EFP Takeaways
The Pathway to Enrolling in a High-Performing High School: Understanding Barriers to Access

**Background**

Many urban school districts with a range of schooling choices have redesigned their student enrollment systems to make it easier for families to apply to public schools. One hope is that streamlined systems make the application and admissions process more transparent, ultimately increasing access to high-performance schools for all students. Lauren Sartain and Lisa Barrow describe the barriers families face in enrolling in a high-performing high school in Chicago Public Schools alongside the district’s adoption of an online universal application system. Their work is published in vol. 17 issue 3 of *EFP*.

**Findings**

The authors find that Black students face more barriers to enrolling high-rated high schools than Latinx students, on average. The zoned, or default, high schools for Black students tend to be lower-rated than those for Latinx students. Black students have lower grades and test scores on average than Latinx students, so Black students are less likely to meet eligibility requirements for some programs, which further limits their potential choice sets. Generally, Black students also live in lower-resourced Census tracts than Latinx students, meaning that they have access to lower-quality elementary schools. Similar patterns exist when comparing students who live in higher-income neighborhoods and in lower-income neighborhoods.

The authors find that differences in these factors account for nearly 80 percent of the observed difference in the likelihood that a Black student enrolls in a high-rated high school compared to a Latinx student (and nearly 70 percent of the gap between students living in lower- and higher-SES neighborhoods). The remaining gap can likely be explained by preferences for different high schools.

These findings have implications for policies that seek to equalize access to high-performance schools. Districts looking to improve access to high-rated high schools may consider changes to eligibility requirements so that more students are able to apply to a wider set of schools and improved transportation options to make it easier for students to commute between home and school.

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