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Spotlight: High Schools

What you really need to know

Selecting a high school: Not a level playing field

By Shani Adia Evans and Dale Mezzacappa

With the recent creation of many new, themed high schools and the continuing growth of the charter school movement, students in Philadelphia have more public high school options than ever.

But more options haven't meant that most students are getting into the schools they prefer, or that the available choices meet students' needs.

In fact, about 58 percent of District high school students are enrolled in schools that they did not choose, according to an analysis of School District data by Research for Action. The most desirable schools, including some charters, accept a small percentage of applicants. Average and struggling students find that there are still not enough accessible and appealing options for them.

"If you're not proficient, your choices are limited – let's be honest about this," said Wilfredo Ortiz, deputy chief of the Office of Academic Counseling and Promotion Standards. "And if you look at the students in the District who are advanced or proficient, it's a smaller number of students."

Nearly 80 percent of District 8th graders apply to attend a school other than their assigned neighborhood high school. Separately, many also apply to charters.

The application and selection process for District schools is daunting and poorly understood, and students have vastly different experiences. Throwing charters into the mix with their individual applications has only made the maze more challenging.

Some students – mostly those with the best academic records – get into all the selections listed on their District application, while other applicants are admitted to none. Some have parents and counselors who guide them and advocate for them, while others get little or no help.

Students' and parents' access to good information about schools and programs varies widely. There is no single location or clearinghouse where all this information is readily available, and some stages of the application process lack consistent timelines.

District officials say it is the role of counselors in K-8 and middle schools to make sure families are informed. However, Ortiz acknowledged, counselors until now have had no guidelines on exactly what they must do to advise 8th graders. Without guidelines, counselors view their responsibilities differently. Some are more proactive in reaching out, while others wait for parents and students to ask for help.

It's not clear whether counselors are expected to assist students with charter school applications. Several students interviewed said that their counselors didn't help them navigate that landscape.

Superintendent Arlene Ackerman has said that she is concerned the high school selection process may not be fair to all students, and District officials plan to put together a task force to look at potential changes. One possibility, they said, is moving to a system more like New York

City's, in which students list their preferences in order and they are centrally matched to only one school – their highest-ranked choice that accepts them.

But such a move could be controversial; a previous attempt to do this sparked opposition from some parent groups.

RFA research has found that 20 percent of students get into more than one school. All these slots are tied up for weeks while these students make their selections. "If you're accepted at five schools, you're holding a spot at all five locations," said LeTretta Jones, the director of the Office of Student Placement.

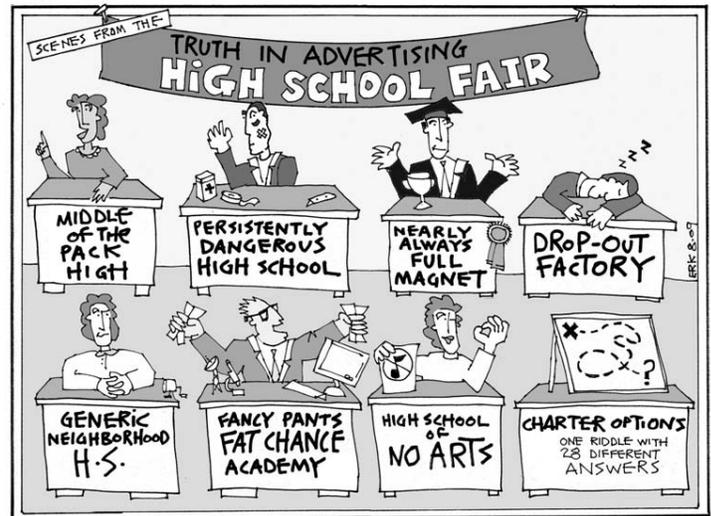
Jones believes that revising the process would streamline it and make it more equitable. "We could say, 'You're at Central,' and boom, that opens up the other locations for other students," she said. The Columbia University economists who designed New York's system noted that "in a system without excess capacity, the cost of giving some students multiple offers is that multiple students get no offers."

Three tiers of District high schools

In the District's high school selection process, there are three tiers of schools. The 16 special admission schools have the most stringent academic criteria and the most discretion over whom to accept. There are 13 citywide admission schools that have less stringent criteria and select students through a lottery after eliminating students who don't qualify. The 32 neighborhood schools are required to enroll all students who live within their attendance boundaries, including students who return from disciplinary schools and incarceration. If there is space, neighborhood schools also admit students from outside their feeder pattern through a lottery.

Based on the review of 2007-2008 data provided by the District, RFA found that Asian and White students were more likely to apply to special admission schools than Blacks and Latinos. At the same time, Black and Latino students applied to citywide and neighborhood schools at higher rates than Whites and Asians. Overall, fewer than half of applicants gain admission to even one school, with Asian and White students most likely to be admitted to a school of their choice.

RFA also found that students don't have to fulfill all admissions criteria to be admitted to a school. For instance, the data showed that only a small percentage of applicants actually met to the letter all the requirements for the most selective schools in the city – requirements that include test scores, grades, attendance, and behavior records. According to RFA's analysis, many students who were "unqualified" on paper were admitted to these schools anyway. Some 30 percent of applicants who did not meet all the criteria for any special admission school wound up attending one



anyway, and 19 percent of students who didn't meet criteria for citywide schools enrolled in one, meaning that schools have a lot of discretion to make decisions.

Students can apply to up to five District schools and to as many charters as they want. But the processes are totally separate, something that not all families understand.

The District's high school application process starts in September. That is when counselors are expected to hand out the directory and applications to 8th graders and the District runs a High School Expo where students and parents can learn about each school. Students who want to apply to one or more District high schools fill out and sign a single application form that they hand in to their 8th grade counselor.

But that process bears no relation to the 28 charter schools with high school grades. These schools must accept students by lottery if they have more applications than slots, but each has its own application form and deadline and can impose other requirements, such as attendance at an open house or an interview. Parents must contact each charter school individually to get an application and find out about the admissions process.

Explaining the selection system

Some school counselors hold an information session and expect 8th grade parents to come, and follow up only with those who show interest. Others require one-on-one meetings with each student to discuss options. Others give students the form and the Directory of High Schools and do little else to help families.

The RFA report found that in addition to providing information, some counselors actively advocate on behalf of students by calling high school counselors and principals, even after decisions have been made – a practice that is likely most effective at schools where principals and other school leaders have wide discretion in admission decisions.

In the spring, students get letters from the District indicating whether they were admitted to any of their five choices. Students admitted to more than one school get letters first, and they have two weeks to make a selection. After that, additional slots open up,

and a second round of letters goes out. Throw in the possibility of acceptances from charter schools and things get very complicated.

The annual Directory of High Schools lists information about schools, but doesn't walk parents and students through the steps they must take to participate in the process. In past years, the Directory has also lacked a timeline with deadlines and key dates. For instance, most citywide admission schools require students to come in for an interview or open house, but students don't know by what date they should hear from a school about that second step.

Jones said that the District is preparing a new middle school guide for students in 6th and 7th grade that will drive home more clearly, as an example, that the 7th grade academic and behavior record is the one that will determine the student's high school options.

Counselors also differ widely in their own knowledge of what high schools offer, in their ability and willingness to advocate for students, and in the number of responsibilities they have at the school. Using federal stimulus money, Ackerman is hiring more counselors for 7th and 8th grade. Ortiz said the new hires will reduce the student-to-counselor ratio and improve services for families. He also said that his office plans to set standards for counselors and monitor their work more closely.

However, District officials say that counselors are only partially responsible and that parents should be "vigilant," about getting information and keeping on top of what they must do.

Soon, the nerve-racking process will begin again. The High School Expo this year is scheduled for Sept. 25, 26, and 27 in Temple University's Liacouras Center. The deadline for submitting the application is October 30.

When they returned to school this year, students found a larger cadre of counselors who can help them figure it all out. But major changes are not likely to occur before next year.

In any case, said Ortiz: "We need to focus on how to make the process seamless so everyone understands it better."

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