How School Actors Respond to Mandatory School Choice Systems

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Background

- Families can increasingly choose their children’s schools, especially in urban districts.
- Large studies address parent preferences for academics, safety, and location but how these preferences vary by social background (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Hamilton & Guinto, 2005; Lareau 2014; Martinez, Goodwin, & Kemmer, 1996; Patillo, O’Connor, & Butts 2014; Sattin-Bajaj 2014; Schneider, Teske, & Marshall, 2000).
- Relatedly little research, however, exists about the role of school personnel in helping families navigate K-12 school choice.
- This paper investigates the perspectives, experiences, and behaviors of 8th grade guidance counselors, and analyzes variation in their approaches to providing guidance about New York City’s compulsory high school choice process.

High School Choice in New York City

- All rising 8th grade students must submit an application in which they rank up to twelve schools.
- The district relies on a complex algorithm to pair students with high schools that take into account students’ preferences, available space, and the schools’ own rankings.
- Some schools screen students based on grades and test scores (24%) or employ a combination of screened and lottery admissions (22%), while others give preference to students who attend an information session (33%), audition (5%), or live in the zone (1%).
- Guidance counselors must, at a minimum, distribute the High School Directory of New York City Schools; distribute and collect applications; and enter each student’s choices manually into the centralized enrollment management system.

Data

School Personnel Interviews and Surveys
- We surveyed school-based personnel in 99 schools and conducted qualitative interviews with 90 of those school personnel. (17% of 8th grade-serving schools in NYC).
- Personnel were selected from a stratified sample of 8th grade-serving schools based on school poverty and the graduation percentile of students’ choices.
- We captured information about personnel’s preparation and training, their information provision to students and parents, and the recommendations, advice, and choice strategies they provided.

Administrative Data
From prior years’ student-level choice data, we construct the school average percentile of students’ top 3 choices in the distribution of high schools located within 30 minutes of their middle schools.

Student Surveys
We administered student surveys after students submitted their school choices in order to assess students’ satisfaction with their choices, their preferences for different school characteristics, and the informational resources they used to learn about schools.

School Actors’ Roles Not Well Defined

School personnel’s role in the choice process is not well-defined by the NYC Department of Education.
- Personnel receive limited preparation and training:
  - 53% of school personnel report feeling “very well prepared” to work on high school admissions
  - How did you learn how to manage the process? “Trial and error,” “I trained myself,” “Learning by doing”
- School personnel’s understanding of what the system requires of them is highly variable:
  - 33% report there are no DOE requirements
  - 53% report the DOE requires them meet with students to help fill out application

School Choice Guidance Approaches

The majority of school personnel interviewed expressed both confusion and ambivalence about what the school or district administration expected of them and what they believed to be the appropriate role for school personnel in students’ high school selections. The school counselor in our interview sample utilized three approaches to counseling students and families about high school choice:

1. Directional Guidance (30%):
   - worked individually with students to identify high schools in which they would have the greatest chance of achieving academic success and graduating
   - provided detailed personalized high school recommendations
   - dissuaded students from listing high schools that were low-performing or unrealistic given admissions criteria and odds of admission

2. Generic Guidance (47%):
   - concentrated on communicating general information about high schools to students and ensuring that all students received an admissions offer during the first round of applications
   - provided students with personal recommendations only when students or parents made an explicit request for this type of support
   - did not believe recommending specific schools was an appropriate role for them

3. Procedural Guidance (22%):
   - focused solely on basic information dissemination about the process
   - strongly resisted providing students with specific high school recommendations
   - staunchly believed that high school application decisions should be driven by parents’ choices
   - rejected any requests for suggestions or opinions about specific schools

“How did you learn how to manage the process? “Trial and error,” “I trained myself,” “Learning by doing”

Conclusion

- School personnel used three approaches to the high school choice admissions process: directional guidance (individual instructions and personalized school recommendations to all students), generic guidance (general information and solicited recommendations), and procedural guidance (basic information and no recommendations).
- Descriptive evidence demonstrated that guidance approaches were associated with the graduation rates of students’ choices and students’ engagement in the high school admissions process.

References