



Can a “Low-Touch” Intervention Help Address School Choice Inequities?



Although sometimes touted as enhancing equity by leveling the playing field between affluent families who can afford to live in the communities where the most well-resourced schools are located and lower-income families who cannot, school choice also can and does have the reverse effect.

These choices are crucial because the American schooling system is stratified, with some schools offering better opportunities than others. Children benefit, relative to other children, when their parents or guardians have the time, information, skills, and inclination to work the choice system. At its core, then, school choice allocates students’ opportunities to learn in a way that readily leads to a rich-get-richer, poor-get-poorer pattern.

In an article recently published in the peer-reviewed journal *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Sarah Cohodes of the University of Michigan, NEPC Fellow Sean Corcoran of Vanderbilt University, Jennifer Jennings of Princeton, and Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj of the University of California, Santa Barbara report on a randomized controlled trial of an intervention that attempted to provide a more equitable school choice experience by testing the delivery of different types of information in different formats, to help 115,000 eighth graders in 473 New York City middle schools avoid high schools deemed low-performing.

Such “low-touch” interventions have grown more popular in recent years because they are

relatively easy and inexpensive to implement. Examples include text messages to remind students to fill out financial aid forms for college and “growth mindset” lessons to encourage students to try harder in school. Studies of these interventions have sometimes generated surprisingly big improvements, especially considering the relatively low cost of putting them in place. However, researchers and real-world practitioners have not always been able to replicate these initially promising results.

Accordingly, one goal of this recent study was to gain a better understanding of why this happens by helping to develop a “nuanced understanding of the conditions under which low-touch interventions work: the types of decisions for which they are most effective, the relevance of intervention modality (how the intervention is delivered), and the sources of heterogeneity in participants’ responses,” the article’s authors write. Another goal was to examine the degree to which a specific set of interventions might enhance equity, given that previous research suggests New York City students with lower-income families are more likely to select lower-performing high schools, as are students with lower test scores.

In New York City, all public school eighth graders must choose which high school to attend. The authors’ previous research suggested that many students make this decision with limited input from their families. So this study focused on interventions implemented by middle school counselors. For study purposes, these counselors’ schools were randomly assigned to one of four conditions during the 2016-17 and 2017-18 (pre-pandemic) school years:

- A list custom-tailored to the middle school, recommending nearby high schools with graduation rates over 75 percent and at least some history of admitting eighth graders from that school. Within this group, middle schools were randomly selected to receive this information on paper or in a digital format.
- An online app that generated a list of recommended schools based on individual students’ preferences.
- Information leading the counselors to use a publicly available online tool to search for high schools.
- A control group that did not receive any information from the researchers.

Using surveys, interviews, and phone calls, the researchers found that most school counselors who received the information used it—or planned to do so.

Eighth graders in schools where counselors received a printout of information customized to their schools were six percentage points less likely than students in the control group (which received no interventions) to enroll in high schools with graduation rates of less than 75 percent. The digital version of this treatment had no impact on students’ high school enrollment choices, leading the researchers to conclude that “putting the same information online as in the paper intervention was not effective.”

Enrollment in low-graduation rate high schools was five percent lower for middle schools where counselors received information on a publicly available online tool. In schools where counselors received information about a school selection app, enrollment in schools with lower graduation rates was similarly six percent lower than in the control group. This inter-

vention was especially effective for students from more affluent families.

More broadly, students coded as English learners in schools that received the interventions were more likely than their peers to avoid schools with lower graduation rates.

Although most of the interventions generated promising results, the researchers caution that, in the end, information is only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to providing an equitable school choice experience. For instance, while New York City has a robust public transportation system, most U.S. cities do not, making it difficult for low-income families to find the time and the resources to transport their children to schools of choice.

And other barriers remain.

“[E]ven the best information cannot ensure a school match for every student when administrative barriers remain in school choice systems or when there is an undersupply of successful schools,” the researchers conclude.

NEPC Resources on School Choice

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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