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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*.

The Study

Despite a substantial policy shift to centralize applications to high schools in Chicago Public Schools, Black students are still less likely to enroll in high schools with high accountability ratings compared with Latinx students (47 percent versus 70 percent, respectively). Similarly, students living in low-income neighborhoods are less likely to enroll in high-rated high schools relative to their peers in high-income neighborhoods (52 percent versus 86 percent). Using administrative and survey data, the authors explore why these differences exist.

For more details:

- View the [full issue](#).
- See the [full article in *Education Finance and Policy*](#).
- [Sign up here to receive future *EFP Takeaways*](#).
- Summary of:
Sartain, L. & Barrow, L. (2022) The Pathway to Enrolling in a High-Performance High School: Understanding Barriers to Access. *Education Finance and Policy*, 17 (3): 379-407.

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.