programs, the high school application process has selective admission criteria. Therefore, analysis of outcomes in this process requires consideration of student demographic and academic record data. Further, choice is often seen as “stealing” students and funds away from traditional public schools, but this choice process occurs within the traditional public school system at a natural educational transition from eighth to ninth grade. Therefore, it is important to examine the sending school role in providing students and their families with information and support in
navigating the high school application process. The quantitative research questions are as follows:

1) *Who participates in the high school application process?* This question includes descriptive comparisons of the demographic and achievement characteristics of applicants and non-applicants and students who receive an acceptance versus those who do not.

2) *To what extent do student, sending school, and assigned neighborhood high school characteristics predict students’ likelihood of high school application?*

3) *To what extent do student and sending school characteristics predict students’ likelihood of high school admission?*

Questions 2 and 3 examine student and school factors related to students’ application and admission, taking into account the multiple dimensions of educational decision-making so as not to overestimate the effects of individuals or schools. Student characteristics include demographic and seventh grade record data. Sending school characteristics are hypothesized to predict application and admission, while characteristics of students’ assigned neighborhood high school are hypothesized to influence application decisions, but not admission outcomes. In addition to examining students’ odds of completing any application and receiving any admission, models are run for application and admission to each selective high school tier (Tier 1 and Tier 2) and for admission to students’ first choice school.

The elements contained within the circle on Figure 1.2 illustrate the conceptual framework used to examine the quantitative research questions:
I use district administrative data to answer the quantitative questions, which does not include measures of information or parent characteristics. Also, admission and enrollment are a combined outcome in this study because although students can apply and be accepted to multiple high schools, the district only keeps a record of the high school to which a student was accepted and decided to enroll.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

This dissertation also includes qualitative case studies to understand the relative influences of parents, students, and school counselors on high school application decisions. The benefit of qualitative research is that it can identify and examine the context and mechanisms through which students and schools operate to influence outcomes in the quantitative analysis.

The majority of school choice research has focused on parents as “choosers,” but the high school application process occurs at a point in the life course where it makes
sense to include students as potential actors. The transition to high school is a period in which adolescents have increasing independence and may manage or help to manage their own educational decisions. I use interview data to examine the relative role of parents and students in making application decisions, and I include students from native-born and immigrant families to compare how they navigate this process.

I also conduct a set of qualitative case studies focusing on K-8 school counselors to understand how they manage the process at their schools. Quantitative measures of school characteristics are limited, so this analysis takes a step towards understanding the counselor as a potential mechanism through which schools are associated with student outcomes in the high school application process. I focus on counselors rather than teachers or other school staff because the sending school counselor is officially responsible for the high school application process in Philadelphia. Additionally, although counselors are understudied in elementary and middle school contexts, higher education research has identified school counselors as important sources of information and support for students in the college application process (Falsey & Heyns, 1984; Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997, 2005). Given the competitive and selective nature of the high school application process in this study, eighth grade counselors may play a role similar to that of high school counselors in shaping students’ educational decisions. The qualitative research questions are as follows:

4) What is the relative role of students and parents within families in deciding whether and where to apply?

5) Are there differences in how students from native-born and immigrant families navigate the application process?
6) To what extent are students’ background characteristics and prior academic record associated with families’ information and application decisions?

7) What approaches do sending school counselors take to provide students and parents with information and support in the application process, and to what extent do the approaches influence students’ application decisions and outcomes?

The elements contained within the circle on Figure 1.3 illustrates the conceptual framework used to answer these qualitative research questions:

Figure 1.3 Conceptual framework of the qualitative research questions

The qualitative portion of this study considers the parent, student, and sending school characteristics that influence information in the high school application process, and how information relates to students’ application decisions.
CHAPTER OUTLINE

This dissertation makes conceptual contributions to the literature on families and schools, school choice, schools as organizations, and the transition to high school. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on school choice and its consequences. It also calls for a critical examination of assumptions of perfect information and consumer choice in the market model framework of choice policies, and the assumption of parent management of educational decisions that dominates prior choice research. Chapter 3 outlines the data and methods used in this study, which includes district administrative data and primary interview and observational data collected for this project. Chapter 4 examines the patterns and predictors of application and admission outcomes. It finds that student and sending school characteristics are both significant predictors of choice outcomes. Chapter 5 uses qualitative data to describe the stakes of the high school application process for students.

Chapters 6 through 8 use qualitative data to analyze the roles of several actors in managing the high school application process. Chapter 6 focuses on the sending school counselor role. It finds two distinct counselor approaches to providing students and their parents with information and support—the clearinghouse approach and the brokering approach. The brokering approach raises students’ high school awareness in seventh grade and provides students with information and support in the application process in eighth grade, highlighting the counselor approach as one mechanism through which schools can mitigate or exacerbate individual differences in the likelihood of high school application and admission. Chapter 7 and 8 find that students actively manage the high school application process, and that information and application decisions are highly
correlated with students’ seventh grade record, preferences, and motivation. In addition, parent involvement varies as a function of their education and English proficiency. Chapter 9 concludes by addressing the conceptual and policy relevance of this research, and the implications for future research. Neither students nor schools have been considered as actors in prior school choice research, but this study reveals that student and sending school characteristics both predict choice outcomes.
CHAPTER 2  
BACKGROUND

The high school application—or high school “choice”—process that is the focus of this dissertation is a conceptually important variant of school choice that questions: 1) the applicability of market-based models in education; 2) the assumption of parent management of choice decisions; and 3) the consequences of choice systems for all students. This chapter provides background about school choice policies, including a discussion of the problems with market model assumptions of “perfect information” and “consumer choice” in the education setting. Then, it argues that in the high school application process, the role of the student and the sending school counselor must be considered in addition to the parent role, which has been the emphasis in prior research. Finally, this chapter discusses the consequences of high school choice, namely that it shifts tracking from within schools to across schools and creates unequal educational opportunities for students.

SCHOOL CHOICE BACKGROUND

The theoretical framework for school choice applies economic market model assumptions to education. Supporters argue first that by creating a competitive market for students and parents to select schools, choice systems hold schools accountable to market supply and demand (Chubb and Moe, 1990). Education vouchers, which allow families to opt out of the public system and attend private schools, are another form of choice with the same underlying assumptions (Friedman, 1962). Second, since choice over residential location and thus schools has always existed for advantaged families, school choice policies have the potential to empower low-income parents (Coleman, 1990; Wong,
Third, choice can attract middle-class families to cities, increasing integration, resources, and general support for public schools (Varady & Raffel, 1995).

Opponents of choice policies argue that the realities of school choice have belied the theory. First, unsuccessful charter schools have been slow to close (Center for Education Reform, 2001). There is evidence that parents are more satisfied in choice schools than traditional public schools, but evidence is mixed about whether choice schools improve student achievement (Gill et al., 2001; Teske & Schneider, 2001). Second, many school choice options benefit families with higher incomes and more education, exacerbating existing disparities in public education (Elmore, 1990; Henig, 1994; Wells, 1993). Research on school choice has consistently found that disadvantaged students—racial and ethnic minorities, poor students, special education students, and English language learners (ELL)—are less likely to participate in choice programs (Elmore, 1990; Elmore & Fuller, 1996; Henig, 1994; Moore & Davenport, 1990; Witte, 1993; Yancey & Saporito, 1995). There is also evidence that although charter schools may not “cream” the best students, they “crop off” service to students whose language or special education needs make them more costly to educate (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002). The goals of increased market equity and increased quality have not been fulfilled in choice implementation, and skeptics argue that choice systems have created “new improved sorting machines” (Moore & Davenport, 1990).

**Imperfect information, unequal access**

One flaw of market model assumptions in the context of school choice is that families do not have perfect information on which to base educational decisions. Astin (1992) summarizes the problem with assumptions about information access as follows:
Classical economics tells us that a free market guarantees the highest-quality goods and services for the lowest price only when the consumer has ‘perfect information’ about all the available goods and services. In the free educational market that ‘choice’ is designed to create, how are students and parents supposed to get this information? And just what information should they get? (p. 25).

The high school application process is one of “universal choice” (Elmore, 1991; Elmore & Fuller, 1996) in which every eighth grade student in the district has the opportunity to apply to high schools and all schools are technically choice schools. Universal choice policies are intended to allow students a set of school options from which they can choose the school that best fits their interests and preferences, but as Astin (1992) states, decisions must be made about what information is relevant and how information should be made accessible so students can exercise choice.

Chubb and Moe (1990) posited that school choice may create incentives for parents to search for information, but this assumes that information is available for consumption. In reality, official information about choice options, program characteristics, application deadlines, and acceptance criteria is often sparse and incomplete (Moore & Davenport, 1990; Neild, 2005; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). A survey about school choice in four large urban districts indicated that parents lack basic information about application due dates and admission requirements (Moore & Davenport, 1990). Another study in New York City found that the city’s high school guide was compiled based on self-report data, and contained outdated and inflated information about programs and school performance that misled the students who relied on it to make their application decisions (Rosenbloom, 2009).
The content, format, and distribution methods of information are all important considerations for public school choice programs (Salganik & Carver, 1992). Reforms under the 2001 federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) law focused on increasing the amount of publicly available information about school performance, but making information available and making it accessible are two different issues. School data is mostly limited to district and state websites that are not user-friendly for families due to literacy and language barriers (Schneider & Buckley, 2002). As technology research has shown, the amount and heterogeneity of information on the internet is likely to reinforce and exacerbate information inequalities because more advantaged families are more likely to have internet access and to have greater proficiency at internet navigation (DiMaggio, 2004; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Also, information used for organizational accountability purposes is not necessarily the same information that is useful to families in making choice decisions. For example, high school course offerings, average SAT scores, graduation rates, and college-going rates may be useful for families making high school application decisions, but this data is not required for NCLB reporting so it is not systematically collected and made available. Published texts and websites are primary methods that educational institutions use to communicate with parents about their children’s schooling, but bureaucratic and managerial decisions influence the content, format, and distribution methods such that the end product often fails to satisfy the needs of families (Andre-Bechely, 2004).

Recent experimental design studies have found that parents use information when it is given to them. One study examined the effects of two types of information—school performance data and school admission rates—on parents’ choice decisions. Parents who
were provided with school test score data were significantly more likely than other parents to apply to schools with high test scores, and parents who were provided admission information were significantly more likely to apply to schools with higher admission rates (Hastings et al., 2007). However, outside of laboratory settings, parents often lack formal information and have uneven access to the available information.

Information adequacy and equity are critical components of choice participation, and school systems take different approaches to whether the responsibility for information acquisition lies with the family or with the school system. In a comparative study of two districts in New York City, Marschall (2000) finds that institutional structures for information dissemination set norms for knowledge and choice participation. In one district with a mature choice program, there were institutional structures in place to disseminate information and families knew school names, reputations, and locations. In a second district with a less-established choice program, there was limited information and no systematic process for distributing information. The responsibility for becoming informed was shifted from institutions to parents, and less information and support was associated with lower levels of participation (Marschall, 2000).

Differential access to institutional information resources is problematic because less advantaged parents rely more heavily than advantaged parents on formal modes of communication, such as district publications (Smrekar & Goldring 1999; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch 1995). In the absence of official information, social relationships allow individuals to access informational resources possessed by their associates, but the amount and quality of these resources differ across relationship networks (Neild, 2005;
Portes, 1998). Middle-class parents and those with greater education are more likely to have access to information through “weak ties” with a variety of well-educated people, including some who have first-hand knowledge of the school system through their roles as teachers or administrators. In contrast, low-income parents’ networks are more populated by relatives whose access to quality information about schools or the school choice process is uncertain (Schneider et al., 1997).

There are additional barriers to information access for racial/ethnic minority, immigrant, and English language learner (ELL) students. In immigrant households, English proficiency and understanding mainstream social norms are significant predictors of information access (Kao, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Ethnic communities provide members with dense social networks and support, but they generally offer limited access to information outside of the ethnic niche (Hirschman, 1983). In school choice processes, non-native English speakers and those with less education have more limited information and greater difficulties in guiding their children through school choice (Moore & Davenport, 1990).

Not just consumer choice

Another flaw of the market model in the education context is that choice policies are often not just a function of consumer choice. In selective school choice systems such as the high school application process in Philadelphia and other major cities, both families and schools are “choosers” (Neild, 1999; Rosenbloom, 2009). Even if “perfect information” could be satisfied, the education marketplace does not mirror the economic marketplace because after families decide where they want their child to attend school, schools decide which applicants they will accept and reject. The competitive nature of the
high school application process adds steps between application and enrollment. Information helps families to make strategic application decisions that may increase students’ chances of admission, but there is no guarantee of admission. Prior research has focused on “participants” and “non-participants” or “choosers” and “non-choosers,” but more nuanced examinations are necessary given that not all students who attempt to participate in choice are allowed to enroll in the school they desire. Rosenbloom (2009), for example, distinguishes between “non-applicants” and “non-admits.”

“School choice” is a popular phrase, but it is a misnomer when choice options are oversubscribed and in high school application processes with selective admission. A recent Philadelphia Inquirer headline noted, “In Philadelphia, School Choice is Often No Choice at All” (Graham, 2010). The Chicago Tribune has written about the “game” of public school admissions and how some high schools are “harder to get into than Harvard” (Banchero, 2008). And The New York Times described how, “Many parents have spent the last few weeks trying to factor all the permutations of the system and… how they might improve their children’s odds of getting into the schools they favor” (Herszenhorn, 2003). Exercising choice was envisioned as a catalyst for schools that lost students to improve and be responsive to consumer interests and preferences (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Marschall, 2000; Schneider et al., 2000), but interest in choice outpaces the number of desirable school options and spots in desirable schools (Neild, 2005; Rosenbloom, 2009). Focusing on family participation draws attention to the need for information, but distinguishing between applications and admissions shifts the analytic lens to consider the school and system characteristics that structure students’ options. The
family context and school context are both important for understanding the implications of choice policies on student outcomes.

THE STUDENT ROLE IN SCHOOL CHOICE

Prior school choice research has narrowly focused on parents as the decision-makers, despite often using the terms “parent” and “family” interchangeably (Elmore & Fuller, 1996; Neild, 1999, 2005; Saporito & Lareau, 1999; Schneider et al., 1997; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). While focusing on parents as the sole decision-makers may be appropriate for younger children, adolescents may manage or help to manage their own educational decisions. Due to the paucity of research on students’ role in educational decision-making (Ascher & Wamba, 2005; Rosenbloom, 2009), this section uses research on parents and schools to highlight the importance of considering students as choice actors.

A long tradition of social class research has shown that the extent to which parents feel comfortable interacting with school staff varies by social class (Bernstein, 1977; Entwisle & Alexander, 1993; Haveman et al., 2004; Hill, 2008; Lareau, 2000; Roscigno, 2000). Lareau (2000) argues that while all parents want their children to succeed in school, social class shapes the resources and skills at their disposal to help their children and to navigate institutions to advocate for their children. In a qualitative study of 12 White, two-parent families, Lareau (2000) finds that working-class parents are more respectful of teachers’ professional status and expertise, but upper-middle-class parents fulfill teachers’ expectations of the extent to which and ways in which parents should be involved in their children’s schooling. Whereas working class parents treat home and school as separate spheres, upper-middle-class parents perceive home and
school as interconnected. This interconnectedness of home and school provides parents with feelings of entitlement and competence in interactions with school staff, and helps them to personalize their children’s education. Lareau (2003) also finds that social class differences in parenting persist across Black and White families.

In addition to socioeconomic status, children from immigrant families face multiple disadvantages based on their parents’ wide-ranging levels of educational attainment, English language skills, exposure to Western culture, and familiarity with the American educational system. Parent expectations have an effect net of SES (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Goyette & Xie, 1999), and immigrant families can compensate for acculturation challenges with strong ethnic networks that maintain high expectations for children’s achievement (Gorman, 1998; Kao, 1995; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Schneider & Lee, 1990; Zhou & Bankston, 2001). Immigrant parents encourage their children to work hard to take advantage of opportunities that did not exist in their home countries, a frame of reference that racial minorities without direct roots in another country do not have.

However, the combination of high expectations and a limited ability to help their children in immigrant families exacerbates the parent-child tension typical in families with adolescents (Qin, 2006). In a longitudinal qualitative study of two immigrant Chinese families, Qin (2006) found that due to both high parental academic pressure and linguistic barriers, the families experienced increased parent-child alienation as the children moved through adolescence. Immigrant families represent a composite of two cultural systems, with the mix depending on the length of time in the United States and their social class (Massey, 1981), and different paces of parent and child acculturation create family tensions (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). As adolescents develop their academic
and social skills in the American context, the burden of both falls more heavily on students in immigrant families since they often cannot rely on their parents for concrete help. In this regard, students in immigrant families are like the native-born, working-class families that Lareau (2000, 2003) describes who have parent support but limited help in navigating schools and other social institutions.

Immigrant students are a growing population in the country and in public schools, but there is currently a lack of understanding about differences within panethnic categories that relate to students’ educational experiences and outcomes. Approximately 20 percent of all school-aged children in the United States are immigrants or children of immigrants, and this is the fastest growing school aged population in the country (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Further, immigrants tend to concentrate in a few, predominantly urban, geographic areas (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Hispanic immigrants, and Mexicans in particular, struggle because they often lack human capital, English language-proficiency, and ethnic networks. Mexican immigrants, on average, have low human capital, including limited educational attainment, limited urban job skills, and little or no English knowledge (Lopez & Stanton-Salazar, 2001). They come to the United States primarily as labor immigrants, occupying low-status, low-wage jobs in agriculture, restaurants, and other service industries. There is no formal mechanism for their incorporation as there is for professional immigrants through employer sponsorship or for refugees through state sponsorship. Moreover, the issue of legal status among Mexican immigrants has no analogue in other groups (Alba & Nee, 2003). Given their parents’ low SES resources, the success of Mexican immigrants and children of Mexican immigrants is tightly linked with school achievement (Stanton-
Asian refugee immigrants with low educational attainment and English knowledge also struggle to help their children in school. Southeast Asian refugee immigrants that have come to the United States post-1975 are poorer and less educated than earlier waves of Southeast Asian refugees (Ngo & Lee, 2007). The educational attainment and income of Southeast Asian American adults is substantially lower than for Asian Americans as a whole. Although 13 percent of Chinese Americans, 15 percent of South Asian Americans, and 9 percent of Japanese Americans have less than a high school education, the numbers for Southeast Asian adults with less than a high school education more than double this average: 52 percent of Cambodian Americans, 59 percent of Hmong Americans, 49 percent of Lao Americans, and 38 percent of Vietnamese Americans (U.S. Census, 2000). The per capita income of Southeast Asians is also lower than the national average and lower than that of other minority groups. Vietnamese Americans had the highest per capita income among Southeast Asian Americans, with $15,385; Cambodian Americans earned $10,215, and Lao Americans earned $11,454. In contrast, the overall U.S. population average is $21,000. Additionally, with the exception of Vietnamese Americans, Southeast Asians earn less than any other racial and ethnic group. The average per capita income is $14,222 for Black or African Americans, $12,111 for Hispanic or Latino Americans, and $23,635 for White Americans (U.S. Census, 2000).

Disadvantaged students—poor, minority, and immigrant—have fewer resources and greater needs than their peers. In a study about parents and adolescents in poor, urban neighborhoods, Furstenberg and colleagues (1999) write that unlike middle-class youth
“who are typically afforded time to wander and second chances if they go off track,”
disadvantaged adolescents operate “with a thin margin of error” (p.213). In examining the
postsecondary transition, they explain, “Many parents are poorly informed about the
educational tracking that takes place in high school, the courses their children must take
to enter a four-year college, sources of academic support outside the high school, and
ways of financing higher education” (Furstenberg et al., 1999, p. 227). The high school
application process in urban districts is similar. Students have a “thin margin of error”
because there are unequal educational opportunities across high schools and admission
decisions are based on students’ seventh grade records. There are no second chances, as it
is almost impossible to transfer to a higher tier during high school. However,
disadvantaged students navigate the high school application process by themselves, and
these students tend to haphazardly choose schools or resign themselves to attending a
school at the bottom of the educational hierarchy (Rosenbloom, 2009). This places a
premium on academic preparation and high school awareness in seventh grade,
application information in eighth grade, and students being motivated and future-
oriented.

THE SCHOOL ROLE IN SCHOOL CHOICE

Schools matter above and beyond family factors (Coleman, 1968) and this study
considers how they may matter in the context of school choice, particularly for students
from disadvantaged families. School contributions to choice decisions have been under-
examined in prior research due to the generally contentious nature of children opting out
of their assigned schools for choice options and the emphasis on choice as a parent
decision, but schools may help to provide families with information about choice options
and support in making application decisions. Without considering school factors in models of educational outcomes such as choice decisions, researchers may overestimate the effect of families (Marschall, 2000; Roscigno, 2000).

Counselors are understudied in K-12 education because they do not directly influence the input-output function of student test score outcomes that has been the focus of educational research for the past decade, but this study examines the counselor role because they have been identified as a critical mechanism through which schools can influence student outcomes (Falsey & Heyns, 1984; Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997, 2005). McDonough (1997, 2005) and Hill (2008) focus on the role of counselors for students in the postsecondary transition, but their research is also applicable to the high school transition. In a set of qualitative high school case studies, McDonough (1997) finds that counselors delimit the universe of postsecondary choices into a smaller range of cognitively manageable considerations based on parent and community expectations and counselors’ own knowledge and experience. Hill (2008) examines differences across counselors and identifies three college-related counselor strategies: traditional, clearinghouse, and brokering. The traditional strategy provides a labor market link for the majority of students and a channel to college for a much smaller segment of the student population. Clearinghouse is characterized by a solid resource structure for college planning but weak organizational commitment. The brokering strategy provides substantial resources and an organizational commitment to providing students and parents with these resources. Although both the clearinghouse and brokering strategies are positively associated with enrollment in a four-year college among college-bound students, brokering schools are more effective at facilitating four-year college enrollment.
These studies highlight the significance of counselors on students’ educational decision-making. They also reveal that a combination of resources and organizational commitment yields the most positive outcomes for students.

Institutional agents such as school counselors are especially important sources of information and assistance for disadvantaged students, but counseling and other resources are less available in disadvantaged schools and for less advantaged students within schools (McDonough, 1997, 2005; Perna, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Disadvantaged youth are less likely to report ties to institutional agents and are also less likely than their peers to seek out information (Hill, 2008; Schneider et al., 1997; Smrekar & Goldring, 1995; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). African American and Latino students are significantly more likely to have their college plans influenced by their high school counselor than other students, but they are the most likely to have inexperienced counselors and counselors that are pulled away to work on other tasks (McDonough, 2005).

The relative role of family and school factors on students’ choice outcomes has been underexplored in the literature, but the competitive public high school application process in the transition to high school in urban districts such as Philadelphia is similar to the college application process and the postsecondary transition. Counselors are one potential mechanism through which schools may contribute to students’ choice outcomes. Research on counselors has been limited to the domain of higher education, but the potential role of counselors in earlier grades for helping students to navigate the high school application process merits examination.
CONSEQUENCES OF “CHOICE”

Beyond who chooses—parents, students, or school counselors—where students end up is important because academic and social opportunities are structured by the so-called choice system. The majority of tracking research focuses on classrooms and academic tracks within schools, but academic opportunities, learning environments, and resources also vary across schools (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Oakes, 1985; Perna, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan 2007). This increases the stakes of the high school application process. Studies that have specifically examined between school variation have found that, for example, the number of advanced courses offered is unequally distributed across schools (Kao & Thompson, 2003). In addition, violence is more prevalent in lower-resource, lower-performing schools. Students in inner-city schools are more likely to encounter violence (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) and students in “reactive” schools spend energy resisting negative peer influences instead of defining a positive vision for what they can achieve (Gibson et al., 2004). Tracking research can be applied to Philadelphia’s tiered system of high schools, which comprise a de facto tracking system across schools that has implications for student outcomes.

Learning opportunities are systematically and highly stratified by academic tracks (Hallinan, 1988; Rosenbaum, 1976; Oakes, 1985). As Coleman (1968) stated:

It is one thing to take as given that approximately 70 percent of an entering high school freshman class will not attend college; but to assign a particular child to a curriculum designed for that 70 percent closes off for that child the opportunity to attend college (p.13).
In a case study of a working-class high school, Rosenbaum (1976) found that teachers who taught students in the highest academic track spent more time preparing for class and presented more interesting material. Gamoran (1987) found that students in different tracks take the same number of courses in English and social studies, but differ by track in the number of math and science courses, especially the number of advanced courses. Oakes’ (1985) work suggests that such differences occur systematically across American high schools. In a qualitative study of 25 middle and high schools, Oakes (1985) examined track placement and classroom processes. She found that lower track students were exposed to less valued knowledge than higher track students, spent less time on-task, and received less instructional time from less enthusiastic teachers. Thus, it follows that track placement has an independent effect on student achievement (Alexander, Cook, & McDill, 1978).

Track assignment also has socioemotional consequences. Lower track placement is associated with the development of negative attitudes and behaviors toward school (Hallinan, 1988). Oakes (1985) found that those in the lower track had lower opinions of themselves, fewer friends, and lower educational expectations than their average-track and high-track peers. These findings are correlational, but students’ perceptions of their ability to succeed academically and the importance of education for providing life opportunities are defined in relation to their peers, and peer interactions are limited by track structure. As Rosenbloom (2009) has shown, “non-admit” students’ perceptions of their peers and their school is shaped by their relative position at the bottom of the high school hierarchy.
Further, race and class differences in track placement and acceptance at selective high schools are related to race and class differences in student outcomes. Tracking research has found that low-SES and racial minority students are disproportionately placed in lower tracks and are also disproportionately likely to become high school dropouts (Oakes, 1985). Asian and White students are the groups most likely to be in the college preparatory track and least likely to be in lower track, vocational education programs (Kao & Thompson, 2003). In the high school application process, disadvantaged students are disproportionately “left behind” in the lowest tier, neighborhood schools (Saporito, 2003).

Academic opportunities set the bounds on attainment, and attainment is increasingly important for labor market and life outcomes (Collins, 1971, 2000). In the context of the high school application process, tracking students into a tiered system of high schools must be critically examined in terms of equity of educational opportunity. The transition to high school is widely understood to be a critical point in students’ educational careers. Freshmen often must negotiate a new school building, manage increased academic expectations, and adapt to a more complex social environment (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Letgers & Kerr, 2001). For rising ninth graders in America’s largest cities, the high school application process is an additional challenge associated with high school entrance that has both academic and socio-emotional consequences.
SUMMARY

As school choice policies and options continue to grow and interest in choice options outpaces the number of available spots, what constitutes “choice” has become vague. In the specific context of competitive high school application processes in urban districts, application and admission are two distinct steps. For students who complete an application and do not receive an acceptance, the system provides a false promise of choice. Within a school district, some options are more desirable than others and not everyone can attend the “best” schools. However, the stakes are higher in districts such as Philadelphia where the disparities across schools are so pronounced.

Two problems with applying economic market model assumptions to school choice policies are that families do not have “perfect information” with which to make decisions and consumers are not the only “choosers.” Still, information may help families to decide whether and where to apply. Prior research is clear that information utility and accessibility has not been a key component of school choice policy implementation, but that parents use information when it is provided.

Also, parent management of choice decisions pervades the literature, failing to account for the role of students and schools. The parents-as-sole-decision-makers focus is insufficient for examining educational decisions in adolescence, particularly for students from disadvantaged groups. Parents’ educational, socioeconomic, and immigrant status are all related to their ability to help their children in school, so the relative balance of student and parent management of educational decisions within families is important to understand for targeting informational resources and institutional supports. The school role has also been under-examined in K-12 choice policies, but higher education research
suggests that the counselor is one mechanism through which schools influence students’ educational decisions.

The high school application process is a multiple step process with several potential actors at multiple levels. Since high school enrollment structures students’ learning and life opportunities, it is important to examine the full range of factors that predict students’ high school application and admission. This study argues that students and schools matter more than the school choice literature suggests.
CHAPTER 3
DATA, SAMPLE, AND METHODS

This study uses multiple methods, including a quantitative study of school district administrative data of the cohort of over 12,000 eighth graders in 2008-09 and qualitative case studies at 10 schools, including counselor, student, and parent interviews. This chapter begins by discussing the quantitative data, variables, and methods. The chapter introduces the quantitative data and describes how specific variables were constructed from these sources. It also outlines the analytic methods used, including the statistical methods used for dealing with the clustered and multi-level nature of the data in regression analysis. Then, it proceeds to discuss the qualitative sample, data, and the methods for qualitative analysis.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

The quantitative portion of this project uses administrative data for the entire cohort of eighth graders in the study district during the 2008-09 school year. The high school application process provides an opportunity for all eighth grade students to apply to high schools under a “universal choice” policy, which means that all district high schools are technically choice schools. Students can apply to a maximum of five schools. They complete the high school application in the fall of their eighth grade year and receive their admission decisions in the spring of their eighth grade year. Admission at selective high schools is based on students’ seventh grade records, including a combination of attendance, lateness, suspension, course grade, and test score requirements. Thus, seventh grade record data was used to examine the admissions process and outcomes for the study cohort in eighth grade.
A total of 15,875 eighth grade students submitted a high school application in 2008-09. However, applicants were excluded from the analytic sample for several reasons. First, applicants were excluded if they could not be located in district records other than the application file. These students applied to district high schools from charter, private, or other schools outside of the district and thus did not have any demographic data, seventh grade record data, or a school identification number. Second, students were excluded if they were enrolled in a district school in eighth grade, but were not in the district in seventh grade since they were missing all seventh grade record data. Third, students were excluded if they were enrolled in an alternative or disciplinary school since their high school assignment was based on factors extraneous to the high school application process. The resulting analytic sample includes the 12,160 students who were in the district data in both seventh grade (2007-08) and eighth grade (2008-09).

QUANTITATIVE VARIABLES

The following section explains the outcome variables and student- and school-level predictor variables that are included in the regression analysis.

Outcome variables

The analysis focuses on five outcome measures delineating various steps in the process from the decision about whether to apply to measures of specific admission outcomes. There are two measures of the application decision:

- ANY APPLICATION: dichotomous variable with 1 = completed a high school application and 0 = did not
- TIER 1 APPLICATION and TIER 2 APPLICATION: two dichotomous variables indicating whether a student applied to any Tier 1 or Tier 2 high schools. This excludes students who only applied to a Tier 3, neighborhood high school other than their assigned neighborhood high school because Tier 3 admission is not criteria-based. For these variables, 1 = applied to at least one Tier 1 or Tier 2 high
school, respectively, and 0 = did not apply to any Tier 1 or Tier 2 school, respectively. These are not mutually exclusive variables.

There are also three measures of the admission outcome, which reflect students’ high school admission and decision to enroll since the district data only keeps a record of the final high school at which a student was admitted and accepted the admission offer:

- **ANY ADMISSION**: dichotomous variable, conditional on application, with 1 = accepted to a high school at which the student applied and 0 = no acceptance
- **TIER 1 ADMISSION**: dichotomous variable, conditional on application, with 1 = accepted to and enrolling in a Tier 1 high school and 0 = not accepted and/or not attending a Tier 1 school
- **TIER 2 ADMISSION**: dichotomous variable, conditional on application, with 1 = accepted to and enrolling in a Tier 2 high school and 0 = not accepted and/or not attending a Tier 2 school
- **FIRST CHOICE ADMISSION**: dichotomous variable, conditional on application, with 1 = accepted to first choice high school and 0 = not accepted and/or not attending first choice school

**Student-level predictors**

The analysis includes two categories of student-level characteristics that were predicted to influence application and admission outcomes: 1) demographic and background characteristics; and 2) seventh grade record data.

**Demographic and background characteristics**

- **FEMALE**: dichotomous variable with 1 = female and 0 = male
- **Race/ethnicity**
  - BLACK: dichotomous variable with 1 = Black and 0 = other. This variable is used as the reference category.
  - WHITE: dichotomous variable with 1 = White and 0 = other
  - ASIAN: dichotomous variable with 1 = Asian and 0 = other
  - HISPANIC: dichotomous variable with 1 = non-white Hispanic and 0 = other
  - OTHER: dichotomous variable with 1 = Other and 0 = another race
- **ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER**: dichotomous variable indicating whether a student is formally classified as an English-language-learner student. (1 = ELL and 0 = non-ELL)
- **SPECIAL EDUCATION**: dichotomous variable indicating whether a student is formally classified as a special education student. This does not include “MG”
(mentally gifted) students because they are not classified as special education in the high school application process. (1= special education and 0 = non-special ed)

Seventh grade record data

- Attendance and behavior
  - 10 OR FEWER ABSENCES: dichotomous variable with 1 = meets this selective high school criteria in seventh grade and 0 = does not meet criteria
  - 5 OR FEWER LATENESSES: dichotomous variable with 1 = meets this selective high school criteria in seventh grade and 0 = does not meet criteria
  - NO OUT OF SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS: dichotomous variable with 1 = meets this selective high school criteria in seventh grade and 0 = does not meet criteria

- Academic grades
  - ALL As, Bs, AND Cs IN MAJOR SUBJECTS: dichotomous variable with 1= meets this Tier 2 high school criteria in seventh grade and 0 = does not meet criteria. Descriptive analyses are run with each of these variables and regression analyses use the less selective, Tier 2 course grade criteria.
  - ALL As, Bs, AND UP TO 1 C IN MAJOR SUBJECTS: dichotomous variable with 1 = meets this Tier 1 high school criteria in seventh grade and 0 = does not meet criteria

- Standardized test scores
  - MATH PSSA SCORE: categorical variable for the state standardized math test with values from 0 to 3, where 0 = below basic, 1 = basic, 2 = proficient, and 3 = advanced according to the test scoring categories
  - READING PSSA SCORE: categorical variable for the state standardized reading test with values from 0 to 3, where 0 = below basic, 1 = basic, 2 = proficient, and 3 = advanced according to the test scoring categories

- Composite eligibility for Tier 1 and Tier 2
  - MEETS ALL TIER 1 CRITERIA: dichotomous variable with 1 = meets all Tier 1 criteria, including attendance, lateness, suspensions, grades, and standardized test scores and 0 = does not meet all criteria
  - MEETS ALL TIER 2 CRITERIA: dichotomous variable with 1 = meets the Tier 2 criteria, including three out of four of the following: attendance, lateness, suspensions, and the Tier 2 course grades criteria. 0 = does not meet all criteria. These variables are only used in the descriptive analysis so as to not lose the information contained in each of the separate criteria variables above in the regression analysis.
School-level predictors

The analysis includes characteristics of sending schools and assigned neighborhood high schools that were hypothesized to influence students’ application decisions and admission outcomes. These variables are defined as follows:

- **Sending school**
  - SCHOOL ID: categorical identification variable for every district school with eighth grade students.
  - SCHOOL TYPE: categorical variable with 0 = middle school (e.g. grades 5-8, 6-8, 7-8), 1 = K-8 school, 2 = other school type (e.g. grades K-12, 6-12, 8-12)
  - 8th GRADE ENROLLMENT: continuous variable indicating the total number of eighth graders in the school
  - PERCENT FREE AND REDUCED LUNCH: continuous variable indicating the percent of students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch at the school
  - MET ADEQUATE YEARLY PROGRESS: dichotomous variable with 1 = the school made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2008-09 and 0 = did not make AYP
  - MS PERSISTENTLY DANGEROUS: dichotomous variable with 1 = a school is on the state’s Persistently Dangerous list and 0 = not on the list
  - School racial composition
    - MS MAJORITY WHITE, MS MAJORITY ASIAN, MS MAJORITY LATINO, and MS DIVERSE: Dichotomous variables with 1 = over 50 percent of students are the given racial category and 0 = not. (MS MAJORITY BLACK is the reference category.)

- **Assigned neighborhood high school**
  - NHS PERSISTENTLY DANGEROUS: dichotomous variable with 1 = a school is on the state’s Persistently Dangerous list and 0 = not on the list
  - School racial composition
    - NHS MAJORITY WHITE, NHS MAJORITY ASIAN, NHS MAJORITY LATINO, and NHS DIVERSE: Dichotomous variables with 1 = over 50 percent of students are the given racial category and 0 = not.

- **Sending school * assigned neighborhood high school interactions**
  - MS MAJORITY LATINO * NHS MAJORITY LATINO, MS MAJORITY BLACK * NHS MAJORITY BLACK, MS DIVERSE * NHS DIVERSE: dichotomous variables with 1 = both the sending school and assigned neighborhood high school share the given racial composition and 0 = the two schools do not share the given racial composition. This is
a measure of racial consonance or dissonance across the transition to high school that may influence students’ application decisions.

- MS PERSISTENTLY DANGEROUS * NHS PERSISTENTLY DANGEROUS: dichotomous variable with 1 = both the sending school and assigned neighborhood high school are on the state’s Persistently Dangerous Schools list and 0 = both schools are not on the list. This is a measure of school safety consonance or dissonance across the transition to high school that may influence students’ application decisions.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYTIC METHODS

The quantitative analysis is designed to examine the relationship between the characteristics of students and the schools they attend on the likelihood of applying and being admitted to high school. The quantitative analysis proceeds in three stages: 1) multiple imputation of missing data; 2) hierarchical generalized linear modeling; and 3) pooling parameter estimates.

Multiple imputation

The analytic sample had complete demographic, application, and school ID data, but just over one-fourth of the sample had missing data for one or more of the seventh grade record variables used in the analysis (25.8%). The multiple imputation (MI) method was used to impute missing data in order to avoid the potential bias introduced by casewise or listwise deletion (Little & Rubin, 1987; Peugh & Enders, 2004; Royston, 2004) and to address the requirement of a complete-information data set needed to estimate hierarchical models (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Assuming data are missing at random (MAR), the resulting parameter estimates in MI are unbiased and have lower sampling fluctuations than would be the case if the missing data were deleted from the analytic sample.
Rather than treating a single set of imputed values as the “true” estimates of the missing values such as in mean imputation, MI creates a number of imputed data sets, each of which contains a different plausible estimate of the missing values (Peugh & Enders, 2004). For this study, imputations were made using the “ice” command in the STATA software. This procedure uses regression modeling of a student’s missing data based on all valid observations, with each imputed data set simulating a random draw from the distribution of plausible values for the missing data. Each imputation is based, in part, on the previous imputed values for a given variable.

Following Rubin’s (1996) findings that, with a modest amount of missing data (less than 30%), three to five imputations are adequate in MI, five data sets were created that included imputed values in place of the missing data. Categorical and continuous variables that had imputed values outside of the possible range were recoded to the highest or lowest possible category, and both integer and non-integer imputed values were allowed for continuous variables as long as they fell within the valid range.

The differences in group means and standard deviations were minimal for all variables with missing data. Appendix 4.B includes descriptive statistics for each variable before and after MI and the percent imputed for each variable.

Two-level hierarchical generalized linear models

In the second stage, a series of two-level hierarchical generalized linear models (HGLM) are conducted to examine the role of a student’s eighth grade school on the aforementioned application and admission outcomes. The goal of this analytic stage is to test hypotheses about the relationships of variables across levels. Further, HGLM corrects for the underestimated standard errors and potentially biased parameter estimates in
logistic regression due to the clustering of students within schools (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

Student-level predictors are entered at Level 1 of the HGLM model and school-level variables are added at Level 2. Two sets of models are run for each outcome. The first set of models enters a sending school fixed effect at Level 2 to account for the clustering of students within schools. The second set of models enters school-level variables at Level 2 to determine the extent to which specific school characteristics are a source of difference in application and admission outcomes after controlling for the relationship between student characteristics and the outcomes of interest. In all, two separate models are run for each imputed data set for each outcome of interest.

*Pooling parameter estimates*

After the HGLM analysis is conducted, the parameter estimates are pooled to generate the “best estimate” of the results. The parameter estimates, or coefficients, are pooled simply by averaging the values of the parameter estimates across the five imputed data sets to obtain a single point estimate for each variable in the model. Pooling the variance, on the other hand, is not a simple average because it must take into account the within and between imputation variance. The pooled standard errors are calculated by: a) averaging the squared standard errors—or variances—of the m estimates, b) calculating the variance of the m parameter estimates across samples, and c) combining the two quantities (Allison, 2000; Little & Rubin, 1987; Peugh & Enders, 2004). The results presented are the pooled estimates.
QUALITATIVE SAMPLE

The qualitative component of this research project uses a case study approach with several nested phases of sampling that embed the qualitative sample within the quantitative study cohort of 2008-09 district eighth graders. Throughout the qualitative portion of the study, the focus is on exploring the role of different actors in the high school application decisions of eighth grade students in the district. Specifically, the qualitative research focuses on the counselor role within K-8 schools, the student and parent role within families, and differences in how students from native-born families and students from immigrant families manage the high school application process.

Case study methodology is appropriate for this research because it permits an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena, including the ways in which information, social support, and application decisions vary across families and schools. Multiple cases were selected for the purpose of analytical generalization and to provide robustness checks. This section begins by describing the strategy for selecting the nested units for the case study—a district region, schools, students, and parents. As Figure 4.1 illustrates, a study region was first selected from within a sampling frame of the entire district. Next, study schools were selected from within the region. Then, focus schools were selected for more in-depth research and the student and parent interview sample were drawn from the focus schools.
Selecting a study region

The qualitative case studies are especially important for addressing two of the central research questions about the counselor role in the high school application process and about differences between children from native-born and immigrant families in the process. The case study research focused on one administrative region in the district so
more time could be devoted to data collection and less to traveling in a district that includes over 100 middle and K-8 schools and an area of 142 square miles. Additionally, focusing on a single region minimized the potential that geographic factors would be confounded with the family and school factors affecting students’ high school application decisions. The two criteria that were used to select the study region are as follows:

- The percent of English-language-learner (ELL) students, the percent Asian, and the percent Latino are the best proxies for immigrant status in the district data. Information access and supports may be different for these populations in the high school application process.
- School enrollment, and specifically the size of the eighth grade class, is important because there is only one counselor managing the high school selection process at each school. There is greater potential for more personalized interaction between the counselor and families with fewer students and fewer eighth graders.

Specifically, the goal was to select a region with school enrollments at or below the district average, and ELL populations and racial/ethnic diversity at or above the district average. As Table 3.1 indicates, several regions met these criteria.
Although regions C, D, E, and F all had sizeable ELL populations and racial and ethnic diversity, the study region was selected for the following reasons: 1) it had a substantial proportion of ELL students (11.6 percent); 2) it had a substantial proportion of both Asian and Latino students (21.1 percent and 12.8 percent, respectively); and 3) all eighth grade students in the region attended K-8 schools. The third factor is important because the majority of eighth graders attend K-8 schools in the district, but middle schools serving every combination of grades five through eight exist throughout the district and there are schools that span elementary and secondary grades such as K-12, 6-12 or 8-12. Thus, selecting the study region controlled for school type.
The study region is more racially and ethnically diverse than the district as a whole, with higher percentages of White, Asian, and Latino students and lower percentages of Black students than average. This population is not representative of or generalizeable to the entire district, but it was particularly well suited to answer research questions about differences in information, applications, and admissions between students from native-born and immigrant families in the high school application process.

*Getting school consent within the study region*

The original goal was to include all 15 K-8 schools in the study region in the qualitative case study, but after extensive outreach beginning with the regional superintendent and working down to the school principals and counselors, 10 of the schools consented to participate (67 percent). Of the five that did not elect to participate, one principal did not want to burden the school’s first year counselor, three principals decided not to participate without explanation, and I never reached the final principal despite sending the initial letter, several emails, leaving phone messages, and making several trips to the school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Total enrollment</th>
<th>% ELL</th>
<th>% Asian</th>
<th>% Latino</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 consenting schools</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 non-consenting schools</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: School District of Philadelphia*
Importantly, the 10 consenting schools had average enrollments and percent Asian that were similar to those of the non-participating schools. However, the two groups of schools did differ in the percent ELL and the percent of Latino students, as Table 3.2 indicates.

**Selecting focus schools within the consenting schools**

For the purpose of conducting an in-depth analysis of the counselor role, the qualitative sample was narrowed to six schools in the study region after initial meetings with the counselor in each of the 10 consenting schools. These meetings revealed that counselors in six of the schools scheduled individual meetings with students and/or their parents about high school applications and four did not. Additionally, three of the six counselors who reported having individual meetings said that they had 100 percent turnout; the other three counselors attempted meetings but reported varying degrees of success. Since a primary goal of the qualitative study was to learn about the role of counselors in the high school application process, a decision was made to purposefully a set of focus schools—three in which the counselor reported scheduling and successfully conducting individual meetings with students and parents and three in which the counselor reported not having such meetings. Of the four schools that did not attempt individual meetings, one was ineligible for inclusion because it had a zero percent response rate on the parent survey. The remaining three non-meeting schools were included in the focal school sample.

**Selecting the student interview sample**

In order to examine the race/ethnic and immigrant/non-immigrant differences in the family and school role in the high school application process, the student interview
sample was selected at the six focus schools based on the following matrix. A total of 60 students were targeted for this portion of the data collection.

Figure 3.2 Sampling matrix for student interviews

As Figure 3.2 shows, students were not sampled by individual school, but rather by their school’s strategy (individual parent-student meeting versus no meeting), their parent’s reported information about high schools from the parent survey, and the student’s race/ethnicity. The cut-point for “high” and “low” parent information was determined based on a survey question that asked, “What resources did you use in selecting high schools for/with your child? Check all that apply.” There were 11 options, including the district’s High School Directory, the High School Expo, the internet, visiting a high school, teachers, the counselor, family, friends, charter or private school information, and a write-in Other option. Initial analysis of the survey data found that approximately half of respondents reported using three or more resources. Thus, “high information” families reported using three or more resources and “low information” families reported using zero to two resources. Additionally, the Asian category includes
three Chinese families and three Cambodian or Vietnamese families in each cell to reflect prior research on differences between refugee and non-refugee immigrant groups.

After selecting students who met the above criteria, not every race/ethnicity-information-school strategy cell could be completely filled, and I interviewed a total of 47 students. The race/ethnic and immigrant status of these students is illustrated on Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3 Race & immigrant status of student interview sample

Ten of these students were immigrants and 15 were children of immigrants. A total of 11 Black, 10 White, 16 Asian, 9 Latino, and 1 Other race student were interviewed. Gender balance was also considered in the sampling process, resulting in interviews of 21 girls and 26 boys.
Selecting the parent interview sample

Although the initial intent had been to interview the parents of all the students in the interview sample, due to time constraints a subsample of parents was selected to interview after students had received their acceptance letters but before the end of the school year (April to June). I interviewed a total of 27 parents, including 15 immigrants. Five parents were selected from each of three major racial/ethnic categories (Black, White, and Latino), and an additional 12 Asian parents were selected to include Chinese, Cambodian, and Vietnamese families.

Figure 3.4 Race & immigrant status of parent interview sample

As Figure 3.4 shows, all of the Asian parents were immigrants, one of the Black parents was an immigrant from Mali, and three of the Latino parents were Mexican immigrants. All names used are pseudonyms and parents are assigned the same last name as their child for ease of identification.
QUALITATIVE DATA

There are several qualitative data tools used in this study, including counselor interviews, an eighth grade parent survey, student interviews, parent interviews, observations, and document collection. This section describes each of the qualitative data tools in detail.

Counselor interviews

Counselors at each of the 10 study schools were interviewed twice, once in the fall and once in the spring of the 2008-09 school year. Semi-structured interview protocols were used for each interview. First round interviews were conducted from the end of September through the middle of October, during the high school application period. This interview protocol included questions about the counselors’ professional background, experiences, and job responsibilities, and the steps involved in the high school application process at their school (Appendix 4.B). Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and were conducted in the counselor’s office before school, during the counselor’s prep period, or after school according to their preference.

Follow-up interviews that asked counselors to reflect on the process for the study year and their students’ outcomes, and discuss any changes planned for the next year were conducted in June (Appendix 4.C). These interviews were timed to occur after students had made their high school enrollment decisions and after all student and parent interviews had been completed.

Parent survey

A survey was administered to parents of all eighth graders in the 10 consenting schools. This survey had two primary purposes: 1) to provide an overview of the parent
role in the high school application process; and 2) to provide a sample frame for selecting a stratified interview sample of students and parents, as described in detail in the qualitative sample section above.

The survey asked parents who was involved in choosing the high schools (parent, student, parent and student, other), what resources they used in choosing high schools, what factors they considered in choosing high schools, and which high schools they chose. It also asked parents to self-report their child’s seventh grade attendance, behavior, grades, and test scores and their own educational attainment. The survey included seven questions on a single page to minimize respondent burden and to increase the likelihood of district approval. The parent consent form was also appended to the survey (Appendix 4.D).

The schools all send home a high school packet for all eighth graders in mid-to-late September that includes a high school application form, the High School Directory, and a copy of the student’s seventh grade transcript. The parent survey was included in this packet at the 10 consenting schools, along with a flyer stating that if parents returned the survey, their name would be entered in a drawing for a Target gift card. The surveys were also translated into Spanish, Chinese, Khmer (Cambodian), and Vietnamese, representing all of the foreign languages spoken at the consenting schools, and the counselor at each school distributed the survey in the appropriate language to their English-language-learner (ELL) students and students with immigrant parents.

The counselor and eighth grade teachers followed up with students to encourage them to return the surveys, including sending home another copy of the survey and a flyer reminding them about the incentives. Based on counselor suggestions, a drawing for one
$25 gift card at each school was offered for students who returned their survey. The counselors were also given a $50 gift card for their support in the survey distribution and collection.

The overall response rate for the parent survey was 38.8 percent of eighth graders in the 10 consenting schools (n=203 of 523)—a rate that, although lower than ideal, is substantially above the 20 to 30 percent return rate currently typical in mail, phone, and online survey research (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004). Notably, the parent respondents reflect a range of race/ethnicities, English-language ability, education levels, information about the high school choice process, and application decisions.

Student interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the students in the interview sample. The interviews, which took place in the counselor’s office or another available room in the school, followed a semi-structured interview protocol that included questions about the student’s school, family, the high school application process, and their future goals (Appendix 4.E). These interviews were conducted in November and December 2008, after students had completed their high school applications. Each interview was approximately 30 minutes in length.

Parent interviews

Parent interviews followed a semi-structured protocol that included questions about parents’ generational status, languages spoken, educational attainment, employment, family, perceptions of Philadelphia, their neighborhood, and their child’s school, and detailed questions about the high school application process (Appendix 4.F). Interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted at the parents’
homes and in the parents’ native language to minimize their burden. Parents were also provided a $20 stipend for their participation.

Interpreters who had been trained to explain the study, answer questions, and administer the interview protocol worked with me to contact the non-English-speaking parents to schedule the interviews. They also accompanied me to the interviews, where I asked each question in English, the interpreter translated it for the parent, listened to the parents’ response, and translated the response to me in English.

Observations

Observations of high school-related meetings and events were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the guidance that counselors give to students and parents and of the questions and concerns families had during the process. I attended as many high school-related meetings and events as I could during the six-week application timeframe at the six focus schools. I attended at least two days of individual meetings at the three focus schools with such meetings. I also attended an eighth grade parent meeting about high schools, two Back to School Nights, four high school presentations at the focus schools, and the district’s High School Expo. Due to the limited timeframe from the beginning of the school year until applications were due and the bounds of my district approval, I did not conduct any classroom observations.

Documents

The final qualitative data tool was a collection of high school-related documents given to students and parents at the 10 consenting schools, which allowed an examination of the printed information sources available to students and parents in the process. Documents were sorted and analyzed in three categories based on their source—
information from the district, information from high schools, and information from the study schools.

District information included the High School Directory, a flyer about the High School Expo, and the district website. The Directory is a glossy, colorful, 36-page booklet that contains basic information about the admission criteria and about every high school. It includes a sample application form, a map with all of the high schools, and a page that describes the types of high schools and the admission criteria for each tier. As stated in the Directory:

- **Special admission** (Tier 1) high schools are “magnet schools,” each with its own set of admissions criteria related to attendance, punctuality, behavior, grades, and standardized test scores. Students citywide may apply to these high schools. However, it is strongly recommended that you review the set of admissions criteria and your own scholastic record prior to application (n=18).
- **Citywide admission** (Tier 2) high schools have admissions criteria. Students citywide may apply. Generally, in order to be eligible for the lottery, they must attend an on-site interview and meet three of four criteria: marks of A, B, or C; no more than 10 absences; no more than five latenesses; and no negative disciplinary reports (n=14).
- **Neighborhood** (Tier 3) high schools have open admission to students who attend a grade eight school that is within the feeder pattern. Students from outside the feeder pattern may apply. However, admission is based upon space availability and selection is made by computerized lottery (n=28).

There is also a statement for English-language-learners and special education students that reads:

Students with disabilities and English Language Learners are encouraged to apply to special admission and citywide admission high schools. Admission criteria may be waived for those students who, given accommodations, may be successful in requested schools, as determined by the appropriate school teams.
In addition to stating the criteria, the remaining Directory pages provide a brief description of each high school, including the school ID number, address, phone number, website, public transportation routes, feeder schools, programs, school size, and school tier. The Tier 1 and Tier 2 schools also include brief descriptions of their admission requirements, although these descriptions are vague. For example, several Tier 1 high schools state that they require “strong” or “excellent” test scores or grades. Only four of 18 Tier 1 high schools state that they require 10 or fewer absences and five or fewer latenesses; the majority list “excellent” and “good” attendance as a requirement. For behavior, schools use the terms “excellent,” “good,” “satisfactory,” and “no negative report.” All Tier 1 schools with supplemental requirements list the requirements but they do not provide any further guidance. For example, the two Tier 1 schools that require writing samples list in their admission requirements section, “writing sample in student’s own handwriting,” but they do not specify the required topic or the page length. The four Tier 1 schools with arts programs list, “successful audition in the chosen art major,” but they do not specify the length of the performance, whether the students need to prepare a performance in advance or if they will learn a piece at the audition, or how the performance will be evaluated. Tier 2 schools, according to the above criteria summary in the directory, generally require interviews, but none of the Tier 2 schools list interviews as an admission requirement in their descriptions.

Charter schools are also listed with their contact information at the back of the Directory, along with the following statement:

Eighth grade students and their families are encouraged to consider Philadelphia’s 24 charter high school options. Placements in charter high schools are not made through the School District of Philadelphia. If you
are interested in one or more of these high schools, then you must contact the schools directly to obtain information about academic, specialty career and technical program offerings, to learn about the admissions process, and to complete application forms.

The second district resource is the High School Expo, which provides a chance for students and parents to learn more about the individual high schools. The Expo occurs during the six-week high school application timeframe, beginning on a Friday afternoon and ending on a Sunday afternoon. The district hosts this event at a local university that is accessible by one of the city’s major subway lines. At the Expo, there is an information booth for every traditional public and charter high school, manned by students and school staff. The schools have informational brochures at their booths and many prepare tri-fold presentation boards or videos to highlight programs, activities, or events at their school. Some schools bring their cheerleaders to draw attention to their booth, and some career-focused schools do demonstrations to highlight their cooking, hair styling, robotics, or other programs. Some schools have a teacher volunteer as a chaperone to escort students on public transportation to the Expo, but most schools send home a flyer about the Expo and rely on parents to take their children. The district had provided bus transportation to the Expo for all eighth graders in the past, but that practice was discontinued due to budgetary issues.

The district website also has a drop down menu for every school that provides school demographics, average test score performance, student and teacher daily attendance, and the number of violent incidents per year.

In addition to the district resources, high school information included flyers and brochures published by individual high schools with various statistics and programs they
sought to highlight and, at some schools, detailed information about the application, audition, and interview requirements. These documents were available to students, parents, and counselors at the Expo and were distributed to students if the high school presented at their school. The high schools also have websites, but the amount and quality of information on these sites varies greatly.

Finally, there was a variety of information provided to students by their schools. Counselors sent home parent letters with reminders about application due dates, high school open houses, high school presentations, individual meetings, and other high school-related information.

QUALITATIVE ANALYTIC METHODS

The qualitative analysis in this study has two conceptual and policy relevant foci—examining the counselor role for supporting students and parents in the high school application process, and comparing the process for students from native-born and immigrant families. This section describes the methods used for organizing and analyzing the qualitative data.

Counselor, student, and parent interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo software. Detailed field notes from every observation were transcribed in the same day to preserve the accuracy of the data. These included a summary of and reflections on each observation. Meetings with students and/or parents were not audio recorded because counselors expressed concern that doing so might result in students or parents feeling uncomfortable.

After all data was transcribed, transcripts were reviewed to develop an open coding framework based on issues pertaining to the role of students, parents, and
counselors in the high school application process. Coding was an iterative and inductive process in which data were continually re-evaluated, resulting in the creation of numerous categories and themes within these categories. I created all of the codes, but research assistants helped to code the interview transcripts.

Analysis was conducted as a cross-case synthesis, treating each individual case as a separate study and aggregating findings across cases (Yin, 2003, p.136). Interviews were analyzed individually and then compared across student, parent, and counselor groups. Special attention was paid to comparing interview responses across race/ethnic groups, by native-born and immigrant families, and between the three focal schools in which the counselors were more active and the three where they were less active in counseling students and parents. The goal with each set of comparisons was to identify and revise themes as they emerged from the data.

One limitation of this analysis is that investigator triangulation could not be used since I was the sole researcher on the project. However, several methodological checks were used to ensure the internal and external validity of the qualitative findings. First, methodological and data triangulation helped to ensure internal validity, or credibility. Findings from one data source were checked for corroboration with other data sources, including data from multiple participants and from various data tools. Second, discrepant cases and alternative explanations were included to identify and address any possible biases and to “describe across the range” of findings. Finally, the selection of multiple case studies allowed cross-case comparisons, which helps to generalize qualitative findings (Yin, 2003).
CHAPTER 4
PATTERNS AND PREDICTORS OF APPLICATION AND ADMISSION/ENROLLMENT

The high school application process is a normalized part of the transition to high school in Philadelphia, with 75 percent of eighth graders completing an application. This chapter examines patterns and predictors of high school application and admission. As stated in Chapter 3, admission and enrollment are a combined outcome throughout this analysis due to limitations in the district data. Multilevel modeling accounts for the clustering of students within schools and considers the extent to which individual and school characteristics predict a range of application and admission outcomes. Including student characteristics is important in this competitive system, where students’ seventh grade record data is used for admission decisions. Additionally, the analysis examines whether the eighth grade school a student attends is related to high school application and admission/enrollment. Considering both student and school characteristics goes beyond prior choice research, which has consistently treated parents as the sole education decision-makers and parent characteristics as the sole predictors of choice participation.

This chapter begins with an overview of the high school application process and descriptive statistics about patterns of application and admission/enrollment. Then, regression analyses are used to examine the factors that predict students’ likelihood of various application and admission/enrollment outcomes. I find that both student and school characteristics matter for choice outcomes.
OVERVIEW OF THE HIGH SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS

The high school application process is not just a Philadelphia phenomenon; it exists in similar forms in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other large, urban districts across the country. Still, it is important to understand the application process and context in Philadelphia, including types of high schools and patterns of application and admission.

Types of high schools

In 2008-09, there were 60 traditional public high schools in the district, almost equally split between selective (Tiers 1 and 2) and non-selective (Tier 3) options (n=28 and n=32, respectively), but the selective schools tend to be smaller. Tier 1 and Tier 2 high schools enroll approximately one-third and Tier 3 schools enroll approximately two-thirds of the district’s high schools students.

Table 4.1. Average high school characteristics, by admission category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School climate &amp; safety</th>
<th>Tier 1</th>
<th>Tier 2</th>
<th>Tier 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of students with a suspension¹</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of violent incidents¹</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student engagement

| % of students with 20+ absences¹ | 11 | 31 | 57 |
| % of students with 20+ latenesses¹ | 17 | 39 | 36 |

Student course-taking & achievement

| % of ninth graders in algebra or higher¹ | 96 | 92 | 79 |
| % taking 4 years college prep math² | 74 | 67 | 40 |
| # of AP classes² | 7 | 2 | 3 |
| % proficient/advanced on PSSA math² | 74 | 33 | 16 |
| % proficient/advanced on PSSA reading² | 81 | 40 | 21 |
| % taking the SAT² | 88 | 83 | 64 |
| average SAT score² | 1352 | 1059 | 1037 |
| % attending higher education (2- or 4-year)² | 97 | 82 | 70 |

Source: ¹ indicates School District of Philadelphia administrative data, 2008-09. ² indicates data compiled by the Philadelphia Inquirer newspaper, from school self-reports on a district-wide survey.
Table 4.1 is a descriptive snapshot of high school characteristics, by tier, and it reveals that Tier 1 schools consistently outperform Tier 2 schools, and that both types of selective admission schools generally outperform Tier 3 schools. Some of the data is taken from district administrative records and some is taken from school self-reports, and the quality of the latter may be questionable. Still, the data reveals that the learning climate and educational opportunities vary across high school tiers. The selective admission high schools have lower suspension rates and fewer violent incidents, and students in selective schools have better attendance, take more rigorous math courses, perform better on state standardized tests, are more likely to take the SAT, perform better on the SAT, and are more likely to report enrolling in some form of postsecondary education after graduation. There are substantial variations within each high school tier, but the hierarchical nature of the tiers persists on all measurable characteristics. Due to these differences, the high school application process in the district is widely perceived as a chance to “escape” the neighborhood high school.

However, unlike typical school choice policies in which students and parents exercise choice by opting out of their assigned neighborhood school to enter a charter school lottery or pay for a private school, students who complete an application do not all have equal admission chances in this system because the Tier 1 and Tier 2 high schools accept students based on selective criteria. Students apply to high schools in the fall of their eighth grade year, but admission is based on students’ seventh grade academic, attendance, and behavior record. Thus, students’ seventh grade record delineates their high school options.
The specific criteria are outlined on Table 4.2 for each admission tier. Tier 1 high schools are the most selective and feature a college preparatory curriculum; they are considered “academic magnets.” The specific requirements vary across Tier 1 schools, but they generally require that students have As and Bs, and up to 1 C, meet certain PSSA test score requirements in math and reading, have fewer than 10 unexcused absences, and do not have any out-of-school suspensions in seventh grade. In addition to considering students’ seventh grade records, over half (11 of 18) of the Tier 1 schools have supplemental requirements. The four Tier 1 schools with arts-focused programs invite qualified applicants for an audition or to present a portfolio of their work, and the two Tier 1 schools with a focus on science or math invite students to present a research project they have completed. Three Tier 1 schools also invite students for an interest interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendance &amp; behavior</th>
<th>Tier 1</th>
<th>Tier 2*</th>
<th>Tier 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer unexcused absences</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No suspensions</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades &amp; test scores</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As, Bs, and 1 C in major subjects</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test score requirements</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Number of schools                           | 18     | 14      | 28     |

Table 4.2 Overview of the 7th grade record data used for high school admissions, by tier

Source: School District of Philadelphia High School Directory, 2008-09. Note: * To be considered for admission to a Tier 2 high school, students are required to meet three of the four criteria.
Tier 2 high schools are less selective and often have career-focused programs. Tier 2 schools consider all of the above criteria except students’ standardized test scores, they have lower course grade requirements than Tier 1 schools, and they require students to meet three of the four admission criteria. Tier 3 schools are non-selective, neighborhood high schools. Students may apply to Tier 3 schools other than their catchment area high school and may be admitted via lottery, after all students in the catchment area have been assigned a spot. However, Tier 3 admission is rare.

There were also 24 charter high schools in the district in 2008-09, but these schools are excluded from the study because students apply to each charter school individually and the district does not have application or admission data for charter schools. Students may also opt out of the public school system to attend private high schools, and these decisions are also excluded from the quantitative analysis.

_The high school application process_

In the application process, students can apply to a maximum of five public high schools on a single application form. In the study year, the selection process formally began on September 15 and applications were due to the K-8 or middle school counselor by October 31. Students submit a complete application form with the ID numbers of the schools to which they are applying and a parent signature to their school counselor. The counselors then enter the applications online so each high school can access a complete list of student applicants and their seventh grade records. As described above, students who apply to certain Tier 1 schools are also required to submit a writing sample with their application. The high schools access their applications online and they “select” or “deselect” applicants based on whether or not they meet the admission criteria. It is
unclear how the writing sample is evaluated and weighed in this decision. Then, some Tier 1 schools invite students for an interview, audition, or presentation in December or January, after which they again “select” or “deselect” applicants. Some Tier 2 schools also conduct interviews. At the end of February or beginning of March, the District conducts an admission lottery for all oversubscribed schools, meaning those schools at which more students are “selected” than there are spots.

The first round of admission letters is mailed in March to students who receive multiple high school acceptances. These students have two weeks to notify their school counselor with their decision, at which point the counselors enter all high school decisions into the online system. Then, another lottery is conducted for the remaining spots and another round of admission letters is sent to students who were originally waitlisted or deselected. In this round, students only receive one admission offer. The high school application process formally ends after this round, approximately in May. However, schools with remaining spots continue to accept students throughout the summer at their discretion. If students receive multiple acceptances, they choose which high school they will attend. If students do not receive any admission offer or if they do not complete an application, they are assigned to their catchment area, Tier 3 high school.

PATTERNS OF APPLICATION

Following prior school choice research that describes “choosers” and “non-choosers,” or “participants and non-participants,” Table 4.3 compares the background and seventh grade records of applicants and non-applicants. The values represent the percentage of applicants and non-applicants who shared the given characteristics. For example, 63 percent of applicants were Black, while 53 percent of non-applicants were
Black. T-tests compare group differences on each characteristic. The population characteristics on the right side of the table provide useful points of comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Applicants</th>
<th>Non-applicants</th>
<th>All 8th graders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.63 ***</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.12 ***</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.07 ***</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.17 ***</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.01 *</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.51 ***</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>0.06 ***</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>0.16 ***</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td>0.73 ***</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td>0.53 ***</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspension</td>
<td>0.80 ***</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td>0.58 ***</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As, Bs, and up to 1 C</td>
<td>0.33 ***</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math PSSA proficient or advanced</td>
<td>0.53 ***</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading PSSA proficient or advance</td>
<td>0.52 ***</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: School District of Philadelphia, 2008-09. Note: Asterisks indicate levels of significance for t-tests of group differences between applicants and non-applicants. * p< .05, **p < .01, *** p<.001

Group differences between applicants and non-applicants are significant for all measured background and achievement characteristics. The applicant pool has a larger proportion of Black students and a lower proportion of every other race than the eighth grade population as a whole. Females are overrepresented among applicants, and English-language-learner (ELL) and special education students are underrepresented among applicants, relative to the total eighth grade population. In addition, students who complete a high school application have better seventh grade records than students who do not apply to any high school. Non-applicants self-select out of the high school application process for various reasons. Since these students typically do not meet the selective admission criteria, they may be resigned to attend a Tier 3, neighborhood high
school, or they may pursue options outside of the traditional public school system such as charter or private schools.

Applicants are “better students” than non-applicants, but many students who apply do not meet the stated admission criteria for Tier 1 and Tier 2 high schools. Specifically, only 33 percent of applicants meet the Tier 1 course grades criteria of all As, Bs, and up to 1 C in “major subjects” (math, English, science, and social studies) during the seventh grade, and approximately half of applicants meet the lateness and standardized test score criteria. Only 16 percent of students meet all of the Tier 1 admission criteria, 38 percent meet the less selective, Tier 2 criteria, and 46 percent do not meet any criteria. Therefore, the applicant group shares a combination of motivation and optimism about the high school application process.

This raises questions about the rationale for allowing and often encouraging all students to apply when the majority of students do not meet the selective admission criteria. It also challenges the necessity of these particular criteria. For example, if students have low test scores but good grades, attendance, and behavior, should they be excluded from the rigorous educational opportunities at Tier 1 high schools? The selective high schools appear to be competing for the same, small pool of exceptional students and it is unclear which criteria they weigh more heavily when they cannot fill their spots with students who meet the stated qualifications. This is addressed in the HGLM analysis later in this chapter.

Where do they apply?

Figure 4.1 shows the highest tier to which students apply. Half of students apply to at least one school in the highest, most selective tier. The remaining applicants are split
between those whose highest level of application is in Tier 2 (14%) and those who only apply to Tier 3 schools (11%). In addition, one quarter of students do not apply. Reasons for non-applicants may include wanting to attend the neighborhood high school or being resigned to attend the neighborhood high school, students choosing to pursue charter or private high school options outside the district.

Figure 4.1 Highest tier of application

![Figure 4.1 Highest tier of application](image)

Figure 4.2 illustrates the reputational advantage of Tier 1 high schools. Almost all students who meet the Tier 1 criteria apply to at least one Tier 1 school, meaning that their qualifications and applications “match.” But the majority of students who do not meet the Tier 1 criteria still apply to Tier 1 schools. Application to Tier 2 and Tier 3 schools is less popular.
Specifically, the lack of “matching” for students who meet Tier 2 criteria applying to Tier 2 schools shows the lack of interest in career and technical education (CTE) options. Moreover, families and school staff use the high school tiers as a proxy for school quality. They consider Tier 1 schools to be the “best” and Tier 3 schools to be the “worst,” but they do not have detailed information about the full range of high school options. This disadvantages Tier 2 high schools because the specific program offerings are key features of Tier 2 schools. They report offering college preparatory academics, but their specialized “career majors” distinguish them from most Tier 1 schools. These programs include auto mechanics, business, health, military, culinary, cosmetology, fashion, and other career fields. But the similar levels of application to Tier 2 and Tier 3 high schools, as shown on Figure 4.2, indicates that Tier 1 schools are highly regarded and other schools are lumped together as less desirable options.
School differences in student applications

Participation in the high school application process is high overall, but school characteristics are associated with students’ application decisions. The eighth grade school mean application rate is 75 percent, with a standard deviation of 15.2 percent, and the highest and lowest sending school application rates are 100 percent and 42 percent, respectively. Table 4.4 indicates that characteristics of the eighth grade schools and characteristics of students’ assigned neighborhood high schools are both related to students’ application decisions.

Table 4.4 Sending school and assigned neighborhood high school characteristics of applicants and non-applicants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of 8th grade school</th>
<th>Applicants</th>
<th>Non-applicants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majority Black</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.49 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority White</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.12 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Asian</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Latino</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.16 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.23 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-8 school</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.35 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistently dangerous</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.13 ***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of neighborhood high school</th>
<th>Applicants</th>
<th>Non-applicants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majority Black</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.54 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority White</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Asian</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Latino</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.11 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.32 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistently dangerous</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: School District of Philadelphia, 2008-09. Note: Asterisks indicate levels of significance for t-tests of group differences between applicants and non-applicants. * p< .05, ** p < .01, *** p<.001

Applicant and non-applicant groups differ in terms of their sending school racial composition, school type, and school safety. The applicant group has a significantly larger proportion of students in majority black schools than the non-applicant group.
Students in K-8 schools make a higher proportion of the applicant group and students in persistently dangerous schools constitute a larger percent of the non-applicant group. The racial composition of students’ assigned neighborhood high school also differs significantly for applicants and non-applicants.

PATTERNS OF ADMISSION AND ENROLLMENT

After students apply, high schools make admission decisions from among the applicants. Overall, 34 percent of eighth graders in the sample, or 45 percent of applicants, receive choice in the system as a result of being accepted to at least one high school to which they applied. However, students’ admission chances vary based on their seventh grade record. Among the 16 percent students who met all of the Tier 1 criteria, 77 percent received at least one acceptance. Among the 38 percent who met the Tier 2 criteria, 50 percent received at least one acceptance. And among the 46 percent who did not meet any criteria, 25 percent received at least one acceptance. Throughout the analysis of admission outcomes, it is necessary to remember the operational definition of admissions as “the high school at which the student was accepted and decided to enroll.” Also, analyses are based on students’ high school assignment at the end of their eighth grade year.
The values on Table 4.5 sum to 100 percent, representing all eighth graders in the sample by their highest criteria met and the high school tier at which they were accepted and decided to enroll. The principal diagonal indicates that 57 percent of students “match,” meaning that they are accepted to and decide to enroll in a high school that they were most qualified to attend. One tenth of eighth graders meet the Tier 1 criteria and attend a Tier 1 high school, 7 percent meet Tier 2 criteria and attend a Tier 2 high school, and 2 percent do not meet any criteria and get into a Tier 3 high school. Additionally, 23 percent do not meet any criteria and do not receive any acceptance, and 15 percent do not meet any criteria and do not apply.

The off-diagonals on Table 4.5 reveal mismatches between the high school criteria and admissions. The top right box indicates that 20 percent of students are “overqualified.” This shows that there are limited numbers of spots in selective high schools and that Tier 2 students may not be applying strategically. Also, 1.4 percent of the students fulfill the Tier 1 qualifications but decide to enroll in a Tier 2 school. Student preferences that are not qualification-maximizing are not accounted for by the
“matching” designation, but this characterization provides a sense of the inconsistencies in the criteria, student applications, and admissions that create disequilibrium in the high school market. Charter school and private school applications and admission may also be part of the story for students who are characterized under “No application” and “No admission” on this table, overestimating students’ lack of choice by not accounting for choices outside of the traditional public school system.

The bottom left diagonal also reveals that 13 percent of students are “underqualified.” These students might be considered “the lucky ones” or they may have information about how to get into certain schools outside of the formal application process. In particular, 7 percent of students who meet Tier 2 criteria get into Tier 1 schools, suggesting that there are not enough students who meet Tier 1 criteria to fill the spots and that the stated test score criteria and stricter grade requirements may not be absolute for Tier 1 schools. An additional 1 percent of students do not meet any criteria and still are accepted at a Tier 1 school. When high schools stray from their stated admission criteria, there is a lack of transparency that raises questions about the explicit requirements.

The issue of “overqualified” and “underqualified” students is amplified on Table 4.6, which shows significant differences among students who receive an acceptance and students who do not receive an acceptance by race, gender, and special education status.
These descriptive findings require analysis using a regression framework to examine the extent to which student background characteristics predict high school admission/enrollment, controlling for students’ seventh grade record.

**PREDICTORS OF APPLICATION AND ADMISSION/ENROLLMENT**

Regression analysis allows examination of the factors that predict students’ applications and admission. The findings presented are the final, two-level HGLM models that include student characteristics at Level 1 and school characteristics at Level 2. This set of models adjusts for the clustering of students within schools, and analyzes whether specific school variables predict student outcomes, above and beyond student

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**Table 4.6 Characteristics of "admit" and "non-admit" students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>At least one acceptance</th>
<th>No acceptance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.65 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.10 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.04 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.19 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.48 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.20 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.63 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.44 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspension</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.73 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.44 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As, Bs, and up to 1 C</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.19 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math PSSA proficient or advanced</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.40 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading PSSA proficient or advanced</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.39 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met Tier 1 criteria</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.08 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met Tier 2 criteria</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.36 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met no criteria</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: School District of Philadelphia, 2008-09. Note: Asterisks indicate levels of significance for t-tests of group differences between "admits" and "non-admits." * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

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factors. Results are presented as odds ratios, so values greater than 1 represent higher odds and values less than 1 represent lower odds of the outcome of interest, relative to the reference category for each variable. Estimates are considered significant when the p-value is less than 0.05 and the confidence interval does not cross 1. All odds ratios are conditional, meaning that they represent an increase or decrease in odds when holding all other variables in the model constant. The set of models includes students’ odds of any application and any admission/enrollment, and models that separately examine outcomes for Tier 1 schools, Tier 2 schools, and students’ odds of admission/enrollment at their first choice high school.

The models were run with school predictors entered at Level 2 to analyze the relationship between specific school characteristics and the outcomes of interest. For applications, school type (middle school, K-8, and other), eighth grade enrollment, percent free and reduced lunch (FRL), whether the school made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), whether the school was on the state’s Persistently Dangerous Schools (PDS) list, and the school’s racial composition were included. Racial composition was defined by a set of variables indicating whether the school was majority Black, majority White, majority Asian, majority Latino, or diverse. The sending school type and enrollment were included because they may influence staff-student relationships and the counselors’ ability to provide students with personalized attention. Percent FRL is a frequently used, albeit imprecise, indicator of school poverty. AYP status is a composite classification of school performance on state standardized exams that is published in local newspapers and has become a recognizable indicator of school success and failure. Similarly, schools on the PDS list receive negative press attention. The rationale for
including these variables is to examine whether contextual indicators of school organization, quality, and safety are associated with students’ application decisions.

In the application analysis, the racial composition and PDS designation of the students’ assigned neighborhood high school was also included, along with sending school and assigned neighborhood high school interaction variables. These interaction terms for racial composition and danger provide insight into whether students and their families consider the context of their current school and the high school to which they would be assigned when making application decisions about whether and where to apply for high school.

For analysis of admission/enrollment outcomes, the sending school AYP status, percent FRL, and PDS designation are included to examine whether high schools systematically favor students from sending schools with certain characteristics in the admission process. These three characteristics are easily accessible and are often associated with school reputation. The general consensus is that schools that make AYP are “good” and schools with high percent FRL or who are on the PDS list are “bad.”

A set of two-level HGLM models were also conducted to predict students’ odds of application and admission/enrollment given their background characteristics and seventh grade record at Level 1 and a sending school fixed effect– or a set of dummy variables for the child’s eighth grade school– at Level 2. Using school fixed effects adjusts for the clustering of students within schools but it does not examine the specific school characteristics that may influence the outcomes. The fixed effects analyses are in Appendix G.
Any application

Table 4.7 HGLM analysis of students’ odds of high school application, using school-level predictors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 1: Student characteristics (n=12,160)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White *</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.223</td>
<td>0.338</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian *</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.424</td>
<td>0.770</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino *</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.427</td>
<td>0.610</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other *</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>0.416</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>1.268</td>
<td>1.646</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.627</td>
<td>1.036</td>
<td>0.0925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.680</td>
<td>0.964</td>
<td>0.0175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh grade record</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.797</td>
<td>2.431</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.830</td>
<td>1.096</td>
<td>0.5027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspension</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>1.046</td>
<td>1.419</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1.730</td>
<td>2.603</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math standardized test scores</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>1.115</td>
<td>1.338</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading standardized test scores</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>1.212</td>
<td>1.475</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEVEL 2: School characteristics (n=133)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary &amp; secondary school **</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.416</td>
<td>0.655</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-8 school **</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>1.914</td>
<td>3.011</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade enrollment</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.992</td>
<td>0.997</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent free &amp; reduced lunch</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.986</td>
<td>1.017</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>0.845</td>
<td>1.692</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistently dangerous</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.835</td>
<td>0.0428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority White ***</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.093</td>
<td>1.753</td>
<td>0.0296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Asian ***</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>-2.441</td>
<td>9.230</td>
<td>0.2517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Latino ***</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>-0.189</td>
<td>0.911</td>
<td>0.1963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse ***</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>-0.112</td>
<td>0.991</td>
<td>0.117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned neighborhood high school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority White ***</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>-0.4276</td>
<td>2.166</td>
<td>0.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Latino ***</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>-0.0855</td>
<td>0.7558</td>
<td>0.1173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse ***</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>-0.0481</td>
<td>0.4205</td>
<td>0.1182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistently dangerous</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.7105</td>
<td>1.2796</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistical interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending school Latino x assigned</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>-1.132</td>
<td>5.692</td>
<td>0.1884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neighborhood high school Latino</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending school diverse x assigned</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>-0.935</td>
<td>6.837</td>
<td>0.1354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neighborhood high school diverse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending school Black x assigned</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>-0.084</td>
<td>0.603</td>
<td>0.1373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neighborhood high school Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending school dangerous x assigned</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>-0.188</td>
<td>3.037</td>
<td>0.0828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neighborhood high school dangerous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: School District of Philadelphia, 2008-09. Note: * Black is the reference category. ** Middle school is the reference category. *** Majority Black is the reference category.
Table 4.7 reveals students’ conditional odds of application to any high school. First, student characteristics predict application. Relative to Blacks, all other racial/ethnic groups have significantly lower odds of completing a high school application. Females have 1.44 times higher odds of application than males, and special education students have 0.81 times lower odds of applying than their peers. Students’ seventh grade record is also predictive of high school application. Those with fewer absences, no suspensions, and stronger academic qualifications have significantly higher odds of completing an application. Students who meet the absence criteria have 2.09 times higher odds of application than their peers, and students who meet the course grades criteria have 2.12 times higher odds of applying to any high school.

Second, school organizational characteristics are significant predictors of students’ odds of application. Students in K-8 schools have 2.46 times higher odds of applying to any school than students in middle schools. Students in “other” types of schools, including grades 5-12, 8-12 and other combinations that do not have a “natural educational transition” from eighth to ninth grade, have 0.54 times lower odds of completing an application. This suggests that students prefer school stability. If they are already in a school that has high school grades, they have higher odds of forgoing the application process. Students in schools with higher eighth grade enrollment also have significantly lower odds of applying than their counterparts in schools with smaller eighth grade classes, but the effect is small. Students in sending schools that are persistently dangerous also have 0.42 times lower odds of application, but this effect cannot be interpreted because it is a main effect included in the interaction variable that incorporates sending school PDS status and assigned neighborhood high school PDS.
status, which is not significant. Neither school racial/ethnic composition at the sending school and the students’ assigned neighborhood high school nor school danger are significant predictors of student application.

**Application to Tier 1 & Tier 2 schools**

When applications are analyzed separately by admission tier, student and school characteristics remain significant predictors. Table 4.8 below indicates that Asians have 1.93 times higher odds of applying to Tier 1 schools than Blacks, although, as reported above, they have lower odds of completing an application than Black students. Other findings on Table 4.8 align with the patterns of overall application. Females have 1.80 higher odds of applying to at least one Tier 1 high school than males. Students who meet the course grades criteria have 2.38 times higher odds of Tier 1 application, students with higher math standardized test scores have 1.35 times higher odds of Tier 1 application, and students with higher reading test scores have 1.48 times higher odds of applying to a Tier 1 school. Students who meet the absence criteria has 1.25 times higher odds of Tier 1 application and students who meet the suspension criteria have 1.37 times higher odds. All of these coefficients represent students’ odds of application, holding all other variables constant.

In contrast to the “any application” model, there is no significant difference in special education students’ odds of Tier 1 application, relative to their peers. Tier 1 schools are generally smaller than high schools in the other tiers, so they may be able to offer students more personalized academic supports to special education students, although they are also more academically rigorous.
### Table 4.8 HGLM analysis of students’ odds of Tier 1 application, using school-level predictors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1: Student characteristics (n=12,160)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% Confidence</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White *</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.599</td>
<td>0.958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian *</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>1.291</td>
<td>2.569</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino *</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.617</td>
<td>0.913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other *</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.307</td>
<td>1.201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>1.589</td>
<td>2.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.856</td>
<td>1.068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.774</td>
<td>1.067</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Seventh grade record                    |            |                |         |
| 10 or fewer absences                    | 1.25       | 1.084          | 1.407   | <.0001 |
| 5 or fewer latenesses                   | 1.10       | 0.964          | 1.242   | <.0001 |
| No out-of-school suspension             | 1.37       | 1.186          | 1.562   | <.0001 |
| All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects    | 2.38       | 2.079          | 2.681   | <.0001 |
| Math standardized test scores           | 1.35       | 1.253          | 1.447   | <.0001 |
| Reading standardized test scores        | 1.48       | 1.360          | 1.598   | <.0001 |

| **Level 2: School characteristics (n=133)** |            |                |         |
| Sending school                           |            |                |         |
| Elementary & secondary school **          | 1.05       | 0.771          | 1.319   | <.0001 |
| K-8 school **                            | 2.06       | 1.523          | 2.606   | <.0001 |
| 8th grade enrollment                     | 1.00       | 0.994          | 0.999   | <.0001 |
| Percent free & reduced lunch             | 0.97       | 0.954          | 0.986   | <.0001 |
| Made AYP                                 | 1.29       | 0.834          | 1.749   | <.0001 |
| Persistently dangerous                   | 0.59       | -0.067         | 1.252   | 0.0776 |
| Majority White ***                       | 0.85       | 0.009          | 1.700   | 0.0476 |
| Majority Asian ***                       | 4.99       | -4.448         | 14.206  | 0.2975 |
| Majority Latino ***                      | 0.13       | -0.100         | 0.365   | 0.2604 |
| Diverse ***                              | 0.19       | -0.086         | 0.462   | 0.1760 |

| Assigned neighborhood high school        |            |                |         |
| Majority White ***                       | 0.44       | -0.289         | 1.165   | 0.2351 |
| Majority Latino ***                      | 0.12       | -0.054         | 0.284   | 0.1811 |
| Diverse ***                              | 0.08       | -0.041         | 0.207   | 0.1890 |
| Persistently dangerous                   | 0.68       | 0.471          | 0.893   | <.0001 |

| Statistical interactions                 |            |                |         |
| Sending school Latino x assigned         | 8.67       | -6.331         | 23.678  | 0.2547 |
| neighborhood high school Latino          |            |                |         |
| Sending school diverse x assigned        | 7.73       | -4.225         | 19.693  | 0.2029 |
| neighborhood high school diverse         |            |                |         |
| Sending school Black x assigned          | 0.15       | -0.081         | 0.382   | 0.2001 |
| neighborhood high school Black           |            |                |         |
| Sending school dangerous x assigned      | 1.46       | -0.431         | 3.342   | 0.1292 |
| neighborhood high school dangerous       |            |                |         |

Source: School District of Philadelphia, 2008-09. Note: * Black is the reference category. ** Middle school is the reference category. *** Majority Black is the reference category.
Table 4.9 HGLM analysis of students’ odds of Tier 2 application, using school-level predictors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1: Student characteristics (n=12,160)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% Confidence</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White *</td>
<td><strong>0.67</strong></td>
<td>0.545</td>
<td>0.801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian *</td>
<td><strong>0.34</strong></td>
<td>0.261</td>
<td>0.425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino *</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.717</td>
<td>1.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other *</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.555</td>
<td>1.693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td><strong>0.73</strong></td>
<td>0.657</td>
<td>0.801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.737</td>
<td>1.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td><strong>0.80</strong></td>
<td>0.682</td>
<td>0.911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seventh grade record</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.903</td>
<td>1.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.865</td>
<td>1.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspension</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.843</td>
<td>1.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.907</td>
<td>1.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math standardized test scores</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.898</td>
<td>1.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading standardized test scores</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.884</td>
<td>1.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 2: School characteristics (n=133)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sending school</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary &amp; secondary school **</td>
<td><strong>0.73</strong></td>
<td>0.608</td>
<td>0.860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-8 school **</td>
<td><strong>2.00</strong></td>
<td>1.658</td>
<td>2.348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade enrollment</td>
<td><strong>1.00</strong></td>
<td>0.996</td>
<td>0.999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent free &amp; reduced lunch</td>
<td><strong>1.01</strong></td>
<td>1.004</td>
<td>1.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.885</td>
<td>1.435</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistently dangerous</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.572</td>
<td>0.871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority White ***</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.255</td>
<td>1.118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Asian ***</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>-0.485</td>
<td>6.572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Latino ***</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>-0.032</td>
<td>2.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse ***</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.291</td>
<td>1.442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assigned neighborhood high school</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority White ***</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>0.186</td>
<td>2.750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Latino ***</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.208</td>
<td>2.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse ***</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.122</td>
<td>0.814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistently dangerous</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
<td>1.536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Statistical interactions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending school Latino x assigned</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.196</td>
<td>1.507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neighborhood high school Latino</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending school diverse x assigned</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.189</td>
<td>2.390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neighborhood high school diverse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending school Black x assigned</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>0.308</td>
<td>4.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neighborhood high school Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending school dangerous x assigned</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>-1.142</td>
<td>5.682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neighborhood high school dangerous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: School District of Philadelphia, 2008-09. Note: * Black is the reference category. ** Middle school is the reference category. *** Majority Black is the reference category.
In analysis of applications to Tier 2 schools, the results generally follow the “any application” model but there are several key differences. Table 4.9 shows that White and Asian students have lower odds of Tier 2 application than Black students (0.67 and 0.34 times lower, respectively), and females have 0.73 times lower odds of Tier 2 application than males, which suggests a lack of interest in career-focused high school programs among these groups. Also, special education students have 0.80 times lower odds of applying to at least one Tier 2 high school. Table 4.9 also indicates that there is no significant difference in Tier 2 application based on students’ standardized test scores, which makes sense given that Tier 2 schools do not consider students’ test scores for admission.

Analyses of applications by tier align with the above “any application” analysis, identifying school organization ad school poverty as significant predictors of Tier 1 and Tier 2 application. However, the estimates differ across the Tier 1 and Tier 2 models. Students in K-8 schools have 2.06 times higher odds of applying to a Tier 1 high school and 2.00 times higher odds of applying to a Tier 2 school than their peers in middle schools or other types of sending schools. Schools that are K-8 encourage application to both Tier 1 and Tier 2 high schools. School poverty is also a significant predictor of application, but students in schools with a higher percent FRL have 0.97 times lower odds of Tier 1 application and 1.01 times greater odds of Tier 2 application. Thus, students in schools with higher average poverty have higher odds of submitting Tier 2 applications, controlling for other factors. These students may not choose to apply to Tier 1 high schools, but they may perceive Tier 2 schools to be a better option than attending their assigned neighborhood high school.
Any admission/enrollment

Table 4.10 HGLM analysis of students’ odds of high school admission & enrollment, using school-level predictors

LEVEL 1: Student characteristics (n=9,130)  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>1.053</td>
<td>1.545</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.995</td>
<td>1.589</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.688</td>
<td>0.972</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>0.922</td>
<td>2.929</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.045</td>
<td>1.288</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1.737</td>
<td>2.773</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.942</td>
<td>1.307</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seventh grade record

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seventh grade record</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.420</td>
<td>1.838</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>1.348</td>
<td>1.691</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspension</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>1.106</td>
<td>1.465</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>1.740</td>
<td>2.207</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math standardized test scores</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>1.168</td>
<td>1.331</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading standardized test scores</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1.274</td>
<td>1.477</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of applications</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>1.642</td>
<td>1.805</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LEVEL 2: School characteristics (n=133)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sending school</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>1.002</td>
<td>1.613</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistently dangerous</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.274</td>
<td>0.738</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent free &amp; reduced lunch</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.994</td>
<td>1.010</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: School District of Philadelphia, 2008-09

Models predicting high school admission/enrollment are run on the 9,130 students who completed an application and all coefficients are conditional odds ratios. The term “admission” is used for simplicity, but all results represent students’ odds of receiving an acceptance and deciding to enroll.

As Table 4.10 shows, student background characteristics are significant predictors of admission. White students have 1.23 times higher odds of receiving at least one acceptance than Black students, and Latino students have 0.83 times lower odds of
admission than Blacks. Females have 1.17 times higher odds of admission than males. ELL students have 2.25 times higher odds of admission than their peers.

   Students with fewer absences and latenesses and no suspensions in seventh grade have higher odds of admission, as do students with higher grades and test scores. As with the application analysis, absences and course grades are among the strongest predictors of admission. Meeting the absence criteria is associated with 1.63 times higher odds of admission and meeting the course grades criteria is associated with a 1.97 times higher odds of admission. Also, the number of schools to which students apply is related to a 1.72 times higher odds of admission, after controlling for other factors.

   School characteristics also predict admission. As Table 4.10 shows, students in schools that made AYP have 0.31 times lower odds of any admission, which counters the theory that high schools may favor students from “good” schools. Students in dangerous schools also have 0.51 times lower odds of admission, which supports the theory that high schools may be reluctant to accept students from “bad” schools, controlling for other factors. These findings indicate that while there are significant school predictors of students’ odds of admission, they are not in a consistent direction.

Admission to Tier 1 schools, Tier 2 schools, & students’ first choice school

   Looking separately at admission and enrollment by selective tier shows that student and school characteristics remain significant predictors, but reveals differences from the “any admission” findings. As Table 4.11 below shows, Asians and Whites have higher odds than Blacks of acceptance into a Tier 1 school (1.65 times and 1.64 times higher, respectively). Females have 1.75 times higher odds of Tier 1 admission and enrollment than males. Also, ELL and special education students have higher odds of
acceptance at Tier 1 schools than their peers & the size of these estimates is striking. ELL students have 5.98 times higher odds of Tier 1 admission than their peers and special education students have 2.33 times higher odds of Tier 1 admission. As with the other outcomes, students who meet the criteria have higher odds of Tier 1 admission. But students who meet the course grade criteria have 3.95 times higher odds of Tier 1 admission that their peers, a stronger predictor than the test score criteria that are a stated differentiator for Tier 1 admissions.

Table 4.11 HGLM analysis of students' odds of Tier 1 admission & enrollment, using school-level predictors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 1: Student characteristics (n=9,130)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% Confidence</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.255 - 2.030</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1.209 - 2.093</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.711 - 1.157</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>0.524 - 2.656</td>
<td>0.0038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>1.490 - 2.005</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>3.775 - 8.183</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>1.629 - 3.039</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seventh grade record</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>1.747 - 2.771</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>1.280 - 1.768</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspension</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1.554 - 2.686</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>3.090 - 4.819</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math standardized test scores</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>1.569 - 1.914</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading standardized test scores</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1.969 - 2.505</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of applications</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.297 - 1.492</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| LEVEL 2: School characteristics (n=133) |            |                |         |
| Sending school                          |            |                |         |
| Made AYP                                | 1.13       | 0.822 - 1.429  | <.0001  |
| Persistently dangerous                  | 0.47       | 0.180 - 0.757  | 0.0017  |
| Percent free & reduced lunch            | 0.98       | 0.974 - 0.992  | <.0001  |

Source: School District of Philadelphia, 2008-09
As Table 4.12 shows, the race and gender differences in other models become insignificant in Tier 2 admission. However, ELL students’ advantage persists, with 1.88 times higher odds than their peers of Tier 2 admission. Meeting the criteria also predicts Tier 2 admission/enrollment, but students with higher reading test scores have 0.90 times lower odds of being accepted at and enrolling in a Tier 2 school. Since test scores are not used for Tier 2 admissions, it makes sense that if a student meets the test score criteria, he or she would be more likely to be accepted at and enroll in a Tier 1 high school.

Table 4.12 HGLM analysis of students’ odds of Tier 2 admission & enrollment, using school-level predictors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 1: Student characteristics (n=9,130)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>0.7404</td>
<td>1.2773</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.5193</td>
<td>1.154</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.7718</td>
<td>1.1751</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>0.477</td>
<td>2.2299</td>
<td>0.0027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.7975</td>
<td>1.0437</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
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<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td><strong>1.88</strong></td>
<td>1.3277</td>
<td>2.426</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.675</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seventh grade record</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td><strong>1.52</strong></td>
<td>1.2785</td>
<td>1.7675</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td><strong>1.41</strong></td>
<td>1.2112</td>
<td>1.6124</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspension</td>
<td><strong>1.31</strong></td>
<td>1.0868</td>
<td>1.5355</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td><strong>1.51</strong></td>
<td>1.2856</td>
<td>1.7314</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math standardized test scores</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.9135</td>
<td>1.078</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading standardized test scores</td>
<td><strong>0.90</strong></td>
<td>0.8204</td>
<td>0.9883</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of applications</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.9984</td>
<td>1.1356</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| LEVEL 2: School characteristics (n=133)   |            |        |        |          |
| Sending school                            |            |        |        |          |
| Made AYP                                  | 1.14       | 0.8936 | 1.3882 | <.0001   |
| Persistently dangerous                    | **0.64**   | 0.3806 | 0.8905 | <.0001   |
| Percent free & reduced lunch              | **1.02**   | 1.0109 | 1.0275 | <.0001   |

Source: School District of Philadelphia, 2008-09
Schools also matter. Students in dangerous sending schools have 0.47 times lower odds of Tier 1 admission (Table 4.11) and 0.64 times lower odds of Tier 2 admission (Table 4.12). Interestingly, students in high FRL schools have 0.98 times lower odds of Tier 1 admission (Table 4.11) but 1.02 times higher odds of Tier 2 admission. Unlike the school organizational factors that were predictive of application, these findings suggest that high schools consider observable negative characteristics such as school danger and poverty when making admission decisions at Tier 1 high schools and students in “bad” schools have lower odds of Tier 1 admission and enrollment.

Table 4.13 HGLM analysis of students' odds of admission & enrollment at first choice high school, using school-level predictors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 1: Student characteristics (n=9,130)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% Confidence</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>0.943</td>
<td>1.435</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.439</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td><strong>0.64</strong></td>
<td>0.488</td>
<td>0.797</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>0.532</td>
<td>2.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td><strong>1.24</strong></td>
<td>1.071</td>
<td>1.402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.437</td>
<td>2.787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td><strong>1.66</strong></td>
<td>1.258</td>
<td>2.070</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Seventh grade record                      |            |                |         |
| 10 or fewer absences                      | **1.28**   | 1.027          | 1.538   | <.0001  |
| 5 or fewer latenesses                     | **1.46**   | 1.242          | 1.685   | <.0001  |
| No out-of-school suspension               | 1.24       | 0.970          | 1.519   | <.0001  |
| All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects      | **1.39**   | 1.141          | 1.637   | <.0001  |
| Math standardized test scores             | **1.25**   | 1.174          | 1.415   | <.0001  |
| Reading standardized test scores          | **1.64**   | 1.471          | 1.810   | <.0001  |
| Number of applications                    | **0.93**   | 0.875          | 0.986   | <.0001  |

| LEVEL 2: School characteristics (n=133)   |            |                |         |
| Sending school                            |            |                |         |
| Made AYP                                  | 1.05       | 0.797          | 1.300   | <.0001  |
| Persistently dangerous                    | **0.53**   | 0.238          | 0.825   | 0.0005  |
| Percent free & reduced lunch              | **0.99**   | 0.979          | 0.995   | <.0001  |

Source: School District of Philadelphia, 2008-09
The ELL and special education advantage also persists for students’ first choice school (Table 4.13). Other findings are similar to students’ likelihood of admission at any school. Asian students have 1.87 times higher odds of admission to their first choice school than Black students, and Latino students have 0.64 times lower odds of admission. Females have 1.24 times higher odds of admission, as do students who meet each of the admission criteria. Attending a dangerous school or a school with a high percent FRL are both associated with lower odds of first choice admission, 0.53 times and 0.99 times, respectively. This is consistent with the “bad schools” disadvantage hypothesis. In this model, students who apply to more schools also experience 0.93 times lower odds of admission at their first choice school, indicating a potential downside to applying to more schools, although students with more applications have higher odds of receiving any admission.

SUMMARY

This chapter reveals that 1) better qualified students have higher odds of application and admission/enrollment, and 2) students with equal seventh grade records have unequal odds of application and admission based on their background and school characteristics. Qualified students have more options in this selective high school “choice” system, which is consistent with district policy. Students who meet the stated seventh grade record criteria have higher odds of application and admission. Specifically, the course grades criteria and the absence criteria are consistently significant and substantial predictors of admission across the high school tiers.
However, demand for selective high schools exceeds the supply. While 75 percent of eighth grade students apply, only 45 percent of applicants have choice in the system as a result of being accepted to a high school to which they applied. Given the limited number of students who meet the Tier 1 and Tier 2 admission criteria (16% and 38%, respectively), the appropriateness of the stated criteria is questionable. Also, the limited number of available spots in selective high schools requires critical examination of the benefits and consequences of allowing, and often encouraging, all students to apply.

Moreover, consistent differences in application and admission by student background characteristics are not explained by district policy. Race, gender, special education status, and ELL status are all significant predictors, after controlling for seventh grade record variables. All race/ethnic groups have lower odds of completing an application than Black students, but Asian students have higher odds of applying to Tier 1 high school and lower odds of applying to Tier 2 high schools than their Black peers. Female students also have higher odds of Tier 1 application and lower odds of Tier 2 application than male students. Special education students have lower odds of submitting Tier 2 applications than their peers.

In terms of admission, student background characteristics predict student outcomes net of their seventh grade record. White students have higher odds and Latino students have lower odds of any admission than Black students. Females and ELL students have higher odds of admission than their counterparts. And Asian and special education students have higher odds of Tier 1 admissions than Black students and non special education students, respectively. The White and Asian advantage, relative to Black students, may be in part due to efforts to achieve racial diversity in high school
admissions since Philadelphia is a predominantly Black school district. However, these policies are not explicit and this does not explain the Latino disadvantage in high school admission. Also, the ELL and special education student advantage suggests that there are efforts to take ELL and special education students at selective high schools, but the practical implications of these findings may be limited because the regression analysis controls for seventh grade records and these students do not disproportionately meet the selective admission criteria. Still, the findings in this chapter indicate that students with equal credentials have unequal chances of high school admission based on their background characteristics.

Applying to more schools is also related to higher odds of any admission and Tier 1 admission. This is a policy relevant finding because it is simple to recommend that students apply to five high schools instead of leaving some blank on the application form, at least for those who believe that any selective high school is more desirable than a neighborhood school.

There is also evidence that sending school characteristics matter for applications and admissions, but no support for the hypothesis that students’ assigned neighborhood high school predicts application decisions. School structure is a significant predictor of application; students in K-8 schools have higher odds of application and students in schools that span elementary and secondary grades have lower odds of application, relative to middle school students. Also, students in schools with higher enrollment have lower odds of application. These findings reveal that there is something about K-8 schools and schools with fewer eighth grade students that is associated with higher odds of high school application. Students in K-8 schools can potentially be enrolled in the
school for nine years, and this may increase staff knowledge of students and their families and the personalized attention students receive. Of course, while the quantitative data identifies that school characteristics predict student outcomes net of student characteristics, it does not provide an explanation about what it is about schools’ K-8 structure or eighth grade class size that matters for student outcomes.

In terms of admission, students in schools with negative characteristics have lower odds of admission. Specifically, students in persistently dangerous sending schools and schools with higher percent FRL have lower odds of admission than their peers in other schools. School AYP status is not correspondingly associated with higher odds of admission, and school racial composition is not a significant predictor.

This chapter reveals that student background characteristics and school characteristics predict students’ odds of application and admission, after controlling for students’ seventh grade records. Advantages and disadvantages by race/ethnicity and gender align with prior research on educational outcomes, but the ELL and special education advantage in admissions is surprising. Further, this analysis adds the school role as another dimension of “choice” outcomes and finds that students in dangerous and high poverty schools have lower odds of admission, controlling for other factors. Thus, schools may exacerbate or mitigate differences in students’ seventh grade records and their high school admission opportunities. There are limited indicators available in administrative data to examine what it is about these school characteristics that matters for student outcomes, and school effects depend on how resources are used within schools (Gamoran et al., 2000). Therefore, a qualitative approach is necessary to “get inside the black box” of the sending schools in the high school application process.
Chapter 6 focuses on the counselors in 10 K-8 schools to understand how they approach this process and the implications for student applications and admission. Chapters 7 and 8 examine the student role in high school application decisions in native-born and immigrant families.
CHAPTER 5
COUNSELOR, PARENT, AND STUDENT CONCERNS ABOUT THE HIGH SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS

As stated in Chapter 4, the high school application process is a normalized part of the transition to high school in Philadelphia, with 75 percent of students completing an application to opt out of their neighborhood high school. This negative perception of neighborhood high schools is supported in district data. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, Tier 3, neighborhood high schools have worse average performance levels than Tier 1 and Tier 2 schools on indicators of school climate, student engagement, academic rigor, and student performance. This chapter uses qualitative data from 10 counselor, 47 student, and 27 parent interviews to examine specific complaints about the neighborhood high schools, including low academic quality and violence. This chapter also examines larger concerns about the process that were common across study participants, including that students have to make educational decisions about their college and career track at such a young age and that students’ educational and life opportunities are structured by their seventh grade performance. This chapter highlights the importance of students’ seventh grade record for their high school options, and the thin margin of error that students have given that the non-selective, Tier 3 option is widely perceived to be unacceptable.

LOW ACADEMIC QUALITY OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD HIGH SCHOOLS

Counselors, students, and parents agreed that the neighborhood high schools are the “bottom of the pit” for several reasons, the first of which is their perceived low academic quality. Counselors stated that the low quality of the neighborhood high schools is an underlying problem that must be addressed, and that the high school application process exacerbates negative perceptions of the neighborhood high schools.
All of the 10 counselors agreed that the neighborhood high schools were the worst high school options in the district and some counselors discussed the neighborhood schools as being “absolutely horrible.” Others were more charitable in their descriptions, recognizing that some neighborhood schools were better than others. For example, there are two neighborhood schools in the study region and the counselors discussed one more favorably than the other, largely due to a new principal who “is really good,” “doesn’t play,” and “is starting some good things there.”

The counselors acknowledged that students could be successful at any high school, but they agreed that there were more distractions at the neighborhood schools. Ms. Constantine was frustrated because she wanted one of her high achieving current students to consider selective high schools but the student’s mother refused to let her travel outside the neighborhood. She explained how it was difficult for her to not push the child to apply to high schools, but she comforted herself by looking at a wallet sized high school cap and gown photograph of a former student on her wall. She pointed at the photo and told me, “Kareem graduated (from eighth grade) four years ago and is now at the top of his class at the neighborhood school and practically has a full-ride to college. So you can shine there.” Several counselors had similar examples and they were clearly proud of students like Kareem, but these students were the exception.

Like the example of Kareem, four of the 16 immigrant parents expressed the belief that, “It depends on the student, not the school.” Ms. Chey added, “It depends on the student, whether they’re willing to learn or not.” However, while the native-born parents and counselors recognized that students could be successful in any school, they also acknowledged the many challenges and distractions at the neighborhood high
schools, including limited numbers of advanced courses, student mobility, dropout problems, and climate and safety issues. In contrast, some immigrant parents put the burden of educational success entirely on their child.

More typically, families were upset about the low academic expectations at the neighborhood high schools. As Ms. Atley explained, “They’re not really educationally driven. It’s—because you have nowhere else to go, so they just put them there.” Students made comments such as, “I’m not saying [the teachers] don’t care, but they don’t push students as much.” Some also had negative perceptions of the students at neighborhood high schools, making statements such as, “The students are not well behaved, not motivated.”

VIOLENCE, SAFETY, AND DISTANCE

In addition to academics, all parents and many students expressed concern about the school climate and violence at the neighborhood high schools and students’ safety on their way to and from school. Parents and students discussed metal detectors as a prominent symbol of the “unnecessary worries” at neighborhood high schools. Mrs. Evans said, “I don’t like the schools that you gotta go through the detectors. That’s just not- you shouldn’t have to worry about that stuff when you go to school… just unnecessary worries other that what you’re there for.” Mrs. Bianchi said about her son, “I’m sure that he would still do well [at the neighborhood school], but I don’t know if I’d necessarily want him to have to put up with everything else that’s going on around… You gotta go through metal detectors just to go through the front door. That’s a bad sign.” Other parent comments about the violence at neighborhood high schools included, “There’s a lot of violence,” “They’re on the news a lot,” and, “I’ve never heard anything
good about it.” Parents expressed concern about subjecting their children to the “unnecessary worries” of metal detectors, fights, and other distractions at neighborhood high schools.

Students also discussed violence and safety at neighborhood high schools, oscillating between saying the negative reputation was over-exaggerated and sharing incidents in which a girl was slashed in the face with a knife, or a teacher was beaten up, or friends were jumped as evidence that they were the worst schools. They characterized the students who attended neighborhood schools as “bad kids.” As Allison said, “They smoke in the school… They beat people up. You name it, they do it.” Bobby explained, “They have bad kids, really like from the ghetto. They don’t care about getting thrown out, locked up, whatever.” Bobby also mentioned bars on the windows as a physical indicator of the neighborhood high school’s jail-like quality:

My sister’s boyfriend said it’s not so tough, but that’s the way people make it sound. Like, it gets so overexaggerated… but it’s a bad school. There’s graffiti all over and there are cages on the windows. What’s up with that, anyways? Cages on the windows! Like it’s a jail or something. (He leans back in his chair and shakes his head.)

Concerns about safety inside the school building were matched by parents’ concerns about their children’s safety traveling across the city for school. Parents expressed a desire to give their children increased independence, but they were fearful about allowing their children to ride the subway because it gets more crowded and there is less oversight than on buses. Ms. Bianchi explained, “I wouldn’t even want him traveling in the subway somewhere… It’s a little too scary.” Like other parents, she was okay with letting him ride a bus to the high school at which he was accepted, but the
subway was out of the question. She and other parents had fears about the subway, citing an incident in which someone got killed in the subway and stating, “It’s not good to have a smart kid if they’re dead.”

All parents worried about their children’s safety, but willingness to let students travel was associated with students’ seventh grade records and their high school options. Parents of qualified students generally agreed that it was worthwhile to let their children take advantage of the best educational opportunities. Mrs. Peterson admits that she was hesitant about Central because it is far away and because it is a large school. But she explained, “You have to let them grow. I mean, so I have him five blocks from my house now and then I send him off 200 miles away for college?” The idea of letting their children traverse the city as preparation for the bigger geographic distance of college was common among these parents, all of who expected their children to attend some form of postsecondary education. Jasmine even told her parents, “I’m going away for college so I’m going to be far away then.” Mrs. Evans said that her husband would have been more enthusiastic about letting one of their sons travel but was reluctant to let Jasmine go because she was a girl. However, she said, “I want her to get that experience.”

Both mothers explained that they were going to have their children practice riding public transportation. Mrs. Peterson said, “This summer, we’re gonna try working on it…. I said, ‘You’re gonna become Mr. SEPTA this summer.’” She explained that Mark would take rowing lessons over the summer, so instead of driving him, she would have him take public transportation to get comfortable with it. Mrs. Evans said that they were going to “take some test runs” from their house to Jasmine’s high school over the summer.
Ms. Bianchi represented the smaller group of parents of qualified students who was not willing to let her child travel far for high school. One of Ms. Bianchi’s main concerns was the school’s distance from home and Stephen’s safety en route to school. She lamented that there were not more selective schools in her neighborhood, stating, “There were not too many around here. I mean they were like some crazy places I never even heard of. They didn’t sound like they were in Philly, but supposedly they were.” Neither she nor Stephen explicitly said she limited his search to schools close to home, but Stephen only ended up applying to two schools that were among the closest to his house. Stephen explained that he chose not to apply to Central because he was not sure he would get in and because he would have to wake up early to get there. Ms. Bianchi said, “We were just praying he’d get into one of the two.” Unlike Ms. Evans who grew up in a different Philadelphia neighborhood or Ms. Peterson who grew up in the suburbs, Ms. Bianchi has lived her whole life in this neighborhood and was more reluctant to let her son leave.

Although Ms. Bianchi was more cautious about sending Stephen to a high school in another part of the city, parents of qualified students did not consider the neighborhood high school to be an option. All parents expressed concerns about safety, violence, and school climate, but qualified students had never gotten into trouble at school, and their parents expressed a strong desire to keep it that way. Ms. Bianchi was familiar with the neighborhood high school because she had attended it and dropped out, but other parents of qualified students based their knowledge on news reports, school staff, and others who disparaged these schools. Mrs. Peterson was at the extreme end in terms of having little to no information about her neighborhood high school, but she said, “People just talk
about it like that would be like being sent to Afghanistan or something… There’s one little boy that just transferred into eighth grade and Mark comes home and he’s like, ‘He’s bright, but I guess since he missed the application process he has to go to the neighborhood school.’ So it’s like, oh that poor kid.”

In contrast, parents of unqualified students put a strict geographic constraint on their child’s applications because their children did not have access to high schools that would be worth the travel. Mr. Ochoa admitted that if Christina would have been accepted to a selective high school like GAMP or CAPA, they would have tried to drive her and been okay with letting her take public transportation. Mrs. Ochoa said she was still uneasy about it, but the opportunity would have been worthwhile. Ms. Messner agreed that if her daughter would have had the chance to attend Central or another top school, they would have made sure she could attend. She said, “If I had to, I would have drove her there every day. It’s a good school… I would have made a point to get her there.”

Distance, safety, and the increasing independence of adolescents were issues for all parents, and these issues were more pronounced in immigrant families due to their limited English ability and powerlessness in monitoring their children. Mrs. Chey expressed concern about her daughter going too far from home “because she might not come home… and what do I do?” Anne’s older sister had attended a selective high school across the city but did not come home right away after school and ended up getting pregnant in high school, so Mrs. Chey wanted Anne to stay closer to home. Parents who did not speak English could not call the child’s school, the child’s friends, or the police to
find out their child’s whereabouts. Some did not drive, so they could not easily go looking for their child either.

Although most parents wished there were quality high school options close to home, some African American and immigrant parents wanted their children to leave the neighborhood for school. Mrs. Evans expressed a common view among African American parents that she wanted her daughter to attend a diverse school, and that this trumped staying close to home. As she explained, “I can fit in any crowd and I want her to feel that way. I have family members that won’t go to certain places, you know, but I don’t want her to feel that way. So I wanted her to be somewhere where it was diverse so she can feel that she can fit in anywhere, with anybody.” Another African American mother echoed diversity as a priority for her daughter, stating, “‘The world’s not black, you know? I just want her to get to know—she has black friends, she has white friends, she has all types of friends. I wanted her to be a multicultural person… I like that because it means she can get along with anyone. When she’s in a work environment, it’s not gonna be all Afro-Americans… I’m just preparing her… I just see more for my child than this neighborhood.”

Some immigrant parents also felt that their children would be better off leaving the neighborhood due to racial tensions between immigrant groups and African Americans. Several students from immigrant families reported being bullied or beaten up at school or on their way home from school, and their families did not want them to attend the neighborhood high school because “there are a lot of black people there.” Jonathan, a Cambodian student, got into a fight with an African American student at school and Mrs. Im explained that when she went to meet with the principal, “The other
boy’s whole family was there, like to scare us.” She explained that she was frightened and understood why her older daughters did not want Jonathan to attend the neighborhood high school. Marisol also said that the black students at her school yell in the cafeteria that she and her friends are immigrants and should go back to their country. She said it makes her mad and described the tensions between Latino and black students as “a big deal.” And Mr. Diallo said that his son, David, is not somebody who wants to fight so he tries to avoid conflict with African American students in his class. David explained that the other black students liked to make fun of the African students at his school.

“THEY’RE STILL KIDS”

Several of the counselors expressed concerns about students having to make important educational decisions that structure their college and career opportunities at such a young age. As Ms. Wilcox commented,

One teacher was just telling me this morning that (a student) told her, ‘At Bodine, you can get steak sandwiches and at SLA, you can get chicken nuggets and fries.’ She was frustrated, saying, ‘That’s what they’re talking about?’ and I said, ‘Well, that’s because they’re still kids. That’s what’s on their minds.’

Ms. Wilcox turned to me, shrugged her shoulders with her palms raised, and added, “It’s crazy that they have to make this decision in eighth grade.” Students talked about school lunches and how some schools let you go off campus for lunch, schools without uniforms, and schools that give students laptops. Some of the school characteristics that students remembered from high school presentations, the Expo, and talking to people in their network were educational. For example, one student was interested in being a lawyer and was impressed that Constitution High School had its own courtroom.
However, many students were like Anne, who told me, “The reason Parkway is one of my choices is because my cousin told me that at lunchtime, you can go out for a couple minutes and get your own lunch to eat. And I was like, I want to do that, because I’m tired of eating inside. Get some fresh air, you know?” High schools market themselves to students, and students are not necessarily savvy consumers. They express preferences, but they may not have access to information about all schools on which to base their decisions.

FOCUS ON SEVENTH GRADE RECORDS LIMITS STUDENTS’ OPPORTUNITIES

Selective high schools’ reliance on students’ seventh grade records to make admission decisions and the fact that all selective high schools want students with exceptional grades and test scores limits the admission opportunities for many students. As Ms. Olsen explained:

I’ve seen, over the five or six years that we’ve had in eighth grade, you know, seventh is almost, and I’m putting this in quotes, “the evil year,” and in eighth grade, even the most, oh my god, they really come together. And they also, it is a time when they’re coming together with a maturity and a sense, in part because they know they’re moving on, but in part because they’re mature enough to just begin to take control of their own actions, and understandings about how to compensate for, um, the—any academic deficits, and how to come at it from a different standpoint. And yet these children are being judged by the high schools based on seventh grade, um, scores. And that’s a shame, because there are kids who could really benefit, and really make that leap, if they were in schools that were looking at that middle level of student, to take them in. And they’re not getting that because not enough of them do interviews, and really get at what kind of students, and not enough of them are looking beyond the uh—Advanced, Proficient, you know, all that kind of stuff. And that, I believe, is a shame.

Mr. Davis added:

The thing is that the criteria for getting in is so much higher than the average. A lot of students don’t get in because of one C or because their
test scores don’t meet the cut-off. I mean, if you look at all the middle schools, there are massive behavior problems and low test scores in so many of them… Sometimes, it’s so discouraging. You’re waiting all year and the parents and students are waiting too, and in the end they’re disappointed.

The counselors recognized that the system had evolved over time from a few academic magnet schools with selective criteria to allowing all students to apply to all schools in the name of equity and fairness, but several counselors questioned whether all students should be allowed to apply or whether so many schools should have selective admission criteria. Several counselors worried that the process is stressful for students and parents. They lamented that students are “learning to be rejected at an early age” and “are reduced to their scores.”

Parents agreed that there are options in this system for students with strong seventh grade records, but the limited options for children with average or weak records made them upset about the low quality of the neighborhood high schools. Ms. Atley stated:

Well, I guess it should be a competition to some degree, to get kids into better schools, but what they’re left with are like holding institutions… That needs to be changed. I think every school should be a good school. Why should, you’re left with the bottom of the barrel, because all the special admission schools get the cream of the crop, the kids that are all As and Bs… Malik has potential. He’s not an A student, but he has potential, but he doesn’t have any other options. So yeah, something needs to be done about that.

She said that there are a lot of options, but only if “you fit what they’re looking for.” Mr. Ochoa agreed. Students with average and weak seventh grade records have limited or no options in this so-called choice system. Mr. Ochoa was worried about his daughter’s
safety in a neighborhood school and was upset that the neighborhood schools were “a death sentence”:

I just wish they would start cleaning some of these schools up. I mean, like I said, if you know these are the worst schools in Philadelphia, why not try to make it better? Why not try to do something about it, so if you don’t have an option, at least your last option’s not a death sentence for your child. I mean, it’s just hard to watch your child go through that, and knowing she’ll go to school getting beat up every day, or having to spend billions of dollars for school. I mean, in the middle, it’s just nothing in the middle. Unless you get lucky.

Counselors and parents agreed that “it’s a shame” and “it’s so discouraging” that there were good high schools in the district but their children would not be able to access them because they had flaws in their seventh grade record.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND REALITIES OF “CHOICE”

The counselors recognized the potential benefits of high school choice. Only three of the 10 counselors had grown up in Philadelphia, and these counselors explained that when they were in high school, there were only a few selective options and everyone else attended the neighborhood school. These counselors recognized the positives and negatives of choice, arguing that the deterioration of the neighborhood schools was the negative side of creating more high schools and expanding choice. The seven counselors who grew up elsewhere discussed how this process is so different than their own experience and were generally optimistic about the system. As one of these counselors explained, “I grew up in upstate New York and we had one high school. So we didn’t have any choices… I really do like the fact that kids have choices. And I think that it’s a good way to get young children to think about what’s ahead of them.”
However, the selection process contributed to the characterization of the neighborhood schools as the least desirable options. As Jasmine said, “The neighborhood schools—anybody and everybody can go to them, so they shouldn’t be your first choice.” Another student said, “Nobody’s proud about going there. It’s not an accomplishment. It’s just the place you get stuck to.” One parent echoed, “It’s like a last resort to say, well, you’re not good enough to get in.” And Ms. Olsen, a counselor, stated,

   Neighborhood schools are being depleted—between our magnet schools and then charter schools—of everyone but those who can’t get in anywhere else… People don’t want to go to them. The image of any neighborhood school is that it’s the bottom of the pit.

Therefore, the high school application process created a dichotomy in which selective high schools are considered “good” and neighborhood high schools are “bad.” Students define themselves relative to other students in the high school hierarchy and this has academic and socioemotional implications in the transition to high school.
CHAPTER 6
THE COUNSELOR ROLE: BROKERING AND CLEARINGHOUSE APPROACHES

This chapter builds on the Chapter 4 findings that students and schools matter for high school choice outcomes, and focuses on counselors as one of the mechanisms through which schools can mitigate or exacerbate student differences in the likelihood of high school application and admission. This chapter uses case studies at 10 K-8 schools to examine the role of the middle school counselor in providing information and support to students in the high school application process. There is only one counselor at every elementary and middle school in the study district, so the counselor approach is equivalent to the school approach in this process. This chapter describes two distinct counselor approaches, and demonstrates how counselors who use the brokering approach a) work to invest students in the high school application process in seventh grade and b) provide students with information and support to make their application decisions in eighth grade. I use the terms “brokering counselor” and “clearinghouse counselor” to describe the counselors and their approach at each school.

This chapter finds that students’ seventh grade records delimit their high school options, but counselors can play a critical role in encouraging students’ academic preparation and high school awareness in seventh grade. This chapter also finds that students rely on counselors for information, which influences students’ application decisions in eighth grade. Thus, this qualitative analysis reveals that sending school counselors contribute to school effects on students’ high school application outcomes.
BROKERING AND CLEARINGHOUSE APPROACHES

I identified two distinct counselor approaches that counselors use in the high school application process, and I argue that one approach is a “best practice” because it includes structured efforts to promote early awareness in seventh grade and application information and advice in eighth grade, both of which influence students’ application and admission outcomes. I apply Hill’s (2008) terminology of brokering and clearinghouse approaches in the college application context to counselors in the high school application process. Counselors who use the brokering approach had a personal commitment to the high school application process and the principal’s support in structuring their role to provide guidance to students in seventh and eighth grade. These counselors promoted high school awareness and academic preparation in seventh grade by regularly stopping into seventh grade classrooms to discuss high schools and to remind students to improve or maintain their academic, behavioral, and attendance record. One counselor described this as “planting the seed.” The brokering counselors also invited seventh grade students to attend high school presentations with the eighth graders and encouraged seventh graders to attend the district’s High School Expo to start getting information about the district’s 60 high schools and 24 charter high schools. In eighth grade, brokering counselors provided students with application information and personalized guidance, largely through individual meetings with students and/or their parents. They discussed the range of options available to each student based on their seventh grade record. They also decoded the admission requirements for students to help them apply strategically and to successfully prepare for interviews and auditions at some schools.
Counselors who use the *clearinghouse approach*, on the other hand, managed the application paperwork but did not have a system for supporting students throughout the application process. There was also a *hybrid approach*. Hybrid counselors scheduled individual meetings with eighth grade students and their parents, but were not proactive about following up to ensure high turnout. They also did not have strategies in place to support students in seventh grade or with their supplemental requirements in eighth grade. They implemented some of the strategies in the brokering approach, but did not express the same level of commitment to or pride in their students’ selective high school admission as the brokering counselors. Students with hybrid counselors received a mix of the information and support provided by brokering counselors and clearinghouse counselors.

The counselors who used the brokering approach had enabling conditions in their respective schools that allowed them to devote time to this process. As Table 6.1 shows, counselors have many different job responsibilities in addition to managing the high school application process. These responsibilities include coordinating programs and managing staff in the school. Program coordinator responsibilities include facilitating the Comprehensive Student Assistance Process (CSAP), which identifies students’ needs and creates a plan to provide behavioral and academic support to students, serving as the special education liaison, coordinating transportation and busing, attending truancy court, and organizing the school’s career day. Staff management responsibilities make the counselor the point person for a variety of school support staff. Additionally, all counselors are responsible for crisis management such as bullying and child abuse cases. With all of these responsibilities, most of the counselors lamented that they did not have
enough time to counsel students. After Ms. Turner listed her many duties, she noted sarcastically, “And then there's, you know, counseling the kids, which I get to every once in a while.” Ms. Harrity agreed, stating, “I try to (laughs) fit in a little bit of counseling, and everything else I have to do, I just fit it in.”

The brokering counselors averaged the same total number of job responsibilities as counselors at other schools, but a notable difference was that two of the three brokering counselors did not teach classes in the study year. These two counselors who did not have a teaching load credited their principals for making the purposeful administrative decision to “release” them from teaching so they could do more counseling and high school guidance. Ms. Wilcox had taught eight classes a week in previous years, but her principal “was able to work out the whole budgetary thing” to make sure she would not be in the classroom during the study year. As she explained, “This year I am out of the classrooms, so I am certainly able to do a heck of a lot more stuff than I’ve been able to do in the past… I can breathe, I can do work.” Mr. Chan had also taught five to 10 classes a week in previous years. He said that his principal saw that he was involved in so many things that she decided to take away teaching. He smiled widely as he said of her decision, “I’m one of the lucky ones.” He was adamant that “counselors are not trained to be classroom teachers” and he explained that not being in the classroom allowed him to take more time with students. Still, Ms. Wilcox held individual meetings with eighth grade students and parents when she taught in the past and Ms. Olsen taught and held individual meetings in the study year, in addition to her many other responsibilities.
### Table 6.1 Overview of counselor duties at study schools

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Notes: CSAP is the Comprehensive Student Assistance Process in which teachers and other staff work to support students' behavioral and academic needs. The Parent Ombudsman and Student Advisor are support staff positions created by the District in the study year, which the counselor oversees. Behavioral health agency staff includes wrap-around staff assigned to monitor individual students with behavior problems throughout the school day. Counselors are also the point person for the various non-profit and external program staff who facilitate programs such as CATCH/Nurture, Project Pride, pregnancy prevention, and peer mediation. Crisis management includes bullying, child abuse, and other student issues. Principal designee is the principal on-duty when the principal has to be out of the building.
The study counselors were responsible for academic support, behavioral support, and administrative roles, but teaching is the most inflexible of the counselors’ duties. In order to spend time with students and provide them with guidance, counselors need flexibility in their schedules to conduct individual meetings. If counselors must teach, the principal can make purposeful rostering decisions. Eight of the 10 counselors had a weekly teaching course load that ranged from four to 10 classes, spanned grades K to 8, and varied year to year. Counselors’ lessons ranged from drugs and health, to social skills, conflict resolution, anger management, friendship, college and careers, “good touch, bad touch” for a kindergarten class, to filling out work permits, job applications, and the high school application process for eighth graders. Counselors generally teach a group of students once or twice per week and have a teaching load that includes several grade levels and classrooms of students, but their course load does not seem to be systematically assigned in most schools.

Ms. Olsen, a brokering counselor, had arranged with her principal to teach the eighth graders in the first semester and the seventh graders in the second semester to focus on the high school application process for both groups, and this was the only example of a systematic and consistent teaching assignment for counselors in the study. This arrangement represents counselor initiative and commitment to the high school application process as well as support from the principal. Thus, while it is easier to arrange individual meetings when a counselor is not teaching, the brokering approach and having individual meetings with students and/or their parents can work regardless of one’s other responsibilities if a counselor and the school principal are committed to its success.
Counselors’ years of experience do not cause one to adopt a brokering approach in the high school application process. The brokering counselors have more years of experience in the district than counselors at other schools. Brokering counselors averaged 19 years of experience, compared with about seven years for hybrid counselors and 11 years for clearinghouse counselors. While experience can be helpful in establishing networks, collecting information and resources, and creating systems for supporting students, it may also lead to burnout. Additionally, the clearinghouse counselors had more years of experience than the hybrid counselors.

School characteristics also do not dictate the counselor approach or administrative support, as Table 6.2 shows. First, there is not strong evidence that schools with brokering counselors are “better” than the other schools. Making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by federal No Child Left Behind legislation incorporates a variety of factors, including test participation rates and school test scores in math and reading for racial and other subgroups, so AYP is an indicator of school success, albeit an imprecise one. Only one of the three brokering schools made AYP in the study year (33%), compared with three out of the remaining seven schools (43%).
Schools with brokering counselors also serve similar numbers of eighth grade students as schools with clearinghouse counselors. Brokering counselors have an average of 51 eighth grade students in their schools, compared with 34 for hybrid counselors and 55 for clearinghouse counselors, so student enrollment does not determine the counselor approach.

Schools with brokering counselors differ more substantially from the other schools in the sample in terms of the student population. As Table 6.2 shows, they have a lower percent of students who qualify for free and reduced price lunch (FRL), but this is driven by one outlier school in the brokering group in which 46 percent of its students are FRL eligible. The other two schools in the brokering group have 79 and 80 percent FRL students, which is comparable to the district average and to the hybrid and clearinghouse averages. The brokering approach schools, relative to the other schools, also have lower percentages of Black students and higher percentages of White and Asian students. However, the schools with hybrid counselors have approximately the same percent of FRL-eligible students and a similar racial breakdown as the schools with clearinghouse
counselors, which indicates that different strategies can be adopted across schools with similar groups of students.

SEVENTH GRADE: ENCOURAGING ACADEMIC PREPARATION AND HIGH SCHOOL AWARENESS

Given that the seventh grade record is used for high school admission decisions, the counselors emphasized the importance of the seventh grade year for promoting students’ high school awareness, encouraging them to try their hardest academically, and to maintain a good attendance and behavior record. Seven counselors reported making a point to go into the seventh grade classrooms at the beginning of the seventh grade year and all 10 said that they and the teachers remind students that seventh grade record—course grades, test scores, attendance, latenesses, and suspensions—is what counts for high school admissions. They all made statements similar to Ms. Garces, who said, “I try to make an effort with the seventh graders because I know I’ll be working with them in eighth grade. I talk with them about high schools and let them know that seventh grade is the year that counts for their grades and all, when they’re getting considered for high schools.”

All of the counselors worked to get students to internalize the importance of the seventh grade year, but most counselors noted the challenge of students heeding their reminders in seventh grade, when high school seems distant. Mr. Chan explained, “They think they have a lot of time… I say, ‘Actually, this year is the year. You have to work hard because when you’re applying to high school, they don’t know who you are. They only know your report card.’” Mr. Jones said, “We reinforce repeatedly that they have to do what’s necessary to get to the special admission schools.” Ms. Harrity added, “We
keep saying that this year is the most important year, and (the teachers) keep repeating it, and I keep repeating it, so hopefully it sinks in.”

The brokering counselors recognized that the high school application process begins in seventh grade, and they made concerted efforts to make seventh grade students aware of high schools and to encourage them to maintain their seventh grade record. Unlike the other counselors, brokering counselors made themselves the face of the high school application process, stopping into students’ classrooms regularly to talk about high schools. One student with a brokering counselor explained that his counselor and teachers constantly reminded students about the importance of seventh grade. He said, “At the beginning of the year, they said this is your most important year. And before the PSSA, they would hound us about it, and before all of the report periods, like before the end of them. So, mostly all the time they were saying it.” Other students reported hearing about the importance of seventh grade from their teachers and counselor, but the consistency and regularity of this message was greater in schools with brokering counselors. This student brought up his grades from mostly Bs and Cs to ear all As and 1 B in seventh grade, which he attributed to his awareness that high schools would look at his seventh grade performance. Not all students heeded the counselors’ message, but early awareness can be a push factor for some students.

When counselors teach seventh grade students, they structure lessons around high schools. Mr. Jones noted the importance of familiarizing students with the high schools early, getting sixth and seventh graders to think about what schools they wanted to attend and why. He said that he ideally goes over the High School Directory with students three years in a row so by the time they get to eighth grade “they’re pretty solid in terms of
what they know,” but he admitted that he does not always teach sixth, seventh, or eighth grade. The counselors who did not teach seventh graders wished they had more time with these students to discuss high schools. Ms. Constantine, for example, said that she talked to the seventh graders “but that’s only for like five minutes… I would like to do more intensive preparation for the seventh graders to make them more aware of what’s going to happen in eighth grade.”

Brokering counselors also mention the high school application process and the importance of seventh grade at Back to School Night to all parents in attendance so parents of younger children know to prepare for and think about it. One brokering counselor sent the Expo flyer home to seventh graders and another invited seventh graders to the high school presentations, along with the eighth grade students. They recognize that students are critical actors in their education and they try to provide a “push” for students to try their hardest in seventh grade.

Ms. Turner, a clearinghouse counselor, expressed frustration that parents only come in when their children are in eighth grade, when it is too late. She said:

I tried to have a meeting with the seventh and eighth grade parents this year because I think it’s important for the parents to understand that the seventh grade counts for high school, but if the parents don’t come to the meeting, I don’t know what else to do. It’s hard to get them information. Parents have to be more realistic about where their kid’s going to go. None of the parents want their kids at the neighborhood school. I hate to say it. But there’s not much you can do after you fail seventh grade. Some parents come to me and say, ‘I thought it was eighth grade,’ and I just think, ‘You didn’t come to the meeting.’

As Ms. Turner remarked, students’ options are limited if they do poorly in seventh grade. However, unlike Ms. Turner and the other clearinghouse counselors, counselors who
used the brokering approach were committed to trying to raise student and parent awareness in seventh grade to give students the best opportunity for selective high school admission.

EIGHTH GRADE: APPLICATION INFORMATION AND DECISIONS

Once students get to eighth grade, there is nothing that can be done about their seventh grade record, but counselors can provide students with information and guidance about their high school options. At the beginning of eighth grade, all counselors send home a high school packet with a parent letter, the district’s High School Directory, a sample application form, a flyer about the High School Expo, and the student’s data transcript, which includes their seventh grade course grades, standardized test scores, attendance, and suspension record. Also, nine of the 10 counselors invited high schools to speak to the students; the tenth counselor had invited high school speakers in the past but she felt that the students were disrespectful so she discontinued the assemblies. In these presentations, high schools bring current students and staff to talk about their school and its academic and extracurricular programs in an assembly for students.

Half of the counselors hold separate eighth grade parent meetings about high schools. Parent meetings provide an overview of the high school application process and the opportunity for parents to ask questions. However, scheduling conflicts and a lack of personalization at group meetings are barriers for parent participation. All of the study schools struggle with low parent turnout at school functions, particularly as students reach adolescence, so this strategy tends to reach only the more involved parents. Three of the four clearinghouse counselors had an eighth grade parent meeting, but they all had low turnout; one parent, three parents, and 24 parents (out of 79) attended these meetings.
Six of the counselors taught eighth graders in the study year, and these counselors all had lessons on the high school application process at the beginning of the school year, including activities to familiarize students with the High School Directory and the information it contained, discussing students’ seventh grade academic record and the high school requirements, and getting students to think about their career interests and educational goals. Some of the counselors also had lessons teaching students how to look up high school websites online, draft essays, and prepare for interviews. In counselors’ classes, they provide space and time for students to ask questions about high schools. One student, Darren, specifically mentioned that he learned about high schools from his classes with the counselor. He said, “I asked what kinds of programs there are to get certain kinds of jobs and what high schools she’d recommend. I want to be in the military or a cop, so I learned that Bok has a program for cops and Elverson has JROTC.” However, there is a limit to the individualized guidance that counselors can offer in a classroom setting. As Darren stated, “You can ask questions in class, but not everyone does.” Also, eighth grade is not just about providing students with information; students must make application decisions based on their interests and their seventh grade record. In this case, Darren did not meet the selective admission requirements, so he had low chances of getting into the Tier 2 schools he was interested in attending.

Outside of the classroom, clearinghouse counselors did not have systems in place to support students with specific parts of the high school application process in eighth grade. Ms. Turner explained that a few teachers remind students to turn in their forms and help students with their essays but, “As far as some sort of organized involvement, there really is nothing.” Counselors in this group reported that several parents called or came to
meet with them and some students came to ask for their help with specific application requirements, but they addressed parent and student concerns on an ad hoc basis. Ms. Garces described how two eighth grade girls came to her asking for her help with making a portfolio, explaining:

So I tell them, you’ve got to pull this together. For art, they had to put portfolios together and a lot of kids don’t know how. I had to really talk with them real quickly about- even for creative writing, because they had to put their writing samples together. I said, get a binder… I was kind of cuing them in really fast.

Ms. Turner mentioned that helping students with interview and audition requirements was “on my to-do list” and Ms. Shaw said that it was “the next thing I should probably think about.”

Mr. Davis and other clearinghouse counselors shared the view that they had an open offer to help students with their applications, but students and parents do not take them up on it. He said:

The book can be overwhelming. Parents don’t know what they want their child to do, the child hasn’t thought about it, and they don’t know whether they meet the requirements. So I encourage them to turn their application in early, so we can solve these problems… but they don’t do it early. They do apply, but not early.

These counselors were willing to help students and parents, but they did not make concerted efforts to help students make strategic application decisions. As Ms. Turner explained, “I ask them if they want it, you know, come in and I’ll help you… (but) most of the time, they don’t come in. So, I’m not gonna force them.”

The clearinghouse counselors give advice to eighth grade students when they teach or stop into the students’ classrooms, but it may be misguided if not paired with the guidance to consider their individual qualifications when making application decisions.
For example, Ms. Garces focused on getting her eighth grade students to think about the future but she did not advise them to be realistic about where they could get in, given their seventh grade record. She tells students, “If you want to do more college prep, well you’ve got to pick the high schools that are more geared towards that. If you want to do a trade, a specific trade, you gotta pick the more technical, vocational schools. If you want to do arts… then you can apply to a couple of the schools that have arts programs.” Such incomplete advice sets students up for disappointment in eighth grade if they apply to high schools they are not qualified to attend.

In contrast, a key feature of the brokering approach in eighth grade is that counselors schedule individual meetings with students and/or their parents to discuss high school applications based on students’ seventh grade record and interests. Six counselors in the sample held individual meetings, and three of these counselors had perfect attendance at these meetings. Discussion of the brokering approach focuses on these three counselors and not the hybrid counselors who had more limited success with individual meetings and pursued a less comprehensive range of strategies to support students with their high school applications. The information and advice that counselors offered was delimited by the students’ seventh grade records, but brokering counselors made sure that students knew all of their options in the system.

All counselors shared the view that the process was complicated, but unlike the clearinghouse counselors, the brokering counselors believed it was their responsibility to initiate contact and follow-up with students and their parents. As Ms. Olsen stated,

Even though I send home the booklet and I send home letters explaining the process and explaining the eligibility requirements, you have children,
and often parents, coming in like they’re not really aware of this and they’re making unrealistic choices.

She explained her commitment to meet with every parent and the flexibility that required, stating, “I will stay after school, and sometimes it’s difficult. I will call from home. I will do phone call meetings if we have to. I will stay after school in order to do them if a parent is working.”

The strategies of the three brokering counselors varied slightly; Mr. Chan met individually with students, without their parents present. His school had a larger proportion of immigrant families than other schools, and he explained that parents often cannot attend meetings due to their work schedules, language barriers, or because they do not feel comfortable making educational decisions for their children because of their own limited education. Mr. Chan sends home a draft application and encourages the students to spend time on it, talking to their family and friends to decide where to apply. Then, he meets with students individually to go over their choices and their seventh grade record. If he suggests any changes to the student’s application in their individual meeting, he calls the parent or has the student call their parent while in his office to discuss his advice and get their final approval. He speaks Chinese, Khmer, and Vietnamese fluently so he can talk to non-English-speaking parents with a greater comfort level than other counselors, but all schools have an itinerant bilingual counseling assistant (BCA) several days a week to help translate and interpret for parent meetings and the other two brokering counselors enlisted the BCA and the ELL teacher at their school to help communicate with immigrant parents. The issue of immigrant parents’ hesitancy to make educational decisions for or with their children will be further explored in Chapter 7, but
Mr. Chan’s strategy allowed him to give personalized guidance to every student, while acknowledging parents’ challenges in meeting with him.

THE BROKERING APPROACH IN ACTION

I spent two days at the three schools with brokering counselors during the high school application process to observe individual meetings. I observed eight individual meetings with students and/or parents at P.S. 1, 31 at P.S. 2, and eight at P.S. 3. Since Mr. Chan’s meetings at P.S. 2 did not include parents, he scheduled back-to-back meetings over the course of several days. In contrast, meetings at P.S. 1 and P.S. 3 were scattered throughout the day as parent schedules required. All meetings took place in the counselor’s office, which generally had a table surrounded by chairs or a few chairs next to their desk. Their desks had a computer, phone, and piles of papers, colorful posters such as one with a cartoon character and the message “Listen to the speaker” or another with a photograph of an astronaut on the moon and the message “Knowledge is power” in bold, red letters hung on the walls, along with bulletin boards with the district calendar and other important information, and file cabinets occupied the remaining space. All of the counselors’ offices were housed in an office suite shared with the school psychologist, nurse, or assistant principal. All of the counselors had a copy of the district’s High School Directory, which contains basic information about all of the high schools and the application process. They also had folders or a notebook to document the meetings and the status of each student’s applications, and folders or clipboards to record the supplemental requirements that students owed them. Parent and student concerns and counselor recommendations varied according to students’ seventh grade records, with
qualified students focusing on “fit” and somewhat qualified and unqualified students figuring out realistic options.

Recommendations for qualified students

For students who meet the admission requirements for the district’s most selective high schools—As, Bs, and up to 1 C in their courses, high standardized test scores, fewer than 10 absences, fewer than five latenesses, and no suspensions—counselor meetings with these students and their parents revolve around finding the right “fit” for the student.

Ms. Olsen’s individual meetings illustrate the personalized attention that brokering counselors provide. When the parent arrives for the meeting, they join Ms. Olsen around a circular table, and Ms. Olsen calls the classroom to have their child come down. While the parent waits for their child, Ms. Olsen chats with them. Most of the parents have met Ms. Olsen before and seem to have a good rapport with her. They say things like, “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about” or “Can you believe they’re already in eighth grade?” or “(Son/daughter) is so different from (older son/daughter).” When the child arrives, Ms. Olsen begins by asking everyone to review the information on the child’s data transcript. The transcript contains all of the student’s seventh grade record information as well as their race, gender, special education status, and English language learner designation. Then, she asks the student which high schools they are thinking about. The transcript excerpt below represents a common exchange between students, parents, and Ms. Olsen:

Ms. Olsen: Do you have any schools you’re considering?

Vanessa: FLC, SLA, and Central.

Ms. Olsen: Have you given them to me in order?
Vanessa: Yes.

Ms. Olsen: What program at FLC?

Vanessa: Health.

Ms. Olsen: (writes schools in notebook) FLC is college prep. Well, all of these are. But FLC operates a bit differently. They don’t have grades and students choose when they’re going to take an exam and move up so it’s very self-directed.

Mom: Oh.

Ms. Olsen: Well, Vanessa, what are you interested in?—even though that’s going to change several times. What do you want from a school?

Vanessa: Sciences. Like, I want to be a doctor. I really like science. (Vanessa’s eyes light up and her mom looks at her, smiling.)


Vanessa: I like the way they do the courses.

Ms. Olsen: Ok. So let me tell you about SLA. SLA is associated with the Franklin Institute. The principal wanted to change the way magnet high schools were run in Philadelphia. It’s a project-based school that uses the inquiry method of learning through doing and learning to make a difference. It’s linked with Drexel and Penn and I think it’ll be one of the top schools in the country at some point, even though it’s only four years old. There are some people who have great ideas and some people who are really good at making things happen. The principal has great ideas and knows how to make them happen. When he came to present here, I was impressed. I have a friend whose daughter was interested in SLA so I introduced her to the principal. I didn’t even know, but she was interested in Egyptology and he was already thinking, ‘Oh, well not yet, but when you’re in this grade, I should hook you up with this program and this person at Penn.’ He just has so many connections and makes so many connections in his head.

Mom: So, Ms. Olsen, you like SLA better?

Ms. Olsen: It depends on the kid. Vanessa, I know you’re quiet, an excellent student, but quiet. Do you like working in groups on projects?

Vanessa: Yes. I get the best grades when I work in groups, I think.

Ms. Olsen: (pauses, laughs) Oh, so I’m doing it wrong when I teach your class, then, huh? I make it so you can just sit there quietly.

Vanessa: (looks at Ms. Olsen and smiles)
Ms. Olsen: What about big schools? Central is a big school.

Vanessa: It might be scary if it’s big and I don’t know anybody.

Ms. Olsen: Well, lots of our students go there.

Mom: Where is it?

Ms. Olsen: (opens the Directory to the map). It’s not as far as it looks on the map because you just take the Broad Street line the whole way up to Broad and Olney and then Central is one block from the subway.

Mom: Ok. You just walk one block. That’s ok.

Ms. Olsen: Central is one of the oldest schools in the country. They used to be all boys until girls petitioned to go there and it has a name. It used to be just Girls or Central. I went to Girls High myself. Now, there are so many options. But since they take kids from all over the city, it’s very diverse. And they definitely have a name so that’s good for college. But it’s big. SLA is small.

Ms. Olsen: Why did you choose each of these schools?

Vanessa: FLC is small too. I chose FLC first because I want to try new things. SLA is small and I like science, but Central, I heard it’s a good school.

Ms. Olsen: Let’s look at her record. She has As and Bs. 1548 in reading on the PSSA and 1731 in math, both above the 88th percentile. Her attendance is fine, only 1 absence, and she has excellent comments. You should be very proud of your daughter.

Mom: (smiles and pats Vanessa on the head and back)

Vanessa: (smiles, but brushes her mom’s hand away)

Ms. Olsen: Have you called SLA yet?

Vanessa: (eyes big, looks guilty). No.

Ms. Olsen: You need to do that. (Looks at Mom). SLA requires an interview. They ask you to bring a project from this year or last year. They’re less interested in the project, but want the child to talk about something they’re interested in and something they know so they can engage you in conversation. They know the kids will be nervous, so I think that’s why they ask them to bring a project. You have to make sure you let them know that you like learning in groups. I know you’re quiet, but you’ll need to speak up. (goes to her desk to take a phone call)

Mom (to Vanessa): That’s good. If you stay quiet, how will they know you?
Vanessa: (nods)

Ms. Olsen (comes back to the table) Are you interested in shadowing?

Vanessa: Yes.

Ms. Olsen (to Mom): Shadowing is when you go visit a school and follow a student around for the day. You follow their schedule and get to see what a typical day is like at that school. The other thing you have to do is write an essay or fictional story for Central. What they’re looking for is way you write and the way you express yourself. They want to see whether you have deep or—less deep—thoughts. If you write, ‘I want to go to Central because it’s a great school and I’ll get a great education there,’ stuff like that, it’s ok but it’s not exceptional. It doesn’t show you know how to think or express your thoughts. Their English teacher said she’ll help anyone with their essays and I want to see it too, even if it’s just a draft, I want to see it. Ok?

Vanessa: (smiles) Yes.

Ms. Olsen: One more thing about interviews. They’re not supposed to ask or know what order you put them. So if they ask you, ‘Is this your first choice?’ say, ‘Yes.’ I know it might seem dishonest, but they’re not supposed to know that information. (starts to fill out the application)

Ms. Olsen: Do you have any questions for me?

Mom: (pauses) So from what you’re telling me today, you like SLA, then Central, then FLC?

Ms. Olsen: It depends on the child. So I want her to shadow and see how she likes them, see how she feels about the size of the schools and just experience them. (completes application, hands it to mom to sign)

Mom: (signs form) Thank you very much, Ms. Olsen.

In all individual meetings, brokering counselors discuss the high schools on a child’s list and quiz the child about their picks. Ms. Olsen asks, “What do you want from a school? I’m just wondering. What are you interested in?” She emphasizes, “I know your interests will change several times, but what do you want from a school?” The brokering counselors all try to get the student to talk about their goals and what they specifically
like about each school. They also check the student’s seventh grade record to make sure the choices are realistic. And for qualified students, the meetings focus on “fit.”

The three brokering counselors also give students concrete advice about preparing supplemental requirements at some Tier 1 high schools such as interviews, auditions, or portfolios of their work. Decoding the admission requirements is an important benefit of the brokering approach, since the information in the High School Directory is vague. The Directory lists the requirements at each school but the specific expectations are not made explicit. For example, the admission requirements listed in the Directory for the High School for the Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA), one of the premier art-focused high schools in the city, listed among the admission requirements, “successful audition in the chosen art major.” However, it does not explain that applicants must be invited to an audition. It also does not explain that students who apply for the creative writing and visual arts programs must prepare a portfolio of their work, or that dance, vocal, and instrumental music applicants must prepare a three minute solo performance for the audition. Students are sent a document with the specific portfolio and audition requirements if they apply and meet the seventh grade record criteria, but knowing these expectations in advance may alter some students’ decisions to apply to certain selective schools and programs.

If the family lists a school with supplemental requirements, the brokering counselors discuss, to varying degrees, these requirements. For example, Ms. Olsen asks students who are interested in music if they play an instrument and how long they have played. Then, she tells them that they need to prepare a solo piece for an audition and hands them an informational sheet from her file box that has the audition requirements
for the performing arts school(s) to which the child is applying. In individual meetings with brokering counselors, the counselors do not disallow students from applying to arts schools if they express an interest, but they try to be clear about the audition and portfolio requirements so students know that experience in the arts is encouraged.

Without this type of guidance, students with clearinghouse counselors apply based on their interests without necessarily having the experience necessary to successfully audition or without being cognizant of whether they meet the seventh grade record criteria. In several interviews, students with clearinghouse counselors reported applying to arts-focused schools because they thought it would be “fun.” One student said that he applied to CAPA because, “My mom knows I like to sing in the shower and we thought it would be fun to take choir.” Another student said she applied to the Girard Arts and Music Program (GAMP) because, “The drummer in my dad’s band went to GAMP and said it’s a good school for music.” This student had never played the drums, and was unaware that GAMP required students to audition. She also did not meet the admission requirements, but applied because she was interested in learning to play the drums. Some similar students in schools with brokering counselors still decided to apply to arts-focused schools to “see what happens,” but some were also steered towards other high schools by brokering counselors in the individual meetings.

The brokering counselors also give tips to students who are applying to schools with interviews, such as reminding them to speak up, look the interviewer in the eye, and to tell the interviewer that their school is the student’s first choice. And Ms. Olsen and Ms. Wilcox both encourage parents to set up shadowing appointments for their child to
get a feel for life as a student at the high schools they are considering. This concrete and specific advice supplements the Directory, and is a benefit of the brokering approach.

Unlike the other brokering counselors, Mr. Chan conducts meetings without the parents present. He calls down students from class, three at a time, and has the two waiting students sit in the chairs by his office while he meets with one student at the conference table. While the students wait, they are supposed to look through the Directory and review their application choices.

At the conference table, Mr. Chan and the bilingual counseling assistant (BCA) sit with a “done” folder, an “incomplete” folder, the eighth grade class rosters, the High School Directory, a paper listing the career programs at the Tier 2 high schools, and a stack of scrap paper with the names of students written in groups of three to call from class. He begins each meeting by reviewing the background information with the student on their application form. Then, he reviews the high schools they had selected on their practice application form and sometimes asked who helped them fill it out. He seems to know the students and their families well, particularly the Asian immigrant students and those with older siblings. With this group of students, he is the most conversational, asking if their older sister or brother liked their high school or whether they were in college. He is clearly proud of successful former students, remembering what high schools and colleges they attended. Mr. Chan is also obviously proud of successful eighth graders. He beams as he reviews strong seventh grade record, making exclamations to the students such as, “Your hard work will pay off!” and “You’re doing well!” and “Oh, good. You can go to any school you want!” Students clearly appreciate his praise, sitting up straight and smiling or, for the more bashful, looking away and smiling.
If students pick schools that are far away or do not align with their qualifications, he inquires about why they chose the school. He does not push if they have a justification, but he otherwise makes suggestions of other schools to consider. If the student is amenable to his suggestions, he has them go over to the BCA’s desk to call their parent. When the parent answers, the child explains that they are meeting with Mr. Chan and summarize his recommendations. If the parent agrees with the changes, Mr. Chan enters them on the application form and gives it to the child to bring home and get signed. If the parent has questions, Mr. Chan gets on the line to talk to the parent. He explains his thoughts and then listens to the parent, letting them make the final decision. If the parent does not pick up, he puts the child’s application in the “incomplete” folder and tells them that he will call home later or that the parent can come in to meet with him.

His meetings are faster paced than the other brokering counselors, with back-to-back student meetings throughout the course of several days. Some of Mr. Chan’s meetings with qualified students are less than five minutes, compared with 15 to 30 minutes for the other brokering counselors. Mr. Chan makes sure that they meet the qualifications at all the schools they are applying for and prefers if they apply to schools that are not too far, but he does not make recommendations or discuss “fit” beyond that. For example, this exchange lasts only a few minutes:

Val: Mr. Chan, can I get into all the schools? (She pulls her practice application out of her binder and hands it to him.)

Mr. Chan: Well, let’s see. You have a 1579 in reading and 1731 in math, and all As and Bs. So I’d say—(pauses, looks at her application, peers over the paper at her, and raises his eyebrows)—yes!

Val: Yay!
Mr. Chan: (smiles) Central, Girls, Palumbo, Parkway Center City. Those are good. But what about Swenson?

Val: I want to be a baker.

Mr. Chan: Okay. See? Your hard work will pay off!

Val: (smiles and does a little dance as she leaves the table)

The brokering counselors all addressed students’ “academic fit” in their application decisions, making sure that students would have a chance at getting into the schools on their list and giving advice about changes when they thought the students’ high school picks and qualifications were mismatched. However, the brokering counselors varied in the extent to which they discussed “interest fit” and “personality fit” in the application decisions. Overall, qualified students have options in this system and counselors who use the brokering approach help to personalize their application decisions.

Recommendations for somewhat qualified students

For students who are stronger in one area than another, the brokering counselors are more cautious about the schools to which students apply. Brokering counselors emphasized getting this group of students to be “realistic” about their options and to apply to schools where they have a good chance of getting in. In an interview, Mr. Chan explains that sometimes parents call him after her meets with their child:

They say, ‘Why are you discouraging my child?’ and I say, ‘I’m not, but it’s my job to be realistic. If you pick a special admission school and you don’t meet the criteria, even if you don’t meet one of the criteria, you might not get in and then you’re wasting the slot’… I tell the parent, ‘If you insist, you can keep it,’ but I’m just being realistic. That’s my job. It’s a Catch-22 because if I let them apply wherever and then they don’t get in,
The parent would be calling to yell at me too. Why did you let my child apply there if you knew they couldn’t get in? (laughs) You know?

The brokering counselors all let the student and parent make the final application decision, but they agreed with Mr. Chan that “it’s my job to be realistic.” The below interview excerpt illustrates this approach with a student who has high math test scores, but does not meet the reading test score criteria:

Ms. Wilcox: Eric’s PSSA score is 1500, which is the 75th percentile in reading and 1702 in math, which is above the 90th percentile. He has all As and one B in writing. So- what schools are you thinking about?

Mom: (pauses) I don’t know. I wanted to leave it up to you and Eric. I just want him to go to the best school. Like Central, but even that, I don’t know.

Eric: I was thinking Central, SLA, and Academy at Palumbo.

Ms. Wilcox: Well, he might not get in. We have to be careful because of his reading percentile. Central requires the 88th percentile in the reading and math scores. Let me see about the other schools. (reads Directory). SLA says ‘excellent PSSA scores.” Palumbo- also 88th percentile…

Eric: (sighs loudly) It’s that one PSSA score that’s throwing everything off.

Mom: Are there any good schools for math?

Ms. Wilcox: Well, math and science go together and there are some math/science schools. What are you thinking about Carver?

Eric (to Mom): You said it was corny.

Mom: Maybe I’m getting it confused with something else. George Washington? I don’t know.

Ms. Wilcox: No, it’s not the same as Washington. Carver is the same as Engineering and Science. I was impressed when they came to present. It seems like a really good school.

Eric: Yeah, I liked that school.

Ms. Wilcox: Mom?
Mom: (pauses, leans back in her chair) Okay, I guess.

Ms. Wilcox: Okay, we need one more. I think Eric should have a safety school. Let me throw some out there. (She flips through the Directory.) There’s Parkway Center City.

Mom: No.

Ms. Wilcox: FLC?

Mom: No.

Ms. Wilcox: Constitution?

Mom: I never heard of it.

Ms. Wilcox: It’s run by the Constitution Center. (reads from Directory). ‘It is a college preparatory program in partnership with the National Constitution Center’ (pauses, puts book down) and a bunch of other partners, including the History Channel. It also says students are required to take two social studies courses each year and do service learning.

Eric: (nods in agreement) I have like 20 latenesses too (bites his lip).

Ms. Wilcox: (looks at his transcript) You have 16, and yes, they might look at that too. So what about Constitution? They take a lot of our kids who don’t get into another school. You could put it as a safe school.

Mom: (looks frustrated) I don’t want him to go to a school that takes kids who don’t get in anywhere else. He’s gotten As and Bs since first grade!

Ms. Wilcox: Well, I just want him to have a safe school so he’ll get in somewhere.

Mom: (pauses) Alright. Constitution, then.

Eric: (nods)

This mother, like others in her position, knows that her son is a good student, but does not understand the specific admission requirements. She expresses frustration as Ms. Wilcox and Eric discuss that Eric’s low reading test scores and 16 latenesses both
disqualify him from meeting the selective high school admission criteria. This mother’s confusion about George Washington High School, a neighborhood school, and George Washington Carver Engineering and Science High School, a special admission high school that is nicknamed “Carver” or “Engineering and Science,” also illustrates that parents have heard of certain high schools but often have limited knowledge about their selectivity, curriculum, location, or other details.

Thus, brokering counselors balance family preferences for the most well-known and highly selective high schools with the realities of the competitive high school application system and its admission criteria, and encourage students to make “realistic” decisions. Without such guidance, Eric’s mother would have been more likely to consider the “best” high schools for her honor roll son. Instead, Ms. Wilcox encourages Eric to apply to high schools with a math focus since his math scores are higher than his reading test scores. Ms. Wilcox also encourages Eric to apply to five schools, a strategy that all three brokering counselors shared for qualified and somewhat qualified students to increase their likelihood of admission. This also reinforces the belief that any Tier 1 or Tier 2 high school is a better option than the neighborhood school.

**Recommendations for unqualified students**

For students with an average or weak seventh grade record, there is greater tension at the individual meetings. There are more boys than girls in this group of students, and they describe themselves or are described by their parents as “silly,” “lazy,” or “immature.” Typically, students act embarrassed, disappointed, or indifferent and parents are frustrated. The counselors lay out the options that exist, including considering
Tier 2 schools and charter high schools, and if parents are present, the counselors try to console them.

Brokering counselors do not generally recommend Tier 2 or charter high schools to qualified students, but they view these high schools as better options than the Tier 3, neighborhood schools for unqualified students. The counselors consistently recommended a Tier 2 high school in the region as an alternative to attending the neighborhood high school for those who did not meet the Tier 1 requirements, but they did not generally discuss the specific career programs at Tier 2 high schools. Counselors also tend to recommend charter schools as options for students who do not meet the selective admission requirements, since charter school admission is by lottery. The counselors had varying perceptions of charter schools. They also took a more hands-off approach to helping families with charter school applications since each charter school has its own application form and timeline. But the counselors expressed sentiments similar to Ms. Olsen, who said, “I don’t know what to tell parents whose children are good kids but don’t have all of those top things… I do recommend the charters, although I don’t know enough about them.” Counselors never recommend private schools, but some of the parents report considering a Catholic school. There is a Catholic high school in the study region and there are eight in the city; cost is the main deterrent for most families.

Counselors’ advice for students with average or weak records is similar to the above students with one or two flaws, but counselors have a smaller set of schools to recommend to these students. The counselors’ view their job as helping the students and
parents to make realistic decisions, but this is difficult when the realistic options are limited.

There were many examples of students, particularly boys, who do not get into serious trouble but also do not apply themselves in school. Chien-Fu is one of these students. He hung his head as he shuffled into Mr. Chan’s office for his high school meeting and said to himself, “My grades suck.” When he was called to the conference table, Mr. Chan began reviewing his data transcript and he said, “I know. Bad.” Mr. Chan said, “1379 in reading and 1225 in math. You have some As, but also Cs. And 1 D?” Mr. Chan looked at me and said, “He has one sister in college for interior design and one at Central High School. How come your sisters did so well and not you?” Chien-Fu raised his eyebrows and rolled his eyes. “Because I’m a different person,” he said in a sarcastic tone. Mr. Chan replied, “Well, yes, but you can do better. I know it.” Mr. Chan reviewed his high school choices, all Tier 2 schools. Mr. Chan told him, “At least you’re a realistic guy. Your picks are realistic. And when you get to high school, you can improve.” Chien-Fu nodded and sighed. Another example is Zach, who slouched and kept his head down throughout his meeting with his mom and counselor:

Mom (to Zach): I guess I’m gonna have to send you to Catholic school too, like your sister.

Ms. Olsen: That’s why I hate this process. Zach is a smart kid, but he can be silly.

Ms. Olsen (to Zach): There’s no reason you should be getting a D. Or as many Cs as you get. You’re very smart. I know that. Your mom knows that. But smarts will only get you so far. You have to do things so people see. Isn’t that a shame—to be reduced to a piece of paper? (She hold up his data transcript.) But that’s how it is. (pause) Your absences need to come down too. *Nineteen* last year and 14 of them unexcused?
Mom: (shakes her head ‘No,’ and raises her voice) I wrote him notes. He just doesn’t remember to hand them in.

Ms. Olsen: (calmly) This year’s record is the only way we can try to talk around some of this—and I said *try*. If you can’t get to school now, then they’ll think, ‘How will he get to our school next year?’ And if the school’s not in the neighborhood, how will you get there when it’s farther away? ...

Mom: (shakes her head) I can’t afford to have two kids in Catholic school.

Ms. Olsen: Even though you’ll change your mind *several* times, Zach, what are you thinking about right now in terms of the future?

Zach: Sports.

Ms. Olsen: What else?

Zach: (shrugs)

Ms. Olsen: So you’re just taking it all in now, thinking about it? (pauses, looks at Zach but doesn’t get a response) That’s okay. There used to not be so many choices and part of me misses that.

Mom: (looks in the Directory) What’s the High School of Business and Technology?

Ms. Olsen: It’s a new school.

Mom: (looking in the Directory) PET’s a charter? I didn’t know that.

Ms. Olsen: We’ve sent kids there. I don’t know much about it, but it’s supposed to be a good school. Kids like it. We have a bunch of kids who go there and enjoy it. I think you should consider it.

Mom: How’s Bok these days? Is it bad—or good?

Ms. Olsen: Some of both. There are kids there who like it. They have a bunch of special programs. (She pulls an information sheet about the vocational programs at Bok out of her file box and hands it to Mom.) They’re working very hard to pull Bok up.

Mom: (looks at Zach, pauses) Do girls mature faster than boys? Is *that* what it is? My daughter was so much different, so much more mature. I can’t even picture him in high school! …
Zach: (looks up at his mom, then back down at the table, shakes his head, and sighs)

Ms. Olsen: Okay, well I'll fill out the application for Bok and Business and Tech and you can look into the charter schools.

Mom: (signs application form) Thanks, Ms. Olsen. It’s embarrassing with him. Every time I come in, it’s never a good thing. It’s embarrassing.

Ms. Olsen: (looks at Zach) He’s not a bad kid. He’s not mean or angry, it’s just silliness.

As with other students like Chien-Fu and Zach, the conversation includes a discussion of maturity, responsibility, goals, and motivation. Unlike other students who express specific interests in an academic subject or a certain career, Zach only says he is interested in sports. He does not remember to turn in his absence notes, and the above meeting goes on to discuss how he plays around in class. He jokes with Ms. Olsen, “I know, I know. I don’t know when to stop.” In this system, Zach and other children are penalized for their lack of maturity and focus in seventh grade. His poor grades and attendance record will limit his high school opportunities. In this meeting, Zach, his mom, and Ms. Olsen decide that he will apply to several Tier 2 schools and his mom will look into charter schools.

Another case illustrates the challenges of a special education student with low grades, low test scores, and more than 10 absences in seventh grade:

Ms. Olsen: So, what are you thinking, sweetheart?

Christina: GAMP, Palumbo, CAPA, and a charter school. One that’s close to home. (pause). Does GAMP have an audition?

Ms. Olsen: Yes. I don’t know when they’ll be but you have to be invited. Do you play an instrument?
Christina: I play electric guitar.

Ms. Olsen: Oh, so not at school?

Christina: No. I taught myself.

Ms. Olsen (to parents): You know that GAMP and CAPA have admission requirements?

Mom: What about her IEP?

Ms. Olsen: Yes, they consider special ed students at every school, but some special ed students have better grades. (looks at data transcript) Christina has Cs, 1 D, and some As. GAMP and CAPA have the right to invite you for an interview, and I really can’t say if they’ll do that for Christina.

Mom: If you get an interview, are you accepted?

Ms. Olsen: No. Christina’s PSSA reading score is 1210 and her math is 1211. They are not in the 80th percentile, which is what GAMP requires. And CAPA is higher. They look for the 88th percentile.

Mom: So—are you telling me that because her scores are low, she can’t get into a special admissions school? (She starts to tear up and grabs a kleenex from the table.)

Ms. Olsen: It depends… It’s a complicated process.

Mom: (sobbing) Yes, and it’s frustrating. We’re from Texas and you automatically go to your neighborhood school and it’s an excellent school. Here, it’s the opposite.

Ms. Olsen: (gently slides the kleenex box towards Mom)

Mom: (grabs a kleenex)

Dad: And she’s absolutely not going to Southern.

Mom: So if she doesn’t get in, what do we do?

Ms. Olsen: Sometimes, a student is better in one area than another, but Christina’s scores are basic in math and reading and her grades aren’t that good. So I’m not that hopeful for either school.
Mom: (crying) So what do we do?

Ms. Olsen: We’ll figure something out. This is what I hate about the process. She’s a good kid and tries hard, but all the schools are going after the same kids so it’s tough.

Dad: What about Mastery-Thomas charter?

Ms. Olsen: It’s a good school. They’ve put a lot of money into it and they’ve accepted kids from our school with IEPs. It’s very organized and strict, so that’s why some people don’t like it but I think Christina won’t have any problems with that.

Mom: Strict is ok. It’s good. It prepares you for life. You have to show up to work on time, so it’s good to prepare in high school.

Dad: (draws his wife close to him with his arm)

Ms. Olsen: (stands up) Okay, let’s regroup and let’s meet again next week. We’re not done yet, but I have another meeting coming. So look back at the book, especially at the charters, and we’ll come back and talk. I’ll call you to schedule for next week. (Everyone stands up. Ms. Olsen hugs the parents and Christina.) (To mom): It will be okay. We’ll figure something out for her.

Dad: Thanks, Ms. Olsen.

When they leave, Ms. Olsen confides to me, “Kids like Christina are when it’s hard. She a good kid and I really like her parents, but sometimes, parents just don’t quite get it. I mean, they support her and want the best for her, but then they’ll do things like take her out a few days early for the holidays to go visit family and stuff when she doesn’t have good grades and she struggles with the work.” Several counselors commented that parents of special education and English language learner children often think their child is exempted from the selective admission criteria, but they are still compared to other special education and ELL students and the high schools must be confident that they can handle the work in order to admit them.
Eric, Zach, and Christina all had attendance problems in addition to their academic problems, creating multiple “strikes” against them in the high school admission process. The somewhat qualified and unqualified students have limited options in this system, but the brokering counselors may be the most beneficial for these students because they make sure the students and their parents know all of the available options. For example, many students express an interest in applying to art- or music-focused high schools, but Ms. Olsen gently dissuaded Christina from applying by informing her that they require auditions, expect students to have musical experience, and have selective admission criteria. Instead of applying to “reach schools” or being resigned to attending the neighborhood high school, the brokering counselors help students like Eric, Chien-Fu, Zach, and Christina to consider their options, including Tier 2 and charter high schools.

SUMMARY

Students’ selective high school admission opportunities are limited by their seventh grade record, and not all students will have excellent attendance, behavior, grades, and test scores. But students’ opportunities are also limited by their information and awareness, and students with brokering counselors get more guidance about their options. The brokering approach begins in seventh grade, raising students’ awareness about high schools and encouraging students to try their hardest. These reminders occur in all of the study schools, but they are more consistent and frequent in brokering schools and may serve as a “push factor” for some students in seventh grade. In eighth grade, a key component of the brokering approach is counselors’ meetings with individual students and/or parents. The primary benefits of the brokering approach are that students
with brokering counselors receive personalized information that helps them to consider the range of “realistic” options available to them and to make strategic application decisions.

These findings clearly reveal that students benefit when they attend a school with a brokering counselor. Students and parents received early notice about the importance of seventh grade so they could learn about high schools and maintain or improve students’ attendance, behavior, and academic record. They also received guidance about the range of options, given their seventh grade record, in individual meetings in eighth grade. Brokering counselors gave advice about supplemental requirements that helped students and parents to decode the vague explanations of auditions and interviews in the district’s Directory, and they encouraged qualified students to apply to five schools and to shadow, which students identified as one of the most useful ways to determine what the high schools are “really like.”

The brokering approach combines counselor commitment to the high school application process and enabling conditions within their school, particularly principal support for structuring the counselor’s role to allow them the time and flexibility to meet individually with students. There is a tension between the behavioral and academic components of elementary and middle school counselors’ jobs, and whether due to individual preferences or the immediate response necessitated for behavioral and other crises in schools, counselors tend to focus on behavioral issues at the expense of academics. The counselors all believed that the selective high schools offered students better learning climates and academic opportunities, but they varied in the extent to which they took responsibility for students’ high school application and admission. The
brokering counselors illustrate a “best practice” approach to providing families with information and support in the high school application process, which can be replicated across schools with the appropriate counselor and principal support.

Schools with counselors who used the brokering approach did serve different student populations and had more experienced counselors than the other schools and counselors in this sample. Brokering schools have more Asian and White students and fewer Black students than the clearinghouse schools, and this may contribute to the Asian and White student admission advantage in Chapter 4, although we must be careful about generalizing findings from one administrative region to the entire district. Brokering counselors also have more average years of experience than clearinghouse counselors. However, neither of these differences causes the schools to adopt a brokering approach.

Since the district and schools place the responsibility on counselors to manage the high school application process, there are several concrete steps they can take to provide counselors with the support to take the brokering approach. First, if counselors must teach, their schedules could be constructed strategically such as Ms. Olsen’s so they teach all of the seventh and eighth graders and can focus on high school, college, and career awareness. Principals and roster chairs could also figure out how to “release” counselors from classroom teaching duties so counselors could have more flexible time to provide guidance counseling and conduct individual meetings about the high school application process with eighth graders. As the counselor role is currently structured, students in schools with brokering counselors have informational advantages in seventh and eighth grade that translate into application and admission advantages; students in schools with clearinghouse counselors are at a disadvantage in this process.
CHAPTER 7
NATIVE-BORN FAMILIES: STUDENT (AND PARENT) MANAGEMENT

This chapter examines how students matter. It seeks to understand the relative role of students and parents in native-born families in navigating the high school application process, including the extent to which students obtain information and contribute to the application decision. This chapter challenges the assumption of parent management of choice decisions that has pervaded school choice research. I define native-born families as those in which both the focal student and their parents were born in the United States. These students and their families are compared with students from immigrant families in Chapter 8. This chapter uses interview data of 22 students from native-born families and 12 native-born parents. I focus on seven native-born families—four qualified students and three unqualified students—who represent themes that emerged across the interview sample. These cases represent a range of information and application decisions, but focusing on a subset of cases allows a more in-depth examination of the families and their decision-making processes.

I considered students who met the Tier 1 or Tier 2 course grade requirements, attendance requirements, and behavior requirements as “qualified” for admission to a selective high school. In my total interview sample, 55 percent of the students (26 of 47) met the course grades criteria for the Tier 2 schools and 19 of these students also met the Tier 1 course grades criteria. Six of the academically qualified students exceeded the stated absence or lateness requirements, but none had been suspended in seventh grade. I did not have access to all of the students’ standardized test score data in the qualitative sample, but district-level quantitative analysis indicates that a substantial number of
students fail to meet the Tier 1 admission requirements based on their test scores and thus may in fact be “somewhat qualified.”

This chapter examines how decision-making varies for families with qualified students and unqualified students. Previewing the findings, this chapter underscores that students’ seventh grade record shapes their high school options, and demonstrates that students take an active role in their own educational decisions. The overwhelming majority of families want to avoid the neighborhood high school, but native-born families’ application strategies vary according to their child’s seventh grade record. Students with strong seventh grade academic, attendance, and behavior records gather information from a variety of sources about the most selective, Tier 1 high schools. They are motivated consumers because they know that they have a realistic chance of getting accepted to a selective high school and want to choose schools that “fit” their interests. Students with average and weak records are also motivated to get accepted at a high school other than their assigned neighborhood school, but their search includes some combination of Tier 2 schools, charters schools, and private schools. For these students, the search process is less about “fit” and more about getting in somewhere so they do not have to attend the neighborhood high school.

DECISION-MAKING FOR QUALIFIED STUDENTS: “FIT”

Qualified students were active in making application decisions and they considered the “fit” between their interests, the high school curricular offerings, and the academic and social environment. The amount of parent involvement varied across families, largely based on parents’ level of education, but students all consulted with their parents in making their application decisions.
Mark Peterson and Jasmine Evans: “We found out about all the different schools that were out there”

Mark Peterson is white. He was raised in a two-parent household until his father passed away during the summer before his eighth grade year. His parents adopted him when he was an infant and he does not have any siblings. His mom was raised in the Philadelphia suburbs, attended Catholic schools, and graduated from Penn State University. Mrs. Peterson was not working at the time of the study, but is a certified nurse. Mark attends P.S. 3., a school with a brokering counselor.

Jasmine Evans is black. She lives with two parents—her biological father and a stepmom who she calls her mom—and two younger brothers. Jasmine’s parents both grew up in Philadelphia. Her dad went to private school, her mom attended public schools, and both have attained some postsecondary education. Mrs. Evans is a manager at the post office and has taken classes at the Community College of Philadelphia. Mr. Evans is a sheet metal worker and is enrolled in a trade certificate program with his union. Jasmine attends P.S. 1, another school with a brokering counselor.

These students and their parents represent the group of families in which students are self-motivated high-achievers and parents take an active role in helping to manage their child’s education. These parents generally had at least some postsecondary education. The Peterson and Evans families illustrate a parent-child partnership in deciding where the student would apply, and they engaged in a process of “concerted cultivation” with their children, purposefully asking their children to think critically about their options and to articulate their preferences. These families were aware of the process in seventh grade and these parents talked to their child extensively about their academic
performance and interests. The students and parents had information from a variety of sources and specific information about the high schools they were considering so they could find the right “fit” for their child.

Mrs. Evans and other parents in this group firmly believed that, “You gotta know what’s going on in school and the child has to know too.” Mrs. Evans grew up in Philadelphia. She and other lifelong Philadelphians said that there were not as many high school options and there was not as much information about them when she was in school. Still, she explained:

I’d never really heard that (seventh grade was important) myself, but I was at school for the parent-teacher’s night or something like that in seventh grade. I remember being in the auditorium and they were talking about it. And then I talked to Jasmine about it… I kept telling her, you gotta let us know everything that’s going on in school. Once they start talking to you about high school or anything like that, you gotta let us know because you gotta be on top of that or you’ll be at your neighborhood high school… She’s good at stuff like that. So she started bringing all the paperwork home and we started talking to her about it and seeing what she was interested in doing.

This quote reveals two parent characteristics that were common in this group of families. First, Mrs. Evans attended the school’s Back to School Night, a school-wide event in the fall that gives the principal and counselor a chance to welcome and talk to parents and gives parents the opportunity to meet their child’s teachers. This places her among a self-selective group of parents who attends this event, as many counselors reported that attendance is often low at Back to School Night and other school-wide events. Mrs. Evans remembered hearing about the importance of seventh grade for high schools at Back to School Night when her daughter was in seventh grade, so she was aware of the high school application process before many parents. Second, Mrs. Evans regularly talks
to Jasmine about school and reminds her to bring information home so they can “stay on top of” high schools. And Jasmine does. Jasmine, like most other qualified students, is organized and self-motivated. Some parents reported never receiving the Directory or other high school-related information from the school, so parent reminders and the child’s responsibility both enabled family-school communication for this group.

High achieving students and their parents considered the child’s interests, high school programs, and the school location, typically in that order. Mark, for example, had developed an interest in the arts through his school’s performing arts program, and his mother originally wanted him to attend CAPA, a well-regarded creative and performing arts school close to the neighborhood, so he could continue to pursue the arts, have a college preparatory academic curriculum, and not have to travel too far. However, Mark was interested in Central. As Mrs. Peterson explains:

He started on Central last year. He wanted it, and I think his teachers were encouraging him. And I didn’t want it. I even went to his seventh grade teacher and said, ‘You know, don’t you think CAPA would be just as good?’ And she said, ‘Well, it wouldn’t be challenging to him… And he could pick up theater or creative writing in college.’ So that was last March when I had a conference with her, and that made me say, ‘Okay, I’ll be open to Central.’”

Mrs. Peterson knew that her son enjoyed the arts, but she wanted him to attend a high school with rigorous course offerings to prepare him for college. Mrs. Peterson’s proactive approach and concerns about finding “the right school” characterizes this group of parents. Mark and his mom attended the Expo in seventh and eighth grade so they could learn about the high schools, and he said, “I learned a lot about the schools… like what SLA does, like project learning and things like that. Um, how hard it is at Central. Um, how Bodine has the like International Baccalaureate program.” He was drawn to the
academic challenge of Central. Mrs. Peterson said that one of her friends said her son
wanted to be a big fish in a little pond in high school and she replied, laughing, “Mark
wants to be a big fish in a big pond!”

These families used a variety of institutional and personal informational sources
to help determine which schools were the best “fit” for their child. They used information
from the school as well as their social networks to gain information about high schools
and gathered as much information as they could from the High School Directory, the
High School Expo, high school websites, and shadowing. Mrs. Peterson said, “I always
had my antennas out. I’m not one to do research on the computer, but I’m one to network
with people. I have friends who have older children, so I would just listen and ask
questions and see what their experiences were.” She explained that after hearing about
the importance of seventh grade and the high school application process at Back to
School Night when her son was in seventh grade, she took him to the High School Expo
to learn about the different high schools in the district. In eighth grade, they went to the
Expo again, went to several high school open houses, set up shadowing dates at schools
he was interested in, and attended the high school presentations at Mark’s school when
she could. Like several other parents, she explained that she got to the high schools early
when Mark was shadowing so she could watch the kids coming to school in the morning
to “see what it was like.” She also knew a mom who stayed around to watch the passing
period between classes, observing whether kids were hanging out in the hall and if they
were called on it. She was not working at the time and said, “I know some parents aren’t
as proactive… it’s just, you know, that they don’t have the time or knowledge or the tools
or skills to negotiate. My parents didn’t negotiate for me… but it’s such an advantage to have parents that do.”

Mrs. Evans said that she and her husband guided Jasmine to think about the high schools and to explain her decisions:

She really liked science growing up, too, so science was a big thing for her. She really likes science. She likes the whole project thing, the gathering all the information, the research. She likes that. And um, outside of school, she’s into like arts and crafts and stuff like that. She goes to art camps and stuff. So we’re just trying to see where we can get with both. And um, just checking out what schools have college prep… We found out about all the different schools that were out there. And she actually had a chance to get into whatever, you know, she wanted to. But I wanted to know what high schools do you want to go to? What do you have in mind?

Mrs. Evans worked full-time and had two younger children, so she did not volunteer at Jasmine’s school or have many parents with children Jasmine’s age or older in her social network, but she was diligent about finding as much information as she could from the High School Directory, the High School Expo, online, and by setting up shadowing dates for her daughter. She also prodded Jasmine to think through her options and asked her to articulate the rationale for her high school choices. Given that Jasmine and other students have the full set of high schools as realistic options, these parents want their children to apply to schools that fit their interests.

These students had proactive parents who gathered information and discussed high schools with them, and when they attended a brokering school, they gained additional information and concrete advice about the high school application process to help them make strategic decisions. In eighth grade, students are allowed to shadow, a process in which parents arrange a day for their child to partner with a current student at a
selective high school and follow their schedule. Counselors at brokering schools encouraged students to shadow in eighth grade, further emphasizing the quest for fit. Jasmine explained that she had some ideas about where she wanted to apply, but Ms. Olsen also encouraged students to shadow so they could see the environment of the schools and think about where they could picture themselves. These students are also motivated and conscientious observers on shadow days. Jasmine listed the specific questions that she wanted answered on her shadow days:

- What certain things do you learn in different subjects?
- What types of people go there? Because I want to surround myself with the best possible students so I can be challenged.
- What is the environment like?
- What are the teachers like? Some write on the board and explain more than others, some are more patient than others. I saw that when I shadowed.

Mark shadowed at all five high schools he applied to so he could “really get to know what the school’s like on a normal day, when no one’s showing off for you.” He reported,

- I’ve learned a lot about the student populations of each school, and I got to meet the students. I learned about the teachers. Um. I learned about their classes since I was in a lot of classes at each school, and I got a good view of the interior and exterior of the school, what the building was like.

Mark wanted to attend a big school so he could meet more people and Jasmine was excited about project-based learning at one selective school. In addition to academics, the students’ personality and learning style were also factored into the application decisions of this group. Qualified students like Mark and Jasmine were highly motivated, thought about what they wanted from a school, and did research about high schools to decide where to apply. They also had support and concrete help from their parents, and from counselors when they attended brokering schools, to assess various forms of “fit” in their application decisions.
Stephen Bianchi & Allison Murray: “I thought of schools. Then, my mom read and thought they were good too.”

Stephen Bianchi is white. He lives with his mother, grandmother, and a younger brother and sister. His mom was raised in Philadelphia and attended public school, including the neighborhood high school until she dropped out in tenth grade. She gets as many hours as she can working at an off-track betting facility, but she says they struggle financially. Stephen attends P.S. 1, a school with a brokering counselor.

Allison Murray is white. She lives with her mother, stepfather, older brother, and two younger sisters. Her brother is in ninth grade at the neighborhood high school but does not attend school much and is on the verge of dropping out. Her mom attended the same neighborhood high school but dropped out when she got pregnant. Mrs. Murray works at a bar and her husband works at a produce stand. Allison attends P.S. 10, a clearinghouse school.

Stephen said, “(Ms. Olsen and my teachers) told us that your seventh grade report card was most important, so I tried my best.” He also remembered the negative motivation that teachers used, explaining, “When kids were acting up, they’d say, ‘When you go to a bad high school, you can blame it on yourself.’” Like Mark and Jasmine, he is self-motivated and earned all As and Bs in seventh grade. He read the High School Directory when the counselor gave it to the students and read the websites of the schools that he was interested in to find out more information. His counselor showed them where to go on the district website to get to the high school websites, and he looked up several high schools at home. After reading the Directory and looking online, he came up with two schools at which he met the criteria and wanted to apply (Palumbo and Bodine). He
shadowed at both schools and said that he was excited about learning a language in high school after he sat in on a Chinese class at Palumbo. He also got information from when the high schools presented at his school. He said, “I learned that Palumbo was new so it had no graduates, and it’s a small school.” He liked the idea of being in one of the first graduating classes. He knew he wanted to go to college but he did not yet have any specific career interests, and he knew Palumbo had college preparatory classes. He was diligent about doing high school research, but he conducted his search independently.

Unlike Mark and Jasmine, Stephen and Allison represent qualified students whose parents were not active participants in the high school search process. Stephen explained, “I thought of schools. Then, my mom read and thought they were good too.” Ms. Bianchi looked in the Directory at the schools he was interested in, but she did not come up with her own ideas or do her own research. She talked to the counselor and people she knew, confirming that Stephen’s choices were good schools but her advice was simply, “Apply where you really want to go.” Her lack of knowledge about high schools and confidence in helping Stephen was related to her dropping out of high school.

Mrs. Murray also dropped out of high school and expressed regrets about her situation. She talks to her children regularly about school and the importance of education for life opportunities and social mobility, saying, “I just want you to do better than me.” Allison’s family had been through the high school application process with her older brother, but he had bad grades and attendance and ended up at the neighborhood high school. Mrs. Murray wants better for Allison but she is limited in her ability to help Allison with the high school decision. She looked at the Directory and online with her daughter, but she told Allison, “You gotta make the choice.” She told Allison that she had
to consider what school best fits her needs, but she said, “I can’t help you any more than that.” She was reluctant to let Allison travel too far for school, but she recognized the importance of giving her some independence. She said, “There’s a point where you gotta draw the line. Like, you know, you can't baby them forever.”

Mrs. Bianchi did have some knowledge about high schools, but she relied on Stephen to take the lead in his own decision. She had heard that a charter school in the neighborhood was good and thought about applying there, but the charter school applications are separate from the traditional public school application and she never went to the charter school to pick up an application because Stephen did not express a strong interest in the school. Ms. Bianchi told me that Stephen was interested in learning Chinese in high school and I laughed as I told her that I asked all of the students I interviewed if they spoke a language other than English and Stephen had told me, “Well, I know a few things in Chinese.” I asked him what he knew and he said, “I learned, ‘Ni hao?’ (how are you?) when I shadowed at Palumbo.” Upon hearing this, she laughed and replied, “Oh, that’s why he wants to learn Chinese?” Ms. Bianchi talked to her son about high schools and scheduled a shadow date for Stephen when he asked, but Stephen did not share the details of his interests in particular high schools with her and she did not push him to explain his interests or decisions.

Allison also lacked personalized guidance from her mother, and she did not attend a school with a brokering counselor. Allison is a driven student who had wanted to be a doctor since she was a child, but she did not know which schools offered health, nursing, or science foci or “career majors.” She was able to match her seventh grade record and the high school admission requirements, but she made application decisions that did not
reflect her interest in medicine. Instead, she applied the most selective high schools she thought she could get into, including Constitution High School because she remembered liking it when they came to present at her school. I asked what she liked about the school, and she replied, “If I remembered the name, I know it was a good school for me… when they came here I was like, I guess, we don't have to wear a school uniform. They have all these fun activities, like end of day after school programs, stuff like that.” In the Directory, Constitution High School states that it focuses on citizenship and service learning and is for students with an interest in civics, law, and government.

These cases illustrate that students have preferences that influence their application decisions. Students may plan to attend college, have specific career interests, or express interest in learning a foreign language or playing sports. Some students also said that they did not want to have to wake up early to commute to a high school across the city or did not want to wear a uniform. Others wanted to be allowed off-campus for lunch or were interested in the food. And others paid attention to the physical facilities, including metal detectors, science laboratories, and a courtroom at one school with a law focus. For qualified students who shadowed, they added criteria such as the academic rigor, teaching style, and student diversity at the high schools they visited. Students who had involved parents or who had brokering counselors were asked to justify their choices and had help in applying to schools that fit their academic qualifications, interests, and personality. Others, like Stephen and Allison, were able to determine their “academic fit” for high schools using the Directory and other resources, but they took a more haphazard approach to assessing “interest fit” and “personality fit.”
DECISION-MAKING FOR UNQUALIFIED STUDENTS: LIMITED OPTIONS

I defined “unqualified” students as those who had average or weak grades, including any Ds or Fs, or attendance or behavior problems in seventh grade. These students consider Tier 2, charter, and Catholic high schools, and unlike the qualified students who concern themselves with “fit,” students who do not meet the special admission requirements try to figure out where they have any chance of getting in. These families consider neighborhood schools to be the worst options, but they had limited options in the district. These students all assessed their “academic fit” and knew they did not meet the selective high school admission criteria, so they either decided to “give it a try” and apply to selective schools, rationalized attending the neighborhood school, or pursued charter or private school options. These students had less information about high schools than their qualified peers, and proactive parents and brokering counselors were important for helping these students with charter and private school applications, since these applications are separate from the district process.

Malik Atley and Darren Sampson: “Could’ve done better, should’ve done better”

Malik is African-American. He has lived with his grandma since he was three years old because his father is in and out of prison and his mother is on drugs. He has 12 biological siblings but he does not see them often. His grandma grew up in Philadelphia and attended the neighborhood high school, as did many of their relatives who live in the area. She said that the neighborhood high schools were good options back then. She works with social service agencies to educate parents about finding quality childcare in the city. Malik attends P.S. 1, which has a brokering counselor.
Darren is biracial (African-American and White). He lives with his dad, who is white, and his younger brother. His father grew up in Philadelphia, graduated from a neighborhood high school, and is a construction worker. Darren attends P.S. 1.

Malik and Darren both report not trying their hardest in seventh grade and express disappointment that they did not meet the Tier 1 or Tier 2 admission criteria. Malik had Cs and 1D on his report card in seventh grade and Darren had 1 F, though they also earned As in some classes. These students lack the focus and self-motivation of their qualified peers. In the interview excerpt below, Malik and I discussed his seventh grade record:

Malik: My grades weren’t good, but they weren’t bad.

CH: Did you get Bs, Cs, Fs?

Malik: Cs, a couple of As, and 1 D.

CH: What was the D in?

Malik: Social studies. I can’t get into social studies. To me, it’s a boring subject.

CH: So, would you say that you tried your best last year?

Malik: No. They’re not the best grades. I really wasn’t trying that hard and I was always playin’ around.

CH: But you knew that seventh grade mattered, right?

Malik: Yes, but I wasn’t really thinking about it.

Malik did not have attendance or behavior problems, and his grandma said, “He’s not a bad kid. I think most of the problem is he’s not motivated.” In an interview, Ms.
Atley explained that she started reminding Malik about the importance of seventh grade when he was in sixth grade, but he did not listen. She said,

> We actually started in the sixth grade. I was talking to him then. I said, you know, next year is the important year. You have to buckle down, you have to, you know, do the work, and if you’re having troubles with the work, you have to let somebody know that you’re having trouble. But… he can do the work. He just don’t want to do it. He picks and chooses what he wants to do. If it interests him, then he does it. If it doesn’t interest him, then he doesn’t do it.

She explained that Malik never fails any classes, but he does just enough to pass.

> Like other parents in the study, and specifically parents of boys, Ms. Atley expressed frustration that her grandson lacked focus and motivation. She said, “I don’t think he understands what school means for later on in life. You have to take care of yourself, so in order to take care of yourself, you have to get an education. And, he hasn’t put that together yet. And I hope one day he does get it, and put it together, but right now he’s not there.” She tried to find comfort in the belief that “he’ll get there,” but she laughed and added, “if I don’t kill him first.”

Even at brokering schools, counselors had a hard time coming up with options for students like Malik and Darren. Ms. Atley and Malik attended a meeting with Ms. Olsen, the counselor, but Ms. Atley described her frustration:

> Well, we looked at the book. And we had a meeting with Ms. Olsen, and she basically put it out there that with his grades, Central and them are out… Seventh grade went out the window, so now the only option that was left was the neighborhood school. So that’s what we had to do. But the more I think about it, putting him over there in [the neighborhood school], it’s only going to get worse with him. I just know it. He’s not gonna do well… He would do worse because it’s the caliber of students that are there. He’s gonna—most likely, I hope he doesn’t—you know… just be one of the crowd, that just gets by.
They decided not to apply to any high schools, representing the 25 percent of eighth graders in this “non-applicant” group. Malik, like other students with weak records, told me that he was fine with going to the neighborhood high school, that people overexaggerated how bad they are, and that he would be okay as long as he did what he was supposed to do. But Ms. Atley told me, “His feelings are really hurt that he couldn’t get into those schools.”

Darren also admitted to not doing his work in seventh grade, but he expressed regrets about not trying his best. When I asked Darren if he had any advice for younger students, he said, “You definitely got to stop tryin’ to be lookin’ for attention and do your work. Now that it’s getting close and I know I’m not getting in, I wish I did my work last year. I know I could do it. I just didn’t.” He applied to two Tier 2 high schools, one with a military focus and another with a police program. He said he knew he would not get in because he did not meet the requirements, but “I just sent out the application because you never know.” He applied to those two schools because he was interested in the military or being a police officer, and he wanted a school with strict discipline to help him. He said he talked to his dad about high schools and his father told him to think about where he would have the best chance of graduating high school. Darren said, “With me wanting always to be talkative and have fun, Elverson is better (than the neighborhood school) because they won’t allow someone to be a loud mouth.” In their meeting with Ms. Olsen, Mr. Sampson worried aloud that Darren would drop out at the neighborhood high school. Although they knew it was a long shot since Darren did not meet the admission criteria, Mr. Sampson and Darren both clung to the hope of admission at the Tier 2, military high school.
Ms. Atley was considering sending Malik to a Catholic high school but worried about whether she would be wasting her money. She wondered, “Is he going to do what he needs to do? … If he’s not gonna buckle down and take his education seriously, then I’m not throwing my money away.” As several parents explained about Catholic high schools, “They’ll accept you if you can pay.” Tuition in the archdiocese is over $5,000, and after adding in orientation and other fees, the total annual cost per student is almost $7,000. For those who can afford it or who get a coveted need-based scholarship, Catholic high schools provide a “choice” option for unqualified students.

Students with weak seventh grade records generally focused on the positive aspects of the neighborhood high school, including one student who said, “It could be fun because I know lots of people there. They say it’s actually kind of fun.” I asked what specifically is fun at the neighborhood school and she replied, “Like gym and stuff.” Darren stated that at the neighborhood school, “The work is easy, at least.” But regret and disappointment was common in this group. As one student admitted, “I think I messed up last year. I could’ve done better, should’ve done better.” Unlike qualified students who had specific reasons to look forward to high school, these students tended to have more angst or to be indifferent. When I asked Malik what he was most looking forward to about high school, he looked at me and said matter-of-factly, “Getting out.” Unqualified students rationalized neighborhood high school attendance at the end of eighth grade when it was apparent that they would be attending one, but students define themselves in relation to their peers and these students all expressed an interest in the selective high schools and disappointment in not being able to get in.
Christina Ochoa: “Since you struggled, you don’t deserve it”

Christina lives with both parents and her grandfather. Her mother is Mexican-American and her father is white. Her mom grew up in Texas and her dad grew up in Philadelphia. Both of her parents attended public schools. Mr. Ochoa attended a neighborhood high school, but dropped out in ninth grade because “it was too dangerous even then… and I had no other options.” Mrs. Ochoa grew up in the suburbs in Texas and said how the schools were “totally opposite” of her husband’s experience. She explained how everyone attended the neighborhood high school and they were excellent schools. Still, she reported making bad choices when she was young, dropping out, and earning her GED when she was 20 years old. The family lived in Texas until Christina was in third grade, but moved to Philadelphia to take care of Mr. Ochoa’s sick father. Mrs. Ochoa works in insurance billing and Mr. Ochoa works with a friend as a contractor. Christina is an only child and attends P.S. 1. She was tested and classified as a special education student in fifth grade; her primary IEP goal is reading comprehension but she also gets help in math.

Christina’s parents had started to think about high schools when Christina was in sixth or seventh grade because her father, who had grown up in the neighborhood, refused to send his daughter to the neighborhood high school. However, her parents did not realize the importance of the seventh grade record until they met with Ms. Olsen in eighth grade, when it was too late. Mrs. Ochoa praised Ms. Olsen for her support, but she said, “I had no clue. I didn’t know what the challenge was that I was facing. All I knew was, okay, we have to apply at schools. I thought, Okay, that’s fine, I guess, just like we filled out the paperwork for P.S. 1. You know they want to know your whole history,
that’s fine. So I pretty much thought that that’s what it was. I didn’t know it was gonna be so challenging.”

After a tear-filled meeting with Ms. Olsen, as described in Chapter 6, Mr. and Mrs. Ochoa applied to the arts-focused schools that Christina wanted to attend, but they also decided to apply to a charter high school in the neighborhood. They had heard about the school because it was close to their house. They attended an Open House and were impressed by the building, the activities, and the school’s academic supports, so they filled out an application. They knew that Christina was not a strong candidate for the Tier 1 or Tier 2 schools, so they anxiously awaited the charter school admission lottery and brainstormed various alternate options. Mrs. Ochoa told her husband that if Christina did not get into the charter school, “I was thinking crazy thoughts, like will we have to shack up with your brother. Or friends of ours who live out in the suburbs, who have a big, beautiful home said come, move in with us… I was thinking of getting a second job to put her in a private school.” Mr. Ochoa chimed in, “I mean, this is your daughter. This is what you live for. And you’re not gonna—I would refuse to let her go to [the neighborhood school]. That just wasn’t an option.”

Mr. and Mrs. Ochoa explained the “filtering process” through which they decided the high schools to which Christina would apply. Ms. Ochoa stated,

The first thing we thought of was, okay, what are the schools that are closest to us? It was just mainly, um, a filtering process. What schools are close to us? Out of those schools, what type of transportation would she have to take? And that one whittled it down. And then out of those schools, you know, do they go by her academic scores? How safe are they?
Unlike the decision-making process for qualified students that began with the requirements and program offerings at the high schools, and then moved to the schools’ location, parents of unqualified students put a stricter geographic constraint on their child’s applications and did not apply to the maximum five schools.

Mrs. Ochoa felt strongly that the high schools should look beyond students’ grades and test scores when making admission decisions. She stated,

I feel like, if they’re going to judge based on their scores, which they have every right to, and the scores are low, that they need to look into why their scores are low. Are their scores low because they have discipline problems? Are they low because of their attendance issues? Or are they low because they’re having difficulties in, you know, learning? If it’s because of learning difficulties, is she getting help? How is she progressing?... I can understand them not picking those with attendance or discipline problems. They need to look into it further, and they don’t. They just see that test scores are low.

Like many parents who were frustrated that their children were “good kids” and not being given a chance at the selective high schools, Mrs. Ochoa did not acknowledge that her daughter would have also been disqualified based on her seventh grade attendance, a problem that exacerbated Christina’s poor academic record in the admission process. Still, her desire for selective schools to look beyond the numbers and give average students a chance was a sentiment echoed by parents and counselors alike.

Mr. Ochoa also was sensitive to the emotional ramifications for his daughter of being rejected and disappointed in this process. He said, “It’s hard enough when they know that they’re not on the level that they should be, and they tell them, well guess what, you're not going to the school you want to… That devastates a kid, it really does. It kills confidence. And confidence at this age is important. And it really hurts them, it
really, really hurts confidence in a students when you tell them, well guess what, if you would have had better grades, you could have got here, but guess what? Since you struggled, you don't deserve it.” Unlike Malik and Darren, Christina tried in school but still struggled. However, she had other flaws in her seventh grade record. As her parents explained, they were not aware of the importance of seventh grade and the specific high school admission criteria until eighth grade, when it was too late.

Through a combination of students’ lack of effort, poor attendance, or other flaws in seventh grade, students like Malik, Darren, and Christina had limited options in eighth grade. Proactive parents and brokering counselors were particularly important for helping these students to pursue options outside of the district process.

ADMISSION DECISIONS

The 10 study schools had higher admissions rates than the district as a whole. In the study schools, about half of students received any acceptance, about 45 percent enrolled in the neighborhood school, and about five percent reported enrolling in a charter or Catholic high school. Across the district, 34 percent of students received at least one acceptance and the remaining 66 percent of eighth graders were assigned to a neighborhood school, although these percentages do not reflect those who pursue options outside of the high school application process. Most of the qualified students in the interview sample were accepted to at least one high school, although several were placed on waiting lists. Mark, Jasmine, and Stephen were accepted at Tier 1 high schools, and Allison enrolled at a Tier 2 high school.

The unqualified students in the interview sample were split between attending the neighborhood high school, like Malik and Darren, or exercising choice outside the
traditional public system, like Christina, who was accepted at a charter high school through a lottery. Mr. and Mrs. Ochoa had arranged to meet with the special education coordinator to ensure that Christina’s transition to high school would be as smooth as possible and Mrs. Ochoa told me, “I’m relieved. I can sleep peacefully now. My mom doesn’t have to pray the rosary any more.” Malik’s grandmother considered enrolling him in a Catholic high school, but she decided against it because, “He didn’t show a commitment to his education, so it wasn’t worth it.”

Given that approximately two thirds of ninth graders in the district attend Tier 3 high schools, my sample underidentifies these students. One of the difficulties of including students with poor seventh grade records is that if they did not complete an application, they may not have seen the purpose in participating in a study about high school selection. However, my sample illustrates the importance of understanding the entire high school marketplace—including district, charter, and private high schools—because more students may have “choice” than is recognized in analysis of district data.

SUMMARY

Students with equal qualifications have unequal chances of admission based on students’ seventh grade record and their information, which is shaped by student initiative, parent education, parent involvement, and the counselor approach. In all of the native-born families, students and parents were involved in the high school application process, although the balance varied across families. For qualified students, students took an active role. They were engaged in the process and motivated to gather information because they were realistic candidates for many of the high schools and they sought to
determine which schools best “fit” their qualifications and interests. Their parents’ involvement varied by parent educational attainment. Mrs. Peterson and Mrs. Evans both had at least some postsecondary education and they felt comfortable navigating the complex high school application process. They obtained information from formal sources and their personal networks and thought critically about where they thought their child should apply. They also engaged in “concerted cultivation,” talking regularly to their children about high schools and requiring their children to articulate and justify their choices. When families in this group attended brokering schools, they were well positioned to take advantage of brokering counselors’ advice such as setting up shadowing appointments to assess “fit.”

Stephen Bianchi and Allison Murray represent another group of qualified students who navigated the process with parent support, but little concrete help from their parents. Mrs. Bianchi and Mrs. Murray had dropped out of high school and were not as proactive or confident about helping their children to make high school application decisions. Stephen and Allison illustrate that student success is not predetermined by parent characteristics. However, qualified students get different amounts of help from their parents based on their parents’ education and their ability to navigate the complicated high school application process. These students were able to assess their “academic fit” and have options in this system, but having a brokering counselor is especially beneficial for qualified students with less involved parents so they have guidance about “interest fit” and “personality fit,” which are also components of the high school “choice” decision.

For families with unqualified students, parent education was less critical because these students had limited options to consider. However, proactive parents sought options
for their children and brokering counselors provided them with information about charter schools. This element of “choice” reveals the hierarchical nature of high schools created by this system. Qualified students enroll in Tier 1 and Tier 2 high schools. For unqualified students, the high school application process provided a false promise of choice. Unqualified students with proactive parents and/or brokering counselors enroll in charter and private schools. The remaining students—those who do not submit an application, do not receive an admission, cannot afford private school, have less involved parents, and/or attend a clearinghouse school—end up enrolling in Tier 3 high schools. This provides a bleak picture of how Tier 3 schools end up as the most disadvantaged.
CHAPTER 8
IMMIGRANT FAMILIES: STUDENT (AND PARENT) MANAGEMENT

A lot of Asian parents, they don’t speak English and they don’t quite understand the American school system, so they kind of feel their children know more about the school system. So they let the student, and maybe their friend or their uncle or their aunt, come up with the decision, and then the student will talk to their parent, and the parent will kind of more like agree to it. - Mr. Chan

This chapter examines how students from immigrant families navigate the high school application process. Like Chapter 7, this chapter looks within families to understand the relative role of students and parents in educational decision-making. However, comparing students from native-born and immigrant families is important because students from immigrant families face barriers to their parents’ involvement in educational decisions when parents are not familiar with the American educational system, do not speak English, or have limited education.

This chapter uses interview data of 25 students from immigrant families, including 15 U.S.-born children of immigrants and 10 immigrant children, as well as 15 immigrant parents. All of the Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants in my sample are members of the third-wave of Southeast Asian refugees that have come to the United States post-1975, a group that is poorer and less educated than earlier waves of Southeast Asian refugees (Ngo & Lee, 2007). This chapter focuses on one Vietnamese, two Cambodian, one Mexican, and one Malian student to understand how students from immigrant families manage the high school application process. Asian refugee immigrants and Latino labor immigrants are similarly disadvantaged in terms of educational attainment and socioeconomic status, and these groups, rather than
professional immigrants, dominate the immigrant population in inner-city neighborhoods and schools. Thus, I am examining a specific segment of the American immigrant population in this analysis.

There are several factors to keep in mind about the sample. First, the immigrant students all had several siblings, and the focal children in the interview sample happened to have older siblings in the majority of cases. However, some of the students in the study were born in the United States but have older siblings who were born in another country and vice versa. Thus, even within a family, siblings may have different educational and acculturation experiences as well as different citizenship statuses. Second, the Asian and African students were all born in the United States; the Mexican students were born in Mexico. The Asian families were from Vietnam and Cambodia and had come to the United States between 1975 and the 1990s. The Mexican families had immigrated more recently, following the economic downturn in the early 1990s. Third, the parents in the sample had a high school or lower education; some refugees had never attended school. Fourth, the parents generally had blue-collar jobs or did not work at all, and most spoke limited English. The one exception was the Mai family; Mrs. Mai is a college graduate, Mr. Mai finished high school, and they own an acupuncture and herbal medicine shop. Fifth, the students attend a mix of brokering and clearinghouse schools, and the brokering school that many of the Asian students in the sample attend is P.S. 2. Mr. Chan, the P.S. 2 counselor, uses the brokering approach but unlike the other brokering counselors, he does not include parents in his individual meetings with students.

The immigrant sample differs from the native-born sample in several ways. First, some of the native-born students were only children. Second, the native-born parents had
more education on average. Even if they had dropped out of high school, they could still obtain information in English documents and had at least general knowledge about the high school application process. Third, the native-born students represented a range of seventh grade records. In the interview sample, all of the 25 students from immigrant families met at least the Tier 2 course grade criteria of As, Bs, and Cs in seventh grade, compared with eight of 22 native-born students. Of course, these numbers may not be representative of the entire population due to participation and sample selection bias, but the counselors at the 10 study schools could only identify two immigrant students with lower than C grades in seventh grade. This may help to explain the Asian students’ advantage in the quantitative data in Chapter 4, but it does not align with the Latino students’ disadvantage. I observed Chien-Fu’s individual meeting with Mr. Chan, as described in Chapter 4, but I was unable to obtain the permission of either students’ parents to participate in the study, so I could not interview these students or their parents.

This illustrates the challenges of including immigrants in research. Low-achieving immigrant students were particularly difficult to reach, for similar reasons as in the native-born sample that these students may be less responsible about bringing information from school home to their parents and the added difficulty of parents’ language and cultural barriers in reading and responding to the parent survey, although it was translated into their native languages to encourage parents’ response. Still, this sample of high achieving students from immigrant families adds to the literature on immigrant children and children of immigrants’ academic success and reveals challenges specific to this group.

This chapter finds that students from immigrant families manage educational
decisions with limited help from their parents. It describes immigrant parents’ optimism about the educational opportunities in the United States, the language and education barriers that prevented them from being able to help their children in school, and how these conditions contributed to students making their high school application decisions with less information than their native born peers. As Mr. Chan explained, the student makes the decision and “the parent will kind of more like agree to it.” While some native-born parents were highly involved in the high school application process, students from immigrant families were similar to the native-born students whose parents did not have any postsecondary education; the latter two groups both navigated the process with minimal parent help. The immigrant students—often, with help from their older siblings—considered “academic fit,” or the match between their seventh grade record and the admission criteria, but unlike the high-achieving native-born students who had explicit preferences about high schools and some of whom had explicit career interests, immigrant students did not consider “interest fit” or “personality fit” in their high school decisions.

IMMIGRANT OPTIMISM

Prior research has found that parent expectations matter above and beyond socioeconomic status, and immigrant parents’ optimism about their children’s educational opportunities in the United States was associated with students’ achievement in this sample. In interviews, the immigrant parents expressed envy that all children have the opportunity to go to school in the United States. Some parents explained that in their country, parents have to pay to send their children to school and because many people are poor, the children have to help their family farm and work instead of going to school. Ms.
Mai said that in Vietnam, “It’s poor country, and some families don’t have money for children to go to school, and we don’t have enough schools.” Mr. Vahng stated:

Over here, it’s easy to get educated. Like in Cambodia, if you’re poor, you have to work instead of going to school. Over here, all my kids just go to school and I support them… They just take a shower and go to school, that’s it. For me, I’m so jealous. That’s why I’m trying to tell them, all the time, everything is taken care of. All you have to do is just study.

Mr. Diallo and other parents echoed Mr. Vahng in stating that their children have it easy because basic needs are met. He said that he tells his children, “I bought a house, you sleep in the house. I buy food, you eat the food. You got a bed, you sleep in the bed. If it’s cool, I put heat. If it’s hot, you got air conditioning. Every day, I take you to school and I bring you back. I buy you clothes and shoes… You don’t need nothing.”

Refugee immigrants from Cambodia also explained how they struggled to survive during war and how they did not have the opportunity to go to school. Ms. Im said, “Here, children have more opportunities to learn… I was in first grade less than a year and then the Communists were fighting a lot, so then we just kept moving and moving to different villages in Cambodia so I never had the opportunity to learn or anything. We just kept running.” Another Cambodian parent added, “In the Communist time, we had no clothes to wear, no food to eat. We slept in wet clothes every day for three years. People starved and nobody had enough clothes to wear. And we all worked, worked, with no pay. So it’s totally different from children that grow up here and are born here… You have to do a lot of things to survive. It’s totally different.”

Relative to their experiences, the immigrant parents were optimistic about the opportunities for their children in America. One Mexican parent tells her daughter:
We are in this country because this country can offer her a lot of opportunities and our priority is that she finishes school because school is a tool very important for life…. And she should take advantage of what this country could give her because in Mexico though she may have the university title, there aren’t that many opportunities for work. For example, if she finishes her university career here in the U.S. and she goes to Mexico, she will find a job immediately. First, because of the language, she speaks two languages and also because they say that schools here are better than Mexico. I often tell her to study, that’s her only job.

The importance of education for career opportunities and studying as a child’s job were common themes among immigrant parents.

Many of the immigrant parents agreed with Mr. Diallo’s sentiment that, “I don’t have a lot of education. I want them to pass me, to be better.” These parents report constantly reminding their children to do well in school and telling their children that they do not want their children to struggle financially as they have. One unemployed mother whose husband works 11-hour days, six days a week in a bakery, explained:

I talk and talk, nonstop. But now I get tired. I try to give them advice because in my case I didn’t have the chance to learn and I want my children to have a very good education… I’ll always support Anne because I don’t want Anne end up like me. I can’t find a job and her dad works so hard. I want her to be better educated so she can go as far as she wants.

Mr. Vahng also has a manual labor job for a commercial glass company and he reminds his children, “Education is very important. I don’t want them to end up like me, doing physical work. It’s not easy. I just hope they understand and study hard.” His children were sitting on the couch next to me during our interview and they all chuckled as he looked over at them. I asked, “Do you hear this a lot?” and they replied, “All the time.”

Some native-born parents also wanted their children to do better than them, but lacked the skills and resources to help their children make their high school application
decisions. Immigrant parents’ frame of reference to their home country made them instill in their children a sense of fortune about the educational opportunities in America that carried a similar urgency as Mrs. Bianchi and Mrs. Murray’s message of education as a vehicle for social mobility, contrary to their own status as high school dropouts (Chapter 7). Thus, native-born students whose parents had low educational attainment and students from immigrant families received similar encouragement but limited concrete help from their parents.

However, two of the Mexican immigrant parents worried that their children will have limited opportunities since they do not have legal papers. One parent said that her daughter “likes to study but she says that she will only finish [high school] because as an immigrant, she can’t go higher than high school. I tell her I think it’s a step towards a good career. This is what I am thinking… but I don’t know.” Mrs. Perez had the stronger worry that her daughter would not be motivated to finish high school because she will not be able to get a good career with only a high school degree. These parents contemplated moving back to Mexico and one thought that her daughter might be able to return to the U.S. on a student visa. Citizenship and age differences among siblings also caused tension in these families. Marisol’s younger sister was born in Philadelphia and Marisol was frustrated that her little sister would have more opportunities just because she was born here. The issue of legal status is unparalleled in other immigrant groups, and it muted immigrant optimism in these families.
LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION BARRIERS: “I CAN ONLY HELP THEM SO MUCH”

Across the immigrant families, parents encouraged their children to do well in school, but they faced several barriers to monitoring their children’s education and helping them succeed. The first barrier is English language proficiency. There are itinerant translators and bilingual counseling assistants (BCAs) at all schools, but they do not necessarily cover all of the languages spoken in a school and they are not always on campus to translate information for parents, interpret in a parent meeting, or make a phone call home on behalf of a teacher. The counselors and parents were both grateful for the translators and BCAs, but they spoke about home-school communication challenges.

One counselor explained, “The immigrant parents, sometimes I speak to them the least because I don’t speak the language and we don’t have a BCA who speaks the language. So that’s sometimes difficult.” Mr. Chan, another counselor, explained that his school is very diverse and that the district was increasingly diverse. There are four BCAs at his school who speak Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Khmer, and there are nine languages spoken at his school. He said, “We translate as much as we can—the school calendar, letters that go home—for the parents,” but he acknowledged that the school cannot translate every document in every language. Parents employed strategies such as bringing a family member to translate, having a family member attend school meetings on their behalf, or having their child interpret for them, but immigrant parents who do not speak English have less information about their child’s education than other parents because many of the details about students’ performance or high school options are lost in translation. Also, students were not skilled at reading and translating detailed
information for their parents due to their own vocabulary limitations in their parents’
language.

Some Mexican parents reported that translating the district’s High School
Directory would be helpful because they were literate in Spanish but could not access the
information in English. Some of the counselors reported that the Directory had been
printed in other languages in the past, but was currently only printed in English due to
budget constraints. The Directory is supposedly available on the district website in other
languages, but families or school counselors are responsible for finding and printing the
document themselves and I could only find an English version when I searched the
district site on several occasions. Mrs. Perez and other parents said they looked at the
Directory with their child but could not understand much of its contents. She explained,

It would have been really different if it was in Spanish because parents
could read about every school… We don’t know that in some schools they
use a lottery or they need a certain grade in order to qualify or you can’t
miss school that often. If we read it in Spanish, it would be a lot easier for
us.

In this interview, she listed the specific information she would like to know about the
high schools, including the location, phone number, course grade requirements, career
programs and other programs offered, and school safety. All of this information, with the
exception of safety indicators, is in the Directory, but she could not read it in English.
Translating documents may help parents such as Mrs. Perez. However, document
translation is not a solution for immigrant parents such as the Cambodian and some of the
Vietnamese refugees in this sample who do not know how to read.
Beyond language issues, immigrant parents in the sample generally had low levels of education and were not familiar with the American educational system. Several parents said that they know how their children are doing in school from their report cards. They have learned that As and Bs are good and Fs are bad, for example, and the ESL teacher, BCAs, and interpreters are generally available at report card conferences to make sure the parents understand the report card and the teachers’ comments. But they were unable to help their children with homework and to monitor their children closely. As Mr. Vahng said:

I just try to push them to study whatever they have to study. I don’t really know what they study. Plus, my education is not that high so I can only help them so much… but they have their own computer so they can find out from the computer. Sometimes, I even tell them to go to the library or something.

Mr. Vahng and other parents explained that the computer, the library, and the children’s older siblings are good resources, but they said that if they knew English or had more education, they would help their children directly. Another parent also expressed this powerlessness, stating, “He tells me he is doing well, but I don’t know. I can look at the homework to see if it’s done, but that’s all.”

“IT’S NOT MY DECISION”

Due to their lack of information and understanding about the high school application process, immigrant parents often left the application decision up to their child—and older siblings, if they had any. As Mrs. Im stated, “It’s not my decision. It’s up to Jonathan to make his choice… He can talk to me any time he wants, but it’s still his choice.” Students from immigrant families are forced to take an active role in their high school application decision, but they have less information than their native born peers.
Therefore, the support of brokering counselors is particularly important for students from immigrant families.

*Jonathan Im, Marisol Perez, & Kyle Vahng: Help from older siblings*

Jonathan Im is Cambodian. He is the fifth of six children, four of whom live at home with his mother. His four older siblings attended the neighborhood high school and he also has two younger siblings. The oldest was born in Cambodia, two in Thailand, and the youngest three, including Jonathan, were born in Philadelphia. Mr. and Mrs. Im came to the United States in September 1990 with their three children, sponsored by Mr. Im’s brother. Neither of Jonathan’s parents work and neither knows English. Mr. Im is on disability and they have public assistance. Mr. and Mrs. Im never had the opportunity to go to school. The family speaks Khmer at home with their parents but the children generally speak in English with each other. Jonathan attends P.S. 9, a school with a clearinghouse counselor.

Jonathan said his older sisters attended the neighborhood high school because they did not know English well, they did not get into any other schools, and their mom did not want them to go far. But his sisters advised him, “Don’t go there because they don’t teach you that much and it’s not a good school.” Mrs. Im agreed with her daughters’ assessment of the neighborhood school, adding, “My older daughters already know all the information so they helped him through the process.” Another parent said, “[My daughter] can tell me, but every time she tells me, I don’t understand much anyway and cannot help her anyway so it’s better if she talks to her sister.”

Kyle Vahng is Cambodian. He lives with both parents, an older sister, and an older brother, both of whom attend selective high schools. Mr. Vahng moved to the
United States when he was about 22 years old, after escaping from Cambodia to Thailand and living in Thailand for four years before his sister sponsored him to come to America. He came to Philadelphia in 1986 because his friend said there were jobs, after brief stops in Indiana, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. He went to school for about three years in Cambodia, “before the Communists took over and there was no more school.” In the United States, he studied at the University of Wisconsin-Lacrosse to learn English and earned his GED. He said he wanted to learn more but did not have any money so, “I had no choice but to come work and quit the education.” He works for a commercial glass company and says, “It’s okay for the money, you know. Because I have no education, I have to do physical work.” He met his wife in America and all of his three children were born in the United States. Mr. Vahng speaks Khmer to his children and they respond in English, but he prefers that they respond in Khmer. Kyle attends P.S. 2, a school with a brokering counselor.

Jonathan, Kyle, and other students with older siblings looked through the Directory together and talked about where the focal student should apply, given their seventh grade record, but they did not discuss their younger brother or sister’s “interest fit” or “personality fit” as was the case in native-born families with high achieving students. Jonathan learned about Central and other well-established, selective high schools from his sisters and he received encouragement to try hard in seventh grade, but he thought Central was too big and too far from home. He applied to newer schools that his sisters had not heard about and thus had to make the “fit” decision by himself. Kyle’s older sister and brother both attended selective high schools and they helped him decide where to apply based on his “academic fit.” However, they did not accurately judge his
eligibility for one school and they, like Jonathan’s siblings, did not discuss Kyle’s interests and personality in discussing where he should apply.

Marisol Perez is Mexican. She lives with her parents, older sister, and younger sister; only the youngest was born in the United States. Mr. Perez came to the United States in 1998 because there was no work in Mexico. He followed his brothers, who had come earlier to Philadelphia. Mrs. Perez joined him in 2000, and Marisol came with her older sister in 2001. In the interim, the girls lived with their grandparents in Mexico. Mrs. Perez finished elementary school and Mr. Perez finished secondary school in Mexico. Mr. Perez has worked in a pizzeria for nine years and Mrs. Perez does not work. They do not speak English. Marisol was in ESL until sixth grade. She attends P.S. 7, a clearinghouse school.

In an interview, Marisol’s mother explained that due to language barriers and a lack of familiarity with the American school system, she did not think that which school her older daughter attended mattered. She said:

To be honest, we did not have an understanding of the schools. [Marisol’s sister] was our first daughter going to high school and I didn’t have any idea. I thought that all schools were good. It was the nearest to my house, so that is the reason why we chose that school.

Marisol’s older sister attended school from seventh to tenth grade in Philadelphia but got pregnant and dropped out. After that experience, she tried to be proactive with Marisol. She asked parents she knew in the community for advice about high schools and told Marisol to ask the counselor and teachers where she should apply. Marisol attended a clearinghouse school, but she asked the counselor for help and followed the counselor’s recommendations. This illustrates the initiative required of students in immigrant
families, since their parents often cannot communicate directly with school staff. Mrs. Perez and other Mexican parents are active in a community organization called Juntos that gives families information and support on a range of issues from health care to jobs to schools, but she and other parents lamented that Juntos does not have specific information about the high school application process and they did not know where else to get it.

Jonathan, Marisol, Kyle, and other qualified immigrant students wanted to do better than their older siblings, but they had less information on which to base their application decisions and they did not generally consider “interest fit” or “personality fit” in their decisions. All of the immigrant students read the High School Directory and some looked at high school websites, but none of the students from immigrant families went to the High School Expo or set up shadowing appointments at the high schools they were interested in attending. The Expo is on the weekend and parents are responsible for taking their children. Parents could allow their child to take the subway and attend alone, but every student who I observed at the Expo was chaperoned by an adult. Also, parents generally set up shadowing appointments for their children at the high schools, so it is not surprising that students from immigrant families participated in these two activities at lower rates than native-born students. Students can call the high schools directly to set up a shadow date, but none of the students in this study who shadowed set up the appointment themselves. Eighth graders are young and lack experience in navigating institutions, but students from immigrant families are required to take more initiative than their peers because they are unable to rely on their parents as intermediaries. The Expo and shadowing are important gaps in these students’ information because native-born
students reported the Expo and shadowing to be the most helpful in considering the “fit” between their interests and personality and the high schools.

While qualified students have good chances of admission at a range of selective high schools, these students from immigrant families do not capitalize on the “fit” goal of the choice system, and this may matter for their high school experience. Kyle explained that both of his siblings were at selective high schools, but neither of them was completely satisfied. He said, “My brother is in 10th grade at Bok (a Tier 2 school) and my sister is in 11th grade at Parkway Center City (a Tier 1 school). My brother said Bok is bad. There are fights all the time. He went because his grades were not good enough so that’s the only place he could get in. My sister applied to Girls but they didn’t accept her so she went to Parkway. She says it’s okay.”

*David Diallo and Jade Mai: Help from parents*

David and Jade represent the smaller group of students from immigrant families whose parents were directly involved in the high school application decision. David Diallo is from the West African country of Mali. He lives with his parents and three younger brothers. Mr. Diallo moved to Los Angeles in 1987, then to New York, and then to Philadelphia in 1991. Mrs. Diallo joined him in 1993, after his parents passed away in Mali, because she had been taking care of them. David and all of his siblings were born in Philadelphia. He finished 10th grade and said it was difficult because under the dictatorship at the time, most children did not attend school. Mrs. Diallo went to school for a few years. Mr. Diallo works at a hospital as a courier and Mrs. Diallo braids hair. They speak English at home, but Mr. Diallo also teaches the children French and his local Malian dialect. David attends P.S. 9, a school with a clearinghouse counselor.
Like David, some immigrant students were the oldest in their families or the first to go through the American school system. These students made the decision on their own after consulting with friends and school staff or, like David, conferred with their parents about where to apply for high school. Mr. Diallo was an exception among immigrant parents because he spoke fluent English, and he took an active role with his eldest son, explaining that he and David sat down together to look at the Directory. “I took my decision and he took his decision, separately. We wrote down our decisions because I just don’t want to say my decision first… and then we compared.” In the end, David and his father agreed that he would apply to a high school that is close to his brothers’ elementary school so he could “watch over them.” Family responsibility and parents’ desire for their child to attend the same school as or to travel to school with their siblings were common considerations in immigrant families, but in this case David applied to a Tier 2 high school for geographic reasons without considering whether he was interested in any of the specific career programs offered at the school.

Jade Mai is Vietnamese. She lives with her mother, father, and an older sister who is in 11th grade at a selective high school. Her parents came to the United States from Vietnam in 1975 and first lived in Camden, New Jersey. Both daughters were born in New Jersey; the family moved to Philadelphia in 1993, when Jade was a baby. Unlike most immigrant parents in the study, Mrs. Mai speaks and can read English and is highly educated. In Vietnam, Mrs. Mai passed a national exam to enter college and completed two years of college. She finished her college degree in the United States. Mr. Mai does not speak English well, but he can understand it. He also completed high school. They own an acupuncture and herbal medicine shop and they live on the second floor. Mr. Mai
does acupuncture and Mrs. Mai makes and sells the herbs. Mrs. Mai requires the girls to speak Vietnamese at home, but they speak English with their friends and relatives. Jade attends P.S. 3, a school with a brokering counselor.

Like Mr. Diallo, Mrs. Mai also took an active role in her child’s high school application decision. However, Mrs. Mai had more information than Mr. Diallo and was the only immigrant parent to approximate the high level of parent involvement in native-born households like the Peterson and Evans families. She was also the only parent in the immigrant sample that had attained more than a high school education. She checks her two daughters’ homework every night and helps them when they ask. She also enrolled Jade in a private tutoring program to prepare for the PSSA standardized exam in seventh grade because she wanted to make sure that Jade had the best possible scores so she could get into a selective high school. She could not find any test prep facility in Philadelphia that worked with middle school students, so she found a test prep facility in New Jersey. She drove Jade 82 miles each way for tutoring, three times a week for a month before the PSSA exam. She explained, matter-of-factly, “I tried. Because I didn’t know if Jade would make a good score, so I was scared and I said, ‘Let me try.’ I tried real hard for her, even though it was real far.” She smiled and laughed as she explained that when Jade got her PSSA scores, “She said, ‘Mom, I’m smart! Look!’… and when I saw the test scores, I said, ‘Good.’ I never thought she would get that high.”

Mrs. Mai most closely represented the “concerted cultivation” approach among the immigrant families. She knew details about the high schools, including that “Masterman, you have to go in fifth grade… [After,] they say you are on a waiting list and they don’t take you.” Jade wanted to try Masterman, so Mrs. Mai let her apply, but
she said, “I don’t expect her to get in.” Mrs. Mai also knew the admission criteria, stating, “I looked at the Directory and saw they have requirements, like the grades, and I looked at what they try to teach children and if they prepare them for college. And those schools, I said, that school is good.” Jade explained that her older sister attended Palumbo (a Tier 1 school), and she wanted to get into Masterman or Central to do better than her sister. She was also excited about running track in high school, like her sister. This was one of the few cases of students from immigrant families expressing a specific interest besides going to a “good” high school.

ADMISSION DECISIONS

All of the students featured in this chapter got into at least one high school, but unlike qualified native-born students who worried about finding the right “fit,” these students were all relieved just to get in somewhere. They relied heavily on older siblings to make their decisions, and as the students featured in this chapter illustrate, they often try not to make the same mistakes as their older siblings. This may have implications for students’ high school experiences and outcomes, when their older siblings, family members, and friends may not have experience with high school level academic content or the college application process. The immigrant students in this study seemed to fare well in the high school application process, but their continued success requires their continued independence in navigating schools and other institutions.

Unlike students in native-born families whose parents can act as intermediaries between the student and school institutions, students in immigrant families have to navigate these institutions by themselves. Ms. Garces gave an example of a student who asked for her help at several points during the high school application process. She said:
This student came to me because her mom speaks Vietnamese, so she came to me and asked me to help her with her application. So we sat down and I went through it with her. And then she got into SLA and she came in again to ask me for help because she was confused about some of the information, because they have to buy insurance for the laptop they get, so we worked that out. And when I called the secretary at SLA to clarify about the laptop, she told me, ‘Oh, I remember her. She called for directions for her interview.’ So I told her that I was proud of her because they need to learn to do that kind of thing.

Ms. Garces is a clearinghouse counselor who helped this student when she asked, but as the clearinghouse counselors noted, most students are not proactive about seeking out help. Students in native-born families have their parents to help them navigate at least some elements of school, but language proficiency, limited education, and a lack of familiarity with the American education system are all barriers for parents to participate in their child’s education. Thus, the support of institutional agents such as counselors is especially important for students from immigrant families.

SUMMARY

Students from immigrant families managed the high school application process more independently than their native-born peers. Immigrant parents supported their children and emphasized the importance of education, but they were limited in their ability to provide concrete help in school and in the high school application process. The findings in this chapter align with prior research that parent expectations matter, net of other factors. The students internalized their parents’ message of the educational opportunities in America; the students in the immigrant sample had stronger academic records overall than those from native-born families.
These students discussed high schools with older siblings if they had them, with family members who spoke English, and with the counselor if they attended a brokering school, but they otherwise lacked support in making their application decisions. For qualified students, considering “academic fit” and applying to the high schools with the best reputation may work out fine; all of the students in the sample were accepted to at least one selective high school. Still, they did not consider “interest fit” or “personality fit” as did qualified students in native-born families. The most esteemed high schools tend to be oversubscribed, so considerations beyond the “best” schools are a buffer against rejection and, in theory, an opportunity to increase student engagement in high school. Without parental support for discussing students’ interests and aspirations, the burden for academic and social development falls entirely on students in immigrant families.

Also, though not included in my interview sample, some students from immigrant families do not meet the selective admission criteria. For these students with average or weak records, they face disadvantages because parents are responsible for obtaining charter school and private school applications and advocating for their child’s admission.

There were two cases in which parents provided direct help to their child, but both of these parents spoke English and had attended school. Mrs. Mai had completed college and Mr. Diallo finished 10th grade. This adds to the evidence in Chapter 7 that parents’ level of education influenced their approach to the high school application process. It also highlights English knowledge as a barrier for many immigrant parents to participate in their child’s education. The students in this sample were qualified for high school admission, indicating their ability to compensate for the parents’ language and education
barriers through personal motivation and help-seeking initiative. Although this sample
does not represent unqualified students from immigrant families, it is safe to assume that
they face greater challenges than their high-achieving peers in making educational
decisions with a more limited set of options.

Overall, this chapter confirms the findings in previous chapters that students play
an important role in their own choice decisions and outcomes. It also illustrates that
although adolescents are involved in their own education, they benefit from adult
guidance in the transition to high school. Immigrant students with parents that did not
speak English and had low or no educational attainment were similar to native-born
students whose parents had a high school education or less; students in these groups were
able to assess their “academic fit,” but neither they nor their parents had detailed
information about school size or curricular features to help personalize the student’s
application decision. Older siblings played a prominent support role for the students in
this study, but they, like the focal student, had limited information and limited skills with
which to navigate the high school application process. All students benefit when they
attend a school with a counselor who uses the brokering approach, but students from
immigrant families particularly benefit from the support from institutional agents such as
counselors because they do not have their parents to act as intermediaries between
themselves and the high schools.
CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSION

As school choice policies and systems have expanded in districts across the country in the past two decades, “choice” has become an all-encompassing term that fails to capture the complexities of choice policies and implementation. The high school application process that is the focus of this dissertation is distinct in two regards. First, there is an inherent tension in the study district’s “universal choice” policy in which all eighth grade students have the opportunity to apply to high schools and are schools are choice options, and the selective criteria used for Tier 1 and Tier 2 high school admissions that limits students opportunities based on their seventh grade record. Second, this “choice” process occurs in the transition to high school, a period in the life course in which adolescents have increasing independence and are actors in their own educational decisions. This dissertation sought to examine the student role in this process, including the influence of students’ seventh grade record, background characteristics, information, and initiative on their high school application decisions and admission outcomes. It also compared qualified and unqualified students, and students from native-born and immigrant families. Additionally, this dissertation sought to examine the school role, and specifically the role of sending school counselors, in this process.

This study reveals that individual and sending school characteristics matter more than the school choice literature suggests. Students’ seventh grade record limits their high school options, but students with equal qualifications have unequal odds of admission in this system based on their background characteristics and school characteristics. This suggests that students’ educational opportunities are structured by the high school
application system, exacerbating differences in students’ seventh grade records for some groups (males, Latinos) and mitigating seventh grade record disparities for others (females, Asians, Whites, ELL students), based on selection criteria that is not explicit in the admission requirements. These findings highlight the structural inequalities inherent in a system that sorts students into high schools with wide disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes.

However, individual actors also have agency in this system by preparing themselves in seventh grade and gathering information to make strategic and “realistic” application decisions in eighth grade. Students play an active role in this process, which supports a conceptual shift away from the assumption of parent management in adolescent educational decisions and future choice research.

Moreover, these findings highlight that guidance from school counselors benefits all students, but is particularly important for students whose parents face educational and language barriers to helping their children navigate social institutions. The counselor approach is one mechanism through which schools can mitigate or exacerbate individual differences in information and the likelihood of high school application and admission.

This chapter summarizes the findings on student and school characteristics and contexts that are associated with application decisions and admission outcomes. It then discusses the policy implications of this study and the implications for future research.

STUDENTS MATTER

Parents have typically been the unit of analysis in choice research about participation decisions and predictors of participation, but the within-family analysis in this study reveals that adolescent students play an active role in their educational
decisions. Students and parents navigate the high school application process together when parents have some postsecondary education, but otherwise, students manage the process with minimal help from their parents. Parent education and immigrant status limit parents’ ability to help their children. Thus, student preferences, motivation, and ability to navigate institutions are all important factors in their application decisions.

The student management of decisions and the benefits of support from parents and school counselors in this study illustrate the “in-between” stage of adolescent development. In this stage, some adults take a “concerted cultivation” approach help guide students to make independent decisions and to navigate social institutions, whereas other adults—parents with less education or English language ability, and counselors who use the clearinghouse approach—place the responsibility for academic and socio-emotional development more squarely on the students’ shoulders. As this dissertation has shown, some students are better equipped to take on this responsibility than others. All students are able to assess their “academic fit,” or the match between their seventh grade record and the high school admission requirements, but adult support from parents and/or the school counselor helps them to consider “interest fit,” “personality fit,” and the full range of options available to each student so they can make strategic decisions.

Students’ seventh grade records provide the context for application decisions across families. Students who are qualified acquire information from a variety of sources and consider their interests and the high schools’ offerings to make “fit” decisions. For these students, “choice” is a reality in this system. On the other hand, “choice” is an illusory promise for students with average or weak seventh grade records unless they consider charter and private school options outside the traditional public school system.
In addition to the explicit seventh grade record criteria for Tier 1 and Tier 2 high school admission, this study reveals that student background characteristics are significant predictors of admission. The district appears to do a certain amount of racial balancing, but while this explains the Asian and White students’ admission advantage, it does not explain Latino students’ admission disadvantage, relative to Black students in this predominantly Black district. Also, ELL and special education students’ admission advantage is unexplained in the formal criteria. These differences indicate that students with equal qualifications have unequal chances of admission based on their race, gender, ELL status, and special education status.

SCHOOLS MATTER

This study goes beyond prior research that focuses individual and family predictors, and finds that school characteristics also predict choice outcomes. First, the structural context of schools predicts application. K-8 schools support high school application whereas other school grade configurations are associated with lower odds of application. Also, students in sending schools with higher eighth grade enrollment also have lower odds of application. Second, negative indicators of school climate and composition predict students’ odds of admission. Students in schools with high percent FRL and those in persistently dangerous schools have lower odds of admission, relative to their peers in other schools.

The qualitative data also reveals that sending school counselors are one mechanism through which schools may confer advantages or disadvantages to students in the high school application process. Counselors who use a brokering approach emphasize the importance of seventh grade and help students to start thinking about high schools
early. In eighth grade, they help students to make realistic application decisions, encouraging qualified students to consider “fit” and to apply to five schools and encouraging unqualified students to consider applying to charter schools. Counselors have the potential to influence student academic preparation, high school awareness and information, and choice outcomes.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There are several policy implications of this research. On a system level, this dissertation raises several questions about the structure of the high school application process. First, what is the benefit of allowing—and often, encouraging—all students to apply, given the limited number of spots in selective schools? As discussed in Chapter 1, the current policy has emerged as an amalgamation of policies over time that does not have a cohesive rationale. In particular, there is a tension between the aims of “universal choice,” which provides students a range of options and allows them to choose based on their interests, and “academic magnets,” which admit students based on selective criteria. The latter policy trumps the former in implementation, providing a false promise of choice to the majority of students.

Second, does selective admission criteria lead to better student outcomes? Tier 1 and Tier 2 schools have better outcomes than Tier 3 schools, but it is unclear whether that is due to the “creaming” of students or to the quality of the high schools themselves. Test scores count for federal and state accountability policy, so there is an incentive for the high schools to want students with better test scores. But is this the best policy for students? In this system, the high achieving students access the best high schools and students with average or weak seventh grade records are relegated to the worst schools.
This “choice” policy contributes to the larger educational debate about whether and when tracking is appropriate. In this case, the stakes are high because the disparities between the high school tiers—or tracks—are substantial and upward mobility between tiers after the high school application process is near impossible.

This study demonstrates that the transition to high school must be conceptualized as beginning in seventh grade in urban districts with extensive choice options. Early awareness and preparation is key, so an important question is how to get families more information about the importance of seventh grade and the range of high school options.

As Chapter 6 argued, the brokering approach is a counselor “best practice” for providing students and parents with information and support in the high school application process. Sending schools can take several steps to adopt this approach, including purposefully structuring the counselor role to provide them with the time to increase students’ awareness about the importance of seventh grade and the range of high school options and to provide individual guidance to students and/or their parents in the application process. Schools and counselors must also critically examine the balance of the academic and behavioral support components of the counselor’s job. Fights, bullying, child abuse, and other issues require counselors’ immediate attention. Counselors are also tasked with managing programs and staff, teaching, and other duties that prevent them from spending time addressing academic issues such as the high school application process in eighth grade. As Chapter 7 and 8 indicate, institutional supports such as the counselors’ brokering approach are particularly important for students whose parents have low educational attainment and for immigrant students whose parents face language,
education, and cultural barriers to helping their children make informed educational
decisions.

Counselors are a critical resource that can be deployed to encourage student
attendance, behavior, and academic effort, and to promote students’ high school
awareness in seventh grade. Of course, the burden of awareness and preparation should
not fall entirely with counselors. Seventh and eighth grade teachers could work together
to integrate high school, college, and career awareness activities into the curriculum so
every student has the best possible chance of high school admission. Figuring out how to
help counselors and other school staff to balance academic, behavioral, and guidance
roles has important implications for students’ academic opportunities and success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This dissertation analyzed the district’s high school application process, but it
reveals that families have more “choice” than is represented in this analysis by opting out
of the traditional district schools to attend charter and private high schools. The district
does not keep records of charter school applications or admissions, but linking this data
would provide the opportunity to get a complete picture of the public high school
marketplace. The qualitative analysis finds that unqualified students apply to charter
schools to avoid the neighborhood high school. Therefore, students who enroll in Tier 3,
neighborhood high schools are those who did not participate or did not receive any
admission offer in the district system, the charter system, or the private school system,
highlighting that they really are “stuck” or “left behind” in the Tier 3 schools.

This study points to the need for better administrative data on immigrant students.
Race/ethnicity and ELL status are imperfect indicators of immigrant students, particularly
in middle school and older grades when students who have attended U.S. schools their entire lives exit out of ELL programs as they gain English proficiency. It is difficult to link the quantitative and qualitative findings in this study, and many other studies exclude immigrants because of sample identification and participation challenges. But as the immigrant population grows, it is increasingly important to understand the strengths and needs of students in immigrant families.

This study also points to the importance of geography in students’ application and enrollment decisions. Future research with global information systems (GIS) data and district administrative data is necessary to determine the geographic bound of students’ application and enrollment decisions. This study suggests that qualified students were willing to travel across the city for the best high schools, but that distance from home was a major consideration for many students. There are Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 high schools in every administrative region, but the best high schools are concentrated in the North and Center City regions and not all regions have equal numbers of high schools in each tier. If, in fact, students’ decisions have a geographic bound, there may be a case for developing a system of regional choice and creating a Central High School, a Creative and Performing Arts High School, and other desirable options in each region.

Another question that can be examined in geographic data is the extent to which the city’s neighborhoods are more racially and socioeconomically diverse than the neighborhood high schools. The Tier 1 and Tier 2 high schools are more diverse than the Tier 3 high schools, and one of the political justifications for having selective high schools is to keep middle class families in the district. But if all students attended their neighborhood high school, would the schools be more or less diverse than the selective
high schools? Similar descriptive analyses would be useful to examine the relationship between neighborhood and school violence. Given the risk factor of violence for educational outcomes, it would be interesting to examine students with comparable records who were accepted and not accepted to a “choice” high school. Perhaps students in the worst neighborhoods and schools benefit the most from choice, but as Chapter 4 illustrated, students in high FRL and dangerous schools have lower odds of high school admission.

Finally, future research is needed to complete the examination of the transition to high school begun in this analysis. This study examined students’ seventh grade records and eighth grade applications and admissions, arguing that the transition to high school must be conceptualized as starting in seventh grade. But a remaining question is: What is the effect of attending a choice high school on students’ high school outcomes? Specifically, comparing “admit” and “non-admit” students with equivalent records can help to explain the extent to which high schools matter for student academic and socio-emotional outcomes.
### Appendix A. Means and Standard Deviations of Predictor and Outcome Variables Pre- and Post-Imputation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean pre-imputation</th>
<th>Standard deviation pre-imputation</th>
<th>Mean post-imputation</th>
<th>Standard deviation post-imputation</th>
<th>Percent imputed</th>
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</table>
APPENDIX B

HIGH SCHOOL SELECTION STUDY
2008-09 COUNSELOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

General information
1a. How long have you been a counselor?
   1b. How long have you been a counselor in the District?
   1c. How long have you been a counselor at this school?
   1d. (if applicable) What other positions have you held (teacher, etc.)?
2a. What are your responsibilities as a school counselor?
   2b. How is your time divided among these responsibilities? (eg- teaching, prep
       coverage, etc.)
   2c. What are the challenges of these multiple roles, if any?
3a. How well do you know the students at (school)?
   3b. How do you get to know students?

High school selection: counselor role
4a. How do you handle the high school selection process?
   4b. form distribution and collection
   4c. information distribution; eg- HS Fair, HS Brochure, HS visits, parent meetings
   4d. How did you come up with this system?
   4e. Do you get any PD from the District? About what?
5a. What do you know about all of the high schools in the District?
   5b. Do you get any professional development or information about high schools
       from the District?
   5c. Do you know anything about charter or private high schools?
   5d. How do you use this information to help your students select high schools?

High school selection: others’ roles
6a. What role do the 8th grade teachers play in high school selection?
   6b. Do they look at students’ grades, attendance, and test scores?
   6c. Do they know how the process works?
   6d. Do they have information about District high schools? Charter or private
       schools?
7a. Who else plays a role in high school selection at this school?
   7b. Do you have any sense of whether parents are involved in the decision?

High school selection: the numbers
8. How many of students at this school participate in the high school selection process—
   fill out and turn in a selection form?
9a. Do you know how many students get into at least one school besides the
    neighborhood high school? –or- how many students attend the neighborhood high
    school?
   9b. How many students get into a “top tier” high school?
9c. How many get into a “second tier” high school?
9d. How many get into a charter or private high school?

10. Do you know how many students get accepted to their first choice school?

11. Do you have any information about how students at your school do in high school?
So we’ve talked about the specifics of the selection process at this school, but let’s back up a bit.

11a. Can you walk me through the high school selection process?
11b. What are some positives about this system?
11c. What are some challenges of this system?
11d. What advice would you give to parents and students about the process?
11e. What suggestions do you have for policymakers and administrators to improve the selection process?

12a. What do you think are the most important factors that students and parents consider when choosing high schools?
12b. Do you think they have enough information to make their decisions?

13. How involved are parents at this school?

14a. Do you think students from your school are prepared for high school?
14b. Are there any specific projects, etc. that prepare them for high school work?

15a. What is expected of students at this school after they finish 8th grade?
15b. What level of educational attainment is expected of students at this school?

16. Is there anything else you’d like to share with me about the high school choice process or yourself?

Student interviews
· When is best to schedule student interviews?
· Do ELL students need interpreters for an interview?
APPENDIX C

HIGH SCHOOL SELECTION STUDY
2008-09 COUNSELOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
END-OF-THE-YEAR FOLLOW-UP

· Remember to get the list of all eighth graders and where they’re going to high school (and where they applied, if available).
  · Scan for students I interviewed and follow-up if I notice any discrepancies between the counselor’s information and my interview.

1. How does this year’s 8th grade class compare to others at [school]?
   a. Were there more/less acceptances?
   b. Are the high schools they’re going to typical for [school]?

2. Did any students, parents, or high schools contact you about high school admissions after the application process ended in October?
   a. Who? What did they ask you about?

3. Did any students, parents, or high schools contact you after the admissions letters went out in the spring?
   a. Who? What did they ask you about?

4. Did you do anything to advocate for any particular students to help them get into a high school?
   a. Who? What did you do?

5. Is there anything you’re planning to do differently next year with the high school selection process?

6. Do you have any suggestions for changing the process, or are there any supports you wish you had?

7. Do you have any questions for me?

8. Do you have any ideas about who I should share my findings with or where I should share them?
APPENDIX D

HIGH SCHOOL SELECTION STUDY
2008 8th GRADE PARENT SURVEY

The following questions ask about your experiences in helping your child to select a high school, as well as a few questions about you and your family. This information will be kept confidential, but will help the District to understand how to support parents and students in the high school selection process.

1. Who chose the high schools on the selection form?
   ____ Parent/guardian  ____ Student  ____ Parent/guardian & student together  ____ Other

2. What resources did you use in selecting high schools for/with your child? Check all that apply.
   ____ Middle school teachers  ____ High school fair
   ____ Middle school counselor  ____ High school information booklet
   ____ Family  ____ High school visit(s)
   ____ Friends  ____ The School District of Philadelphia website
   ____ Charter or private high school information
   ____ Community organization(s). Please specify: _______________________________________
   ____ Other. Please specify: _______________________________________________________

3. Which factors did you consider in selecting high schools for/with your child? Check all that apply.
   ____ Close to home  ____ Know someone who attends the school
   ____ Close to work  ____ Sports teams
   ____ Good reputation  ____ Strong college-preparatory academics
   ____ School size  ____ Student services (ELL, special education, etc.)
   ____ School safety  ____ Vocational programs
   ____ Other. Please specify: _______________________________________________________

4. Which high schools did your child apply to?
   In the School District (five):
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   Any Outside the School District (private or charter):
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

5. Please check the appropriate box in each row to rate your child on ALL of the following at school in the past year:

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Below Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test scores (PSSA, TerraNova)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. a. Did you graduate from high school? ① Yes ① No
   b. Did you get a GED? ① Yes ① No
   c. What year did you earn your diploma or GED?
   d. Do you have any education beyond high school? ① Yes ① No
   e. If yes, check all degrees that you have:
      ① Certificate/license (ex- medical asst., cosmetology) ① A.A. ① B.A./B.S.
      ① M.A./M.S. ① Higher degree (ex- JD, MD, PhD) ① Other _______________________

Please read the information on the next page.
7. I have read and understand the information on the next page describing the high school selection study.
   ☐ I agree to participate and give my permission for my child to participate.
   ☐ I do not agree to participate.

Signature __________________________________________ Date _______________________

Primary phone number ___________________________ ☐ Home ☐ Cell
Secondary phone number ___________________________ ☐ Home ☐ Cell

THANK YOU VERY MUCH! PLEASE RETURN THIS SURVEY TO THE COUNSELOR ALONG WITH YOUR CHILD’S HIGH SCHOOL SELECTION FORM.
2008 HIGH SCHOOL SELECTION STUDY
INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

Introduction & Purpose
The schools in the XXX region are part of a study to understand how to support parents and students in the high school selection process in the District. The goal of the study is to learn about how schools and communities can help young people get information and engage in high school educational programs that will prepare them for higher education and good jobs after graduation.

We are requesting permission for you and your child to participate in this study. If you agree, we may contact you for an interview about your experiences in choosing schools for your child. Also, your child will be asked to complete a short survey and participate in an interview to ask about their educational experiences and future goals. The study team will also gather information from your child’s school records, including grades, attendance, and test scores.

Benefits & Risks
By participating in the study, your child will help parents, educators, and policymakers learn more about the high school selection process and how to help prepare today’s youth for success in high school and beyond. In addition, the School District will gain knowledge that will help us better serve our students. The risks for your child are minimal.

Confidentiality
All of the information collected about your child for this study will be kept confidential and will be used only by the study team for the purposes of the study. The information on your child will be used in combination with information from other students and reported in statements like: “40 percent of students used the high school informational brochure to help make their selection decisions.”

Alternatives
Participation in the study is voluntary. If you and your child do not participate in the study, you will not be penalized in any way. Participation does not improve your child’s chances of being admitted to any particular high school, and choosing not to participate will not hurt their admission chances.

Contact Information
The study is being conducted by the University of Pennsylvania. If you have questions about the study, please call Clarisse Haxton at 215-898-1974.

Note
You may keep this page for your records.
APPENDIX E

HIGH SCHOOL SELECTION STUDY
2008-09 8th GRADE STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Note: The interviewer will have the parent’s completed 8th Grade Parent Survey at the time of the interview from which to refer. These questions do not necessarily have to be asked in the order presented.

Introduction
I am a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania and I am doing a research project about the high school application process. I have interviewed your counselor and am now interviewing students to get your perspective on the high school application process. You have been selected to be interviewed because you completed a Parent Survey and your parent agreed for you to participate. Is that okay with you?
· (get student to sign assent form)
· (ask about audio recording v. notes)
· Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Background
First, I’d like to know a little bit about you:
· When did you start attending (insert school)?
  · If other than K, What schools did you go to before (insert)?

· What are your favorite things about this school?
· Is there anything you would like to change?

· Were you born in the US?
  · If yes, Where?
    · Were your parents born in the US?
      · If yes, Where?
      · If no, Where were they born?
        · When did your parents move to the US?
  · If no, Where were you born?
    · What age were you when you moved to the US?
    · Did you and your parents come to the US together?
      · If no, when did they come?

· What languages do you speak?
  · If more than just English, What language do you speak at home?

· Do you live with your mom and/or dad?
· Who else lives in your house?
  · If any siblings, PROBE:
    · How many of your brothers and sisters are older than you?
    · Did they graduate, drop out, or are they currently in high school?
    · What high school(s) do/did they attend?
· Do you know what made them choose that school?
· What do/did they tell you about their school(s)?

· What languages do your parent(s) speak?
  · If more than just English:
    · Can your parent(s) read in English?
    · Can your parent(s) write in English?
      · If no, Do you think that not knowing English limits their ability to help you in school?
      · If yes, What do you wish they could help you with?
        · Who helps you with school work?
      · If no, Do they help you with homework?
        · Do they make sure you do your hw?
        · Do you talk about school?
        · What do they tell you?
        · Did you talk to them about high schools?
        · What did they tell you?

· Do you or your parent(s) belong to any community groups, organizations, or churches?
  · If yes, Which groups?
    · Do these organizations do anything to help with high school applications?
      · If yes, What do they do?

_OK. Now we’ll focus on high schools._

Since high schools focus mostly on your performance in seventh grade, can you please tell me:
· Did you get mostly As, Bs, Cs, Ds, or Fs in your classes last year?
· Did you have a lot of absences or were you late a lot in seventh grade/last year?
· Did you have any suspensions last year?

· Did you start thinking about high schools in 8th grade or earlier?
  · Do you feel like you started thinking about it at the right time?
    · If no, PROBE: why not?

· What were your biggest questions and what did you care the most about as you were deciding where to apply?
(_consult survey Q3 to check responses_) PROBES:
  · Did you want to stay close to home?
  · Did your parent/guardian want you to stay close to home?
  · Did you pick schools that had a specific program or focus?
    · If yes, PROBE: What program or focus?
· (Besides your older sister/brother—) do you know anyone who goes to or went to the high schools you selected?
  · How many people?
  · Are they your family or friends?
  · Did they graduate, drop out, or are they currently in high school?
  · What did they tell you about the school?

· How much does it matter to you to know people who go to the high schools you picked?

Information
· What were the most helpful resources for you in making your application decisions?
  (consult survey Q2 to check responses)
  (loop if multiple responses)
    · Why was (insert) so helpful?

(use as appropriate, based on above response)
· Who all did you talk to about your high school application?
  (consult survey Q2 to see who they checked)
  (loop for every person):
    · What did you and (insert) talk about in regard to high schools?
    · What information or advice did (insert) give you?
    · How often did you talk to (insert) about high schools?

· Did your school involve your parents in the high school application process at all?
  · If yes, What did they do to involve parents?
· Do your parent(s) feel comfortable coming to your school?
  · How often do your parents come to the school?

· In the end, did you feel like you had enough information to make your choices?
  · If no, PROBE: what do you wish you had known more about?

· Who would you say made the final decision about where you would apply—you, your parent/guardian, both of you together, or someone else?
  (consult survey Q1 to check response)
  · If you, PROBE: Why didn’t you involve your parent/guardian?
  · If parent/guardian, PROBE: Why did your parent make the decision for you?
  · If both, PROBE:
    · Who found most of the information?
    · Did you or your (insert) have strong ideas about where you should apply?
    · Did you and your (insert) make any compromises or do any negotiating?
  · If someone else, PROBE: Who made the decision?

· Which public high schools did you apply to? (five maximum, check survey)
  PROBES:
» If Bok, CAPA, Communications Technology, Dobbins, FLC, Mastbaum, Randolph, or Swenson:
   · Which program did you apply to?
» If Central, Constitution, or Palumbo:
   · Did you turn in an essay?
» If SLA:
   · Did you turn in a letter of recommendation?
   · Are you happy with the schools you picked?
     · If no, PROBE: why not?
   · What do you think is the likelihood that you will get in to the schools you picked?
     · PROBE (for each school): What is the percent chance you think you have at (insert)?
   · Which high school do you most want to attend?

» If CAPA, FLC, or GAMP:
   · Have you been invited to an interview or audition?
     · When is/was it?
     · Are you doing anything to prepare for it?
     · Is anyone helping you prepare?
     —or—
     · Did anyone help you prepare? (If yes) Who? What did you do to prepare?
     · How did it go?
     · What did you do in the interview/audition?
   · Did you apply to any charter schools?
     · If yes, Which?
   · Did you apply to any private schools?
     · If yes, Which?

Future

Now let’s talk a little bit about the future, after you leave (insert current school).
   · How far do you expect to go in school?
   · Do you know what career(s) you’re interested in?
   · Do you have any specific goals you’re working towards?

   · What are you most excited about in high school?
   · What are you nervous about or do you have any concerns about going to high school?

Advice
   · Do you have any advice for younger students to help them in middle school?
   · Do you have any advice for younger students to help them in the high school application process?
   · Is there anything else you’d like to share with me about the high school choice process or yourself?
· What would you say are the best high schools in the city?
  · Why are they the best?
    · *If they name high schools other than the ones they selected, PROBE:*
      · Why didn’t you apply to these schools?

· What would you say are the worst high schools?
  · What makes them bad schools?
    · *If they selected one of these high schools, PROBE:*
      · Why did you apply to (insert)?
APPENDIX F

HIGH SCHOOL SELECTION STUDY
2008-09 8th GRADE PARENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Note: The interviewer will have the parent’s completed 8th Grade Parent Survey and their child will have been interviewed. Also, note that these questions do not necessarily have to be asked in the order presented.

Thank you very much for participating in our study about how 8th graders make their high school decisions. We have interviewed students and middle school counselors and we also think it is very important to have parents’ perspectives on the high school application process and their children’s education.

Background
First, I want to learn a little about you.
1. How long have you lived in Philadelphia?
   • If for whole life: Have you always lived in South Philadelphia? What other parts of the city have you lived in?
     o Where did you go to high school?
     o How did you pick (high school)?
     o How did you like (high school)?
     o Can you tell me any similarities or differences you see between high schools in Philly from when you went to school and now?
     o Did you graduate?
       ▪ Did you go to any school beyond high school? College or a vocational program or anything like that? (probe: Where? What program? When?)
   • If not for whole life: Where did you live before you moved to Philadelphia? How long did you live in (place)?
     o How long have you lived in Philadelphia?
     o Why did you move here?
     o Did you move here with anyone- or by yourself? (probe as appropriate)
     o What is the highest level of education you completed?
       ▪ If graduated high school: Can you tell me a little about high school in (place)?
         • Did you apply to high schools?
         • Were there good and bad schools or were they all known as good or all bad?
         • How did you like high school?
         • What similarities or differences do you see between high schools in (place) and here in Philly?
     o If another country: Can you tell me about how the school system works in (country)?
       ▪ How far do most students go in school?
- Is it different in different parts of the country—like urban v. rural?
- What similarities and differences do you see between education in (country) and here in Philadelphia?

2. Do you currently have a job?
   - Where?
   - What do you do?
   - What hours do you work?
   - Do you like your job?
   - *If immigrant:* Is this what you thought you would be doing when you came to the United States?
     - *If no:* What did you want to do or think you would do?
     - (probe as appropriate)

3. What languages do you speak?
   - If (child) needs help in school, do they ask you or someone else?
   - Do you talk to (child) about school at all?
     - What do you talk about?
     - Do you give them any advice about school?

   - *If more than English:*
     - What language do you speak at home?
     - Do you feel comfortable going to (child)’s school?
     - If you went to (child)’s school for a conference or meeting, what language would you speak?
     - Can you read forms that are sent home in English?
     - Do you think people’s legal status influences how involved they are in their child’s education?

4. Who all lives with you?
   - *If multiple children:* Are any of your children older than (child)?
     - *If yes:* Where do or did they go to high school?
     - How did they pick (high school)?
     - How do you feel about (high school)?

**High schools**

5. When did you start thinking about where (child) would go to high school?
   - What made you start thinking about it?
   - Where did you get information about high schools?
     - PROBES: High School Book?
       - High School Fair?
       - Look online?
       - Talk to friends or family?
       - Talk to people at work?
       - Talk to anyone at (school)? Teachers, counselor, other?
       - Visit schools?
• Where did you get the most helpful information?

6. Did you consider any charter or private schools?
   • *If no:* Why not?
   • *If yes:* Which ones? How did you hear about (school)? Where did you get information?
   • Did (child) apply to any charter or private schools?
   • How likely—out of 10—do you think they are to get in?
     o Why?
   • How likely—out of 10—do you think it is that they’ll go to (school) next year?
     o Why?

7. How important is it to you that (child) goes to a high school close to home?
8. How important is it to you that (child) goes to a school where they know people?
9. How important is it to you that (child) goes to a school with specific programs?
   • Which programs?
10. How important is it to you that (child) goes to a “good school”?
   • Which high schools do you consider to be good?
     o Why?
   • Which high schools do you consider to be bad—or unacceptable?
     o Why?
11. Do you have any other concerns about high schools?

12. How did (child) come up with the schools to apply to?
   • Did they come up with the schools on their own?
     o Did you want them to do that or do you wish you were more involved?
   • Did you have any specific schools that you wanted (child) to apply to?
     o *If yes:* How did you know about (schools)?
       ▪ What do you like about (schools)?
       ▪ Did (child) apply to (school)?
       ▪ Did (child) also want to go there?
   • Did anyone else help to pick (child)’s schools?
     o Who? (probe)
   • Do you feel like you and your child had enough information to pick high schools?
     o *If not:* What information do you think would be helpful?
     o *If immigrant:* Do you have any advice for how to help parents who don’t speak English to be involved in the high school process?
       ▪ Do you think that people’s legal status influences how involved they are with their children’s school? (probe)

13. Do you remember which schools (child) applied to?
14. What chance do you think (child) has—out of 10—of getting into each school?
   • Why?
15. Do you know what kind of criteria the high schools use to decide who to accept?
   (eg- attendance, behavior, grades, test scores)
16. Did you know that high schools use students’ seventh grade records to determine who to accept?
   · What kind of grades did (child) have in seventh grade?
   · Was s/he absent or late a lot in seventh grade? (How many times?)
   · Was s/he ever suspended last year?
   · Do you know how s/he did on the PSSA? (Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, Advanced)
   · What about in eighth grade? Has any of the above improved or gotten worse?

   · *If parent doesn’t know:* Do you have a general sense of how (child) is doing in school?
     · How do you know?

17. We hope your child gets accepted at high schools, but if—for some reason—they don’t, how would you feel about them going to the neighborhood high school?
   · Do you know anyone else who goes there?
   · Do you think they’d do well there?
   · Would you consider other options?
   · Is there anything you’d do to try and get them into the school they want?

18. Is there anything you really like or dislike about the high school selection process?
   · Is there anything you really like or dislike about Philadelphia public schools?
   · Any suggestions?

Future
19. How far do you expect your child to go in school?
20. Do you know what career(s) your child is interested in?
21. Do you have any particular goals for them?

Advice
22. Do you have any advice for parents of younger students?
23. Do you have any advice for parents about how to help their children prepare for high school?
24. Do you have any advice for parents about where to get information about high schools?

25. Is there anything else you’d like to share with me about the high school choice process, your child, or yourself?
## APPENDIX G
### HGLM TABLES, USING SCHOOL FIXED EFFECTS

**Table G.1** HGLM analysis of students’ odds of high school application, using sending school fixed effects

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<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.627</td>
<td>1.036</td>
<td>0.0925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td><strong>0.81</strong></td>
<td>0.680</td>
<td>0.964</td>
<td>0.0175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Seventh grade record**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td><strong>2.09</strong></td>
<td>1.797</td>
<td>2.431</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.830</td>
<td>1.096</td>
<td>0.5027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspension</td>
<td><strong>1.22</strong></td>
<td>1.046</td>
<td>1.419</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td><strong>2.12</strong></td>
<td>1.730</td>
<td>2.603</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math standardized test scores</td>
<td><strong>1.22</strong></td>
<td>1.115</td>
<td>1.338</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading standardized test scores</td>
<td><strong>1.34</strong></td>
<td>1.212</td>
<td>1.475</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table G.2** HGLM analysis of students’ odds of Tier 1 application, using sending school fixed effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 1: Student characteristics (n=12,160)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td><strong>0.74</strong></td>
<td>0.569</td>
<td>0.960</td>
<td>0.0234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td><strong>2.74</strong></td>
<td>1.743</td>
<td>4.311</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td><strong>0.41</strong></td>
<td>0.321</td>
<td>0.512</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td><strong>0.39</strong></td>
<td>0.176</td>
<td>0.854</td>
<td>0.0186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td><strong>2.38</strong></td>
<td>1.987</td>
<td>2.847</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.581</td>
<td>1.181</td>
<td>0.297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.772</td>
<td>1.211</td>
<td>0.7719</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Seventh grade record**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td><strong>1.70</strong></td>
<td>1.406</td>
<td>2.047</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>0.922</td>
<td>1.301</td>
<td>0.2991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspension</td>
<td><strong>1.58</strong></td>
<td>1.301</td>
<td>1.926</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td><strong>3.35</strong></td>
<td>2.604</td>
<td>4.311</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math standardized test scores</td>
<td><strong>1.61</strong></td>
<td>1.436</td>
<td>1.803</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading standardized test scores</td>
<td><strong>2.01</strong></td>
<td>1.770</td>
<td>2.279</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LEVEL 2: Sending school fixed effect (n=133)**
### Table G.3 HGLM analysis of students’ odds of Tier 2 application, using sending school fixed effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 1: Student characteristics (n=12,160)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% Confidence</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.258</td>
<td>0.383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.150</td>
<td>0.264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.618</td>
<td>0.856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.514</td>
<td>1.649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.609</td>
<td>0.772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.683</td>
<td>1.157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.590</td>
<td>0.836</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Seventh grade record                     |            |                |         |
| 10 or fewer absences                     | 1.05       | 0.913          | 1.206   | 0.4958  |
| 5 or fewer latenesses                    | 0.90       | 0.796          | 1.022   | 0.1042  |
| No out-of-school suspension              | 0.92       | 0.793          | 1.067   | 0.2707  |
| All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects     | 0.97       | 0.844          | 1.110   | 0.6417  |
| Math standardized test scores            | 0.92       | 0.854          | 0.992   | 0.0309  |
| Reading standardized test scores         | 0.84       | 0.770          | 0.912   | <.0001  |

### Table G.4 HGLM analysis of students’ odds of high school admission, using sending school fixed effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 1: Student characteristics (n=9,130)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% Confidence</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>1.045</td>
<td>1.558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>0.963</td>
<td>1.638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.569</td>
<td>0.816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>0.941</td>
<td>3.315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>1.040</td>
<td>1.336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.948</td>
<td>3.463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special ed</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>1.018</td>
<td>1.496</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Seventh grade record                     |            |                |         |
| 10 or fewer absences                     | 1.87       | 1.606          | 2.189   | <.0001  |
| 5 or fewer latenesses                    | 1.67       | 1.454          | 1.913   | <.0001  |
| No out-of-school suspensions              | 1.40       | 1.188          | 1.656   | <.0001  |
| All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects     | 2.28       | 1.946          | 2.663   | <.0001  |
| Math standardized test scores            | 1.36       | 1.255          | 1.480   | <.0001  |
| Reading standardized test scores         | 1.48       | 1.347          | 1.626   | <.0001  |
| Number of applications                   | 2.00       | 1.868          | 2.148   | <.0001  |

### LEVEL 2: Sending school fixed effect (n=133)
Table G.5 HGLM analysis of students’ odds of Tier 1 admission & enrollment, using sending school fixed effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 1: Student characteristics (n=9,130)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% Confidence</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>1.710</td>
<td>2.845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>1.291</td>
<td>2.362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.580</td>
<td>0.960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>0.800</td>
<td>3.763</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.551</td>
<td>2.219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>8.25</td>
<td>5.231</td>
<td>13.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special ed</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>2.143</td>
<td>4.413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seventh grade record</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>2.243</td>
<td>3.869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>1.413</td>
<td>2.067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspensions</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>1.931</td>
<td>3.629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>3.594</td>
<td>6.289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math standardized test scores</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>1.732</td>
<td>2.235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading standardized test scores</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.422</td>
<td>3.314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of applications</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>1.408</td>
<td>1.666</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LEVEL 2: Sending school fixed effect (n=133)

Table G.6 HGLM analysis of students’ odds of Tier 2 admission & enrollment, using sending school fixed effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 1: Student characteristics (n=9,130)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% Confidence</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.631</td>
<td>1.168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.501</td>
<td>1.262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>0.797</td>
<td>1.268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>0.578</td>
<td>2.937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.772</td>
<td>1.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>1.524</td>
<td>3.266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special ed</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.648</td>
<td>1.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seventh grade record</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>1.359</td>
<td>2.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>1.262</td>
<td>1.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspensions</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.173</td>
<td>1.787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1.350</td>
<td>2.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math standardized test scores</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.888</td>
<td>1.096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading standardized test scores</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.767</td>
<td>0.971</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of applications</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.991</td>
<td>1.160</td>
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</table>

LEVEL 2: Sending school fixed effect (n=133)
Table G.7 HGLM analysis of students' odds of admission & enrollment at first choice high school, using sending school fixed effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 1: Student characteristics (n=9,130)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td><strong>1.39</strong></td>
<td>1.143</td>
<td>1.694</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td><strong>2.00</strong></td>
<td>1.572</td>
<td>2.541</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td><strong>0.51</strong></td>
<td>0.401</td>
<td>0.646</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>0.696</td>
<td>2.412</td>
<td>0.415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td><strong>1.23</strong></td>
<td>1.068</td>
<td>1.420</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English-language-learner</td>
<td><strong>2.12</strong></td>
<td>1.518</td>
<td>2.975</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special ed</td>
<td><strong>1.80</strong></td>
<td>1.393</td>
<td>2.328</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh grade record</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or fewer absences</td>
<td><strong>1.43</strong></td>
<td>1.168</td>
<td>1.757</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 or fewer latenesses</td>
<td><strong>1.52</strong></td>
<td>1.297</td>
<td>1.784</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No out-of-school suspensions</td>
<td><strong>1.32</strong></td>
<td>1.049</td>
<td>1.655</td>
<td>0.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All As, Bs, and Cs in major subjects</td>
<td><strong>1.41</strong></td>
<td>1.149</td>
<td>1.721</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math standardized test scores</td>
<td><strong>1.37</strong></td>
<td>1.244</td>
<td>1.513</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading standardized test scores</td>
<td><strong>1.79</strong></td>
<td>1.599</td>
<td>2.001</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of applications</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.891</td>
<td>1.002</td>
<td>0.059</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 2: Sending school fixed effect (n=133)</th>
<th>95% Confidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


REFERENCES


