

GoCPS: A First Look at Ninth-Grade Applications, Offers, and Enrollment

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) offers many high school options. Since 2015, about 75 percent of ninth-graders have opted to attend a high school other than their neighborhood school.¹ Historically, high school applications had different deadlines and were often decentralized. Beginning in fall 2017, all high school applications were moved to an online platform called GoCPS.² In addition, all programs were given a common deadline for applying and accepting offers. The district expected that GoCPS would make the application process simpler, more transparent, and more equitable for students. This research provides an overview of the first year of GoCPS: the **application** choices that students made, the **offers** they received, and ultimately, their high school **enrollment** decisions.

An Overview of GoCPS and Choices Available to Students

Two Applications, One Deadline:

- » “Choice programs” - rank up to 20 of 273 programs in more than 130 schools
 - » Available options included arts, charter schools, career and technical, International Baccalaureate (IB), and military
- » Selective enrollment high schools - rank up to 6 of 11 schools

Students Did Not Have to Apply to:

- » General education programs at their assigned neighborhood high school
- » A school they were already enrolled in that served high school grades (e.g., a school serving grades 7-12)

Some Programs Had Requirements After a Student Submitted an Application:

- » Applicants had to complete any post-application screens like additional exams, auditions, or information sessions to be eligible for an offer

Offers Made in Two Ways:

1. Lotteries: 70% of seats
2. Points: 30% of seats (e.g., test scores, grades, auditions)

¹ Barrow & Sartain (2017).

² Many elementary school applications were also moved to the GoCPS platform, though the selection process worked differently.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

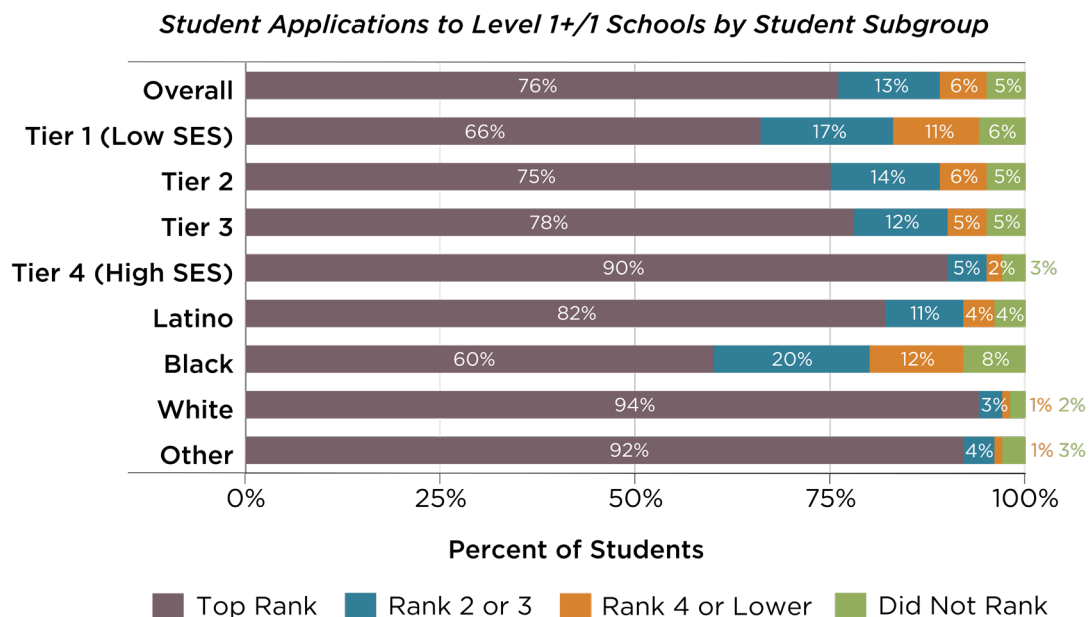
1 Student Applications to Ninth Grade

This research examines patterns in applications overall and by neighborhood socioeconomic status (SES) and race/ethnicity. We found:

- » Engagement was high: Almost all CPS eighth-graders used GoCPS to apply to high school.
 - Students who did not apply were less likely to qualify for free/reduced-price lunch and more likely to be White.
- » Students living in low-SES neighborhoods and Black students applied to more programs, on average, but were less likely than other students to list a program at a highly rated school at the top of their application (see Figure 1).
 - More research is needed to unpack this finding. For example, do students face issues related to access, including test score requirements or distance between school and home? Are families seeking schools that offer programming not captured by accountability ratings?

SNAPSHOT FIGURE 1

The Percent of Students Who Ranked a Highly Rated School Differed by Neighborhood SES and Race/Ethnicity



Notes: Applications in this figure include only choice programs and reflect the highest ranking given to a program at a highly rated high school. The School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) category is calculated at the school level. We assigned each program the SQRP level of the school in which the program was located. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Data and methods are described in the Appendix; see full report.

CPS's School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP)

CPS has a goal of getting all students into SQRP Level 1+ or 1 schools, the two highest rating levels. To be consistent with the district, we rely on SQRP ratings in our analyses as a measure of school quality. However, measuring school quality is challenging. In particular, some components used to rate schools may reflect more about the SES of the students attending the school than the school's contribution to student success.

See <https://cps.edu/Performance/Pages/PerformancePolicy.aspx> for more detailed information on the policy.

2 High School Program Offers

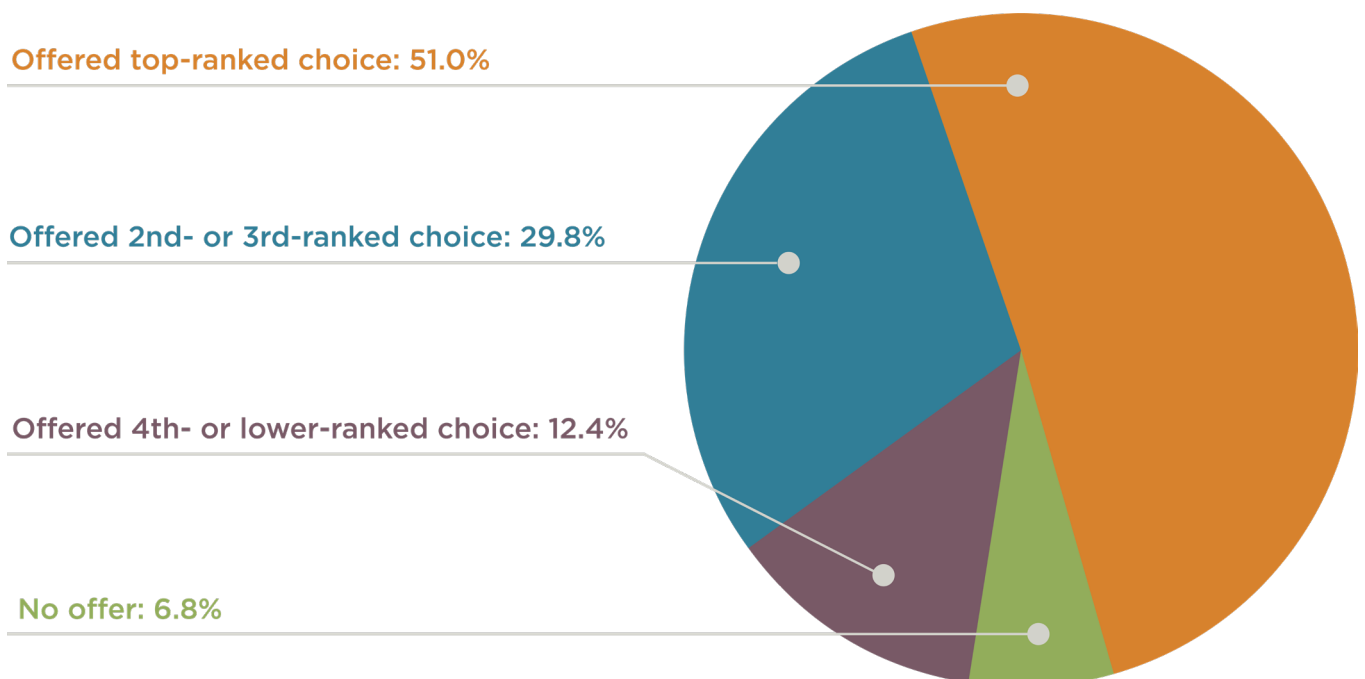
CPS made offers based on how applicants ranked programs, program admission requirements, and the number of seats in each program. We found:

- » Offers were made to applicants as described on the GoCPS website.
 - ⋮ Lotteries were random.
 - ⋮ Points-based seats were offered to the highest-scoring eligible applicants first.
- » Almost all applicants received an offer from a choice program (see Figure 2).
 - ⋮ Students living in the lowest-SES neighborhoods and Black students were the most likely to receive an offer from a program ranked in their top three. This is in part because these students were somewhat less likely to rank high-demand programs at the top of their application.
 - ⋮ Students who did not receive an offer applied to fewer programs on average, tended to be enrolled outside of CPS for eighth grade, and were somewhat more likely to apply to high-demand programs.
- » Conditional on applying to a choice program with additional post-application requirements (e.g., attending an information session or auditioning), just over one-half of applicants did not complete one of these requirements.³
 - ⋮ Applicants who did not complete a requirement were ineligible to receive an offer.
 - ⋮ Students living in low-SES neighborhoods and Black or Latino students were the least likely to complete these requirements.

SNAPSHOT FIGURE 2

Most Students Received an Offer from One of Their Top Three Programs

Round 1 program offers by rank on application



3 Ninth-Grade Enrollment

At the end of the application cycle, questions remained about where students would ultimately enroll in high school. We found:

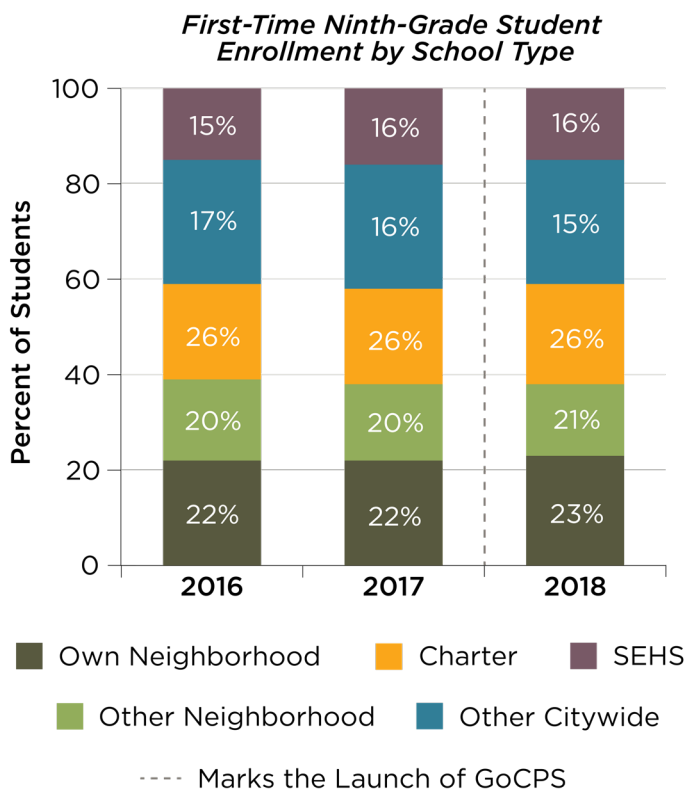
- » Most GoCPS applicants enrolled in the school where they accepted their offer.
- » Most CPS eighth-graders who did not use GoCPS either enrolled in a school where they had a guaranteed seat (like their neighborhood school) or left the district.

There were other questions about how ninth-grade enrollment might change with the introduction of GoCPS. We found:

- » Student enrollment at different types of schools was very similar before and after GoCPS (see Figures 3 and 4).
 - There was a small increase in the percentage of students enrolled in neighborhood schools in the first year of GoCPS, compared to past trends.
 - Within neighborhood SES and race/ethnicity subgroups, there were no changes in the rates at which students enrolled in highly rated schools. As such, students from low-SES neighborhoods and Black students continued to be less likely than other students to enroll at highly rated schools.

SNAPSHOT FIGURE 3

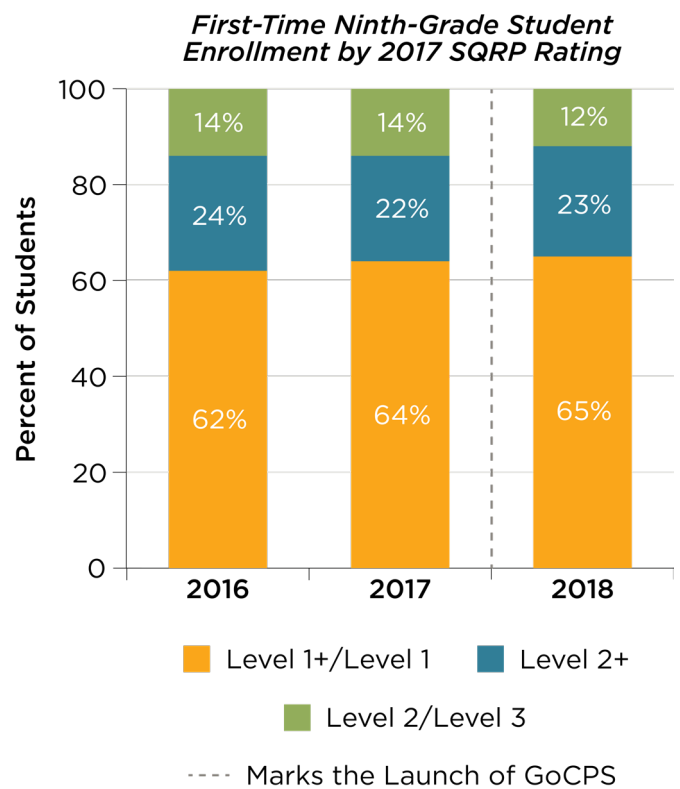
Student Enrollment by School Type Was Very Similar Before and After GoCPS



Note: “Own neighborhood” indicates that students attended a program at their assigned neighborhood high school. Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Data and methods are described in the Appendix; see full report.

SNAPSHOT FIGURE 4

Student Enrollment by School Rating Was Very Similar Before and After GoCPS



Notes: SQRP rating levels were held constant at 2017 levels (those available to students when making application and enrollment decisions). This avoids conflating year-to-year changes in SQRP ratings with changes in student enrollment decisions.

IMPLICATIONS

GoCPS was a big step forward in simplifying the way eighth-grade students applied to and enrolled in high schools. In addition, ninth-grade enrollment was largely consistent with the way the GoCPS system was intended to work—offers were made as described by CPS and most students enrolled in the school where they accepted their offer. This likely provided more certainty to high schools about how many and which students would enroll.

Insights: Applications and Enrollment

Before GoCPS, we did not have a comprehensive sense of the schools and programs to which students were applying. The centralization of the application process under GoCPS provided new insights about the broad set of choices that students and families considered, and also pointed to some potential inequities in access to highly rated schools:

- » Students from low-SES neighborhoods and Black students applied to more programs on average but were less likely to rank a highly-rated school at the top. This suggests that families may seek schools offering programming for reasons that are not captured by accountability ratings.
- » Students from low-SES neighborhoods and Black students were less likely to complete requirements after submitting applications. This suggests that some students may face barriers to enrollment in particular types of programs.

Directions for Future Research

This research does not tell us why students and families made the application and enrollment decisions that they did. Keeping in mind the district's goal to ensure that all students are enrolled in high-quality schools, we intend to investigate these questions in future work:

- » What do families and students value when considering high school options?
- » Does GoCPS result in fewer student transfers, improved high school experiences, and better educational outcomes?

We will follow these data over time to examine whether and how enrollment patterns change with the continued use of GoCPS.

District Considerations: Access to High-Quality Schools

In the context of centralized enrollment systems and school choice more broadly, districts with the goal of ensuring all students are in high-quality schools may need to consider the following questions:

- » Where are programs located?
- » What are the application requirements?
- » What support do students and families need in navigating the application process?
- » What do teachers and school counselors need to best support students throughout the application process?

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Information and evidence in this snapshot are derived from the report *GoCPS: A first look at ninth-grade applications, offers, and enrollment*, published in May 2019 by:

Lisa Barrow, Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago

Lauren Sartain, The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research

To read the research behind this snapshot, visit: <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/gocps-a-first-look-at-ninth-grade-applications-offers-and-enrollment>

DATA SOURCES

The CPS Office of Access and Enrollment provided a number of different datasets in order to evaluate the selection process for students entering high school in fall 2018. These included data generated by GoCPS, such as student identifiers and basic demographic information, as well as applications, responses from the selection process, students' acceptance or rejection of offers, student enrollment, and detailed program information.

About the UChicago Consortium

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research conducts research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as we support the search for solutions to the problems of school reform. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice, but does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working. The UChicago Consortium is a unit of the Urban Education Institute.

About the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago

The Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago is one of 12 regional Reserve Banks that, along with the Board of Governors in Washington, DC, make up the nation's central bank. The Chicago Reserve Bank serves the seventh Federal Reserve District, which encompasses the northern portions of Illinois and Indiana, southern Wisconsin, the Lower Peninsula of Michigan, and the state of Iowa. In addition to participation in the formulation of monetary policy, each Reserve Bank supervises member banks and bank holding companies, provides financial services to depository institutions and the U.S. government, and monitors economic conditions in its District.

Views expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the UChicago Consortium, the University of Chicago, the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, or the Federal Reserve System. The research reported here was supported by the Consortium Investor Council and Consortium general operating grants.

RELATED RESOURCES

Barrow, L., Sartain, L., & de la Torre, M. (2018).

GoCPS: A first look at applications and offers (Manuscript). Chicago, IL: Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.

Barrow, L., & Sartain, L. (2017).

The expansion of high school choice in Chicago Public Schools. *Economic Perspectives*, 41(5), 1-30.

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