



Open Enrollment in Seattle: From 2000-Present

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Summary

Seattle Public Schools (SPS) has a long and rich history of offering students a choice of what school to attend. Following the landmark [Parents Involved v. Community Schools](#) (PICS) Supreme Court decision, the district shifted in 2010 to an enrollment system emphasizing neighborhood schools, even as other large urban districts expanded open enrollment (i.e., systems allowing students to choose between many schools in their region, not just their assigned neighborhood school). While avenues of choice remain in Seattle, many more students attend neighborhood schools today than did prior to 2010.

This policy brief presents key findings from an ongoing research partnership between researchers at MIT and UCSD and the Enrollment Planning Department at SPS. Using detailed data on students' school choice applications, the goal of this partnership is to evaluate the implications of offering choice among the district's schools.

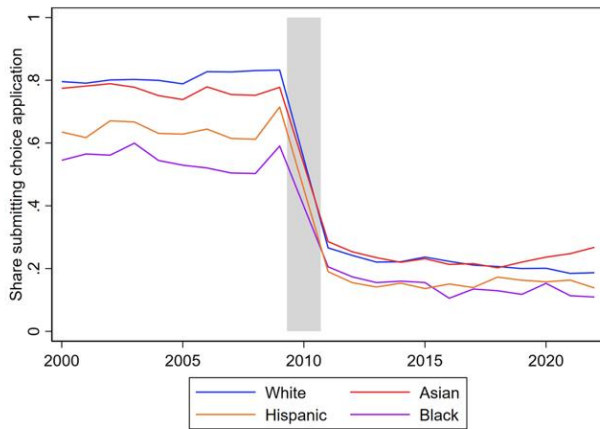
Who uses school choice?

Today, students in Seattle are guaranteed seats at their neighborhood schools. In recent years, roughly 20% of entry-grade students (kindergarten, 6th, and 9th grade) enrolling in the district submitted a choice application. Prior to 2010, however, choice was far more prevalent. The pre-2010 period provides

a lens into how families utilize choice in the absence of neighborhood schools.

Figure 1 plots the share of enrolled students submitting choice applications in each year from 2000 to 2023 across race. While all groups were far more likely to exercise choice before 2010, Black and Hispanic families were roughly 20 percentage points less likely to submit applications than White and Asian families.

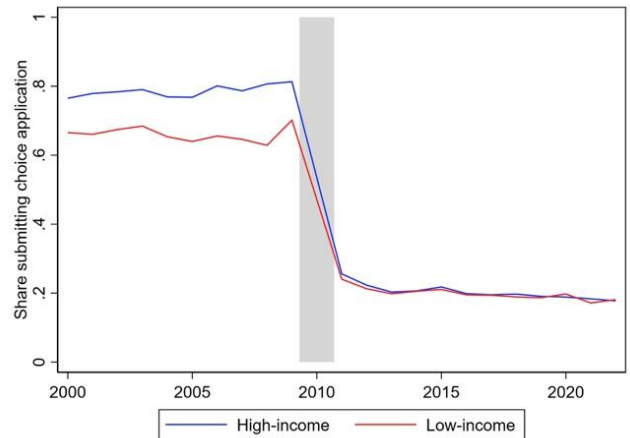
Figure 1. Application rates, by race



Another clear pattern emerges when examining choice application rates by household income. As shown in Figure 2, high-income families were about 10 to 15 percentage points more likely to submit choice applications than low-income families during the open enrollment era prior to 2010.

After 2010, these income-based gaps in choice participation largely disappeared as overall choice rates declined.

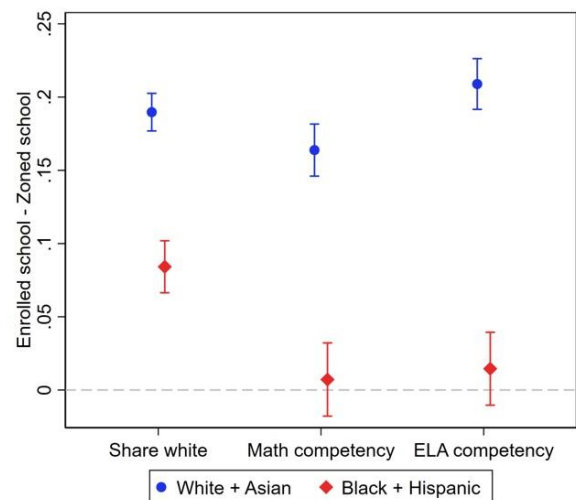
Figure 2. Application rates, by income



What schools are chosen?

When families exercise choice, where do they choose to go? Elementary school enrollment data between 2018 and 2023 show that white and Asian families tend to choose schools that are whiter and higher-performing (as measured by standardized test scores) than their neighborhood schools. This is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Differences between enrolled and zoned schools



White and Asian families ultimately enroll in schools that are about 19 percentage points whiter and score 15-21 percentage points higher on math and ELA competency measures compared to their zoned schools. In contrast, Black and Hispanic families choose schools that are largely similar to their neighborhood schools, suggesting that the benefits of choice may accrue differently across racial groups.

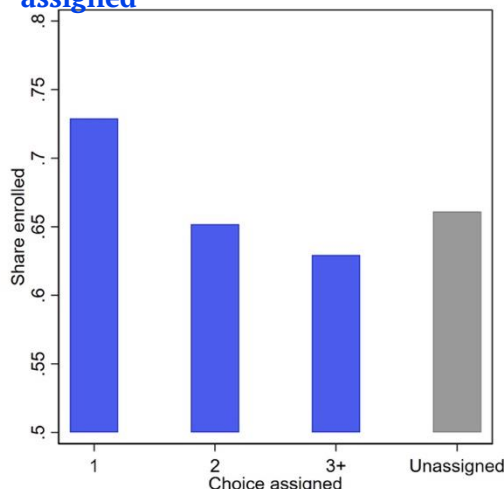
What are the impacts?

School choice policies may affect which families enroll in district schools and where families choose to live. Three key findings about these effects emerge from our analysis.

Lesson 1: Applicants receiving their first choice are more likely to enroll

A common concern about restricting school choice is that families who cannot access their preferred schools will leave the district entirely, reducing total

Figure 4. Enrollment rates, by choice assigned



enrollment. Based on elementary school choice data from 2018-2023, 73% of applicants who received their first-choice school ultimately enrolled in the district. In contrast, only 60-65% of applicants receiving their second or third choice enroll. This suggests that at least some households indeed switch to other schooling options when their most preferred in-district option is not offered.

Lesson 2: The consequences of choice for total district enrollment are minimal

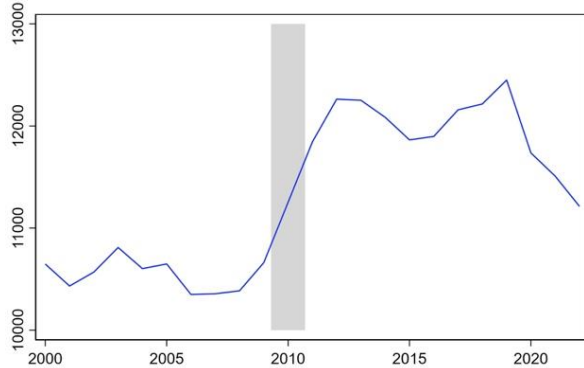
Though some families leave when their first choice is unavailable, there is little evidence that expanding choice would meaningfully increase total enrollment in the district. Back-of-the-envelope calculations show that even if all applicants were granted their first choice, enrollment would increase by less than 3% in most years.

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This prediction is supported by trends in entry-grade enrollment between 2000 and 2023, shown in Figure 5. Enrollment increased after 2010, when the district reinstated neighborhood schools. While this is an observational trend, it suggests that restricted school choice is unlikely to be responsible for the district's declining enrollment in recent years. Conversely, neighborhood-based assignment may increase enrollment by

drawing in families who are deterred by the uncertainty in the choice process.

Figure 5. Entry-grade enrollment



Lesson 3: Families respond to choice policies by changing where they live

Additional analysis using data from the King County Assessor’s Office shows that houses zoned to higher-performing schools become relatively more expensive after the introduction of attendance areas. To isolate price effects from other trends in the housing market, we compare houses close to the attendance area boundaries introduced in 2010. Jumps in house prices near these boundaries are driven by increased demand from families enrolling in the district, who relocate toward more desirable schools. School assignment

policies, in addition to directly affecting where students enroll, can also have meaningful effects on residential property values and where families can afford to live.

Conclusion

Whether school choice makes the assignment process more equitable depends on how families use it. Data from before 2010 provide a useful lens into how access to Seattle’s schools would change if choice was expanded. Our analysis reveals that better-resourced families exercise choice more readily, and when they do, they tend to choose schools that are whiter and higher-performing than their neighborhood schools. However, restricted choice is not likely responsible for the district’s recent decline in total enrollment. Finally, families respond to the rules of choice not only by changing their application and enrollment behavior, but also by changing where they live, pointing to the multi-dimensional impacts of student assignment policies.

About the Authors

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About Our Partners

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