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## BRIEF

# An Evaluation of Denver's SchoolChoice Process, 2012-2014

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## Is the School Enrollment System Working for Families?

Report Prepared for the SchoolChoice Transparency Committee at A+ Denver

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## About This Report

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This report, the third in an ongoing series on Denver’s SchoolChoice system, was commissioned by A+ Denver and the SchoolChoice Transparency Committee, with support from Denver Public Schools. The SchoolChoice Transparency Committee, housed at A+ Denver, was created to analyze the SchoolChoice process, and has overseen the evaluation in A+ Denver’s SchoolChoice Reports. The committee is made up of school leaders (with representation from charter, magnet, and traditional schools), district leaders, and third-party community stakeholders.

## Acknowledgments

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We are grateful for the expertise and insight provided by our reviewers, Todd Ely, University of Colorado Denver, and Marcus Winters, University of Colorado Colorado Springs. We thank Brian Eschbacher, Alisha Chiarelli, Yu-lu Hsiung, all from Denver Public Schools, for their assistance with accessing and using the data for this report.

## About the Authors

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**Betheny Gross** is a senior research analyst and the research director at the Center on Reinventing Public Education. She coordinates CRPE’s quantitative research initiatives, including analysis of portfolio districts, public school choice, and common enrollment systems. Dr. Gross has examined evidence and outcomes of district reform across the country and has advised and consulted with district leaders to formulate strategy and implementation. She is coauthor of *Strife and Progress: Portfolio Strategies for Managing Urban Schools* (Brookings 2013) and the author of numerous research reports and articles. Dr. Gross holds a BA in Economics and Urban Studies from the University of Pittsburgh, an MA in Economics from the University of Iowa, and a PhD in Educational Policy Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**Patrick Denice** is a research analyst at CRPE. His research focuses on issues of access and equity with regard to school choice. He is also a doctoral candidate in the sociology department at the University of Washington, where he applies quantitative methods to the study of stratification in the higher education and labor markets. Prior to starting graduate school and working as a researcher, he was a student affairs administrator at Georgetown University. Patrick holds a BA in Sociology from Boston College and an MA in Sociology from the University of Washington.

## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

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Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America’s disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families.

Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America’s schools.

CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through private philanthropic dollars, federal grants, and contracts.

## About A+ Denver

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A+ Denver is an independent, nonprofit organization working to bring the power of Denver’s citizens to bear on school reform. Our mission is to harness the power of civic leadership to build public will and advocate for the changes necessary to dramatically increase student achievement in public education in Denver. A+ focuses on the intersection of policy, practice, and politics—building support for changes that put the interests of students over those of adults.

## Overview

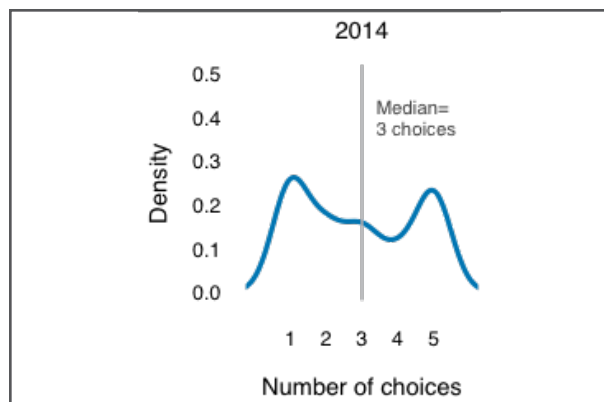
A large percentage of Denver families take advantage of school choice. But despite the broad participation in choice, it is still clear that different families face different obstacles when it comes to picking and ultimately being matched to a quality school. Families across the city showed a clear preference for schools receiving higher ratings on the city’s School Performance Framework. But, these seats are not well distributed across the city. Families in neighborhoods with low-ranking schools must consider if they are willing to send their child to a school that is far from home and may be forced to choose between quality and proximity.

Using application data from the city’s SchoolChoice system, the Center on Reinventing Public Education evaluated Denver’s school choice process. Through this analysis we learned that much work remains to be done to satisfy Denver families’ demand for quality. The full report, *An Evaluation of Denver’s SchoolChoice Process, 2012-2014: Is the School Enrollment System Working for Families?*, was prepared for the SchoolChoice Transparency Committee at A+ Denver.

### Participation in school choice is high, though not equally across all of the city’s communities.

For the 2014–15 school year, about 24,000 students across all grades submitted a SchoolChoice application. In the transition grades of kindergarten, 6th grade, and 9th grade, about 70 percent of students submitted an application.

The SchoolChoice application allows families to rank their top five choices. Indeed, most parents that submitted an application for the 2014–15 enrollment listed more than one option. Twenty-eight percent listed five options, maximizing their chances to match to a school on their preference list. In the Far Northeast, where middle and high students are not assigned to a school based on their address and instead belong to an “enrollment zone” with multiple options, families most frequently listed the full five choices.

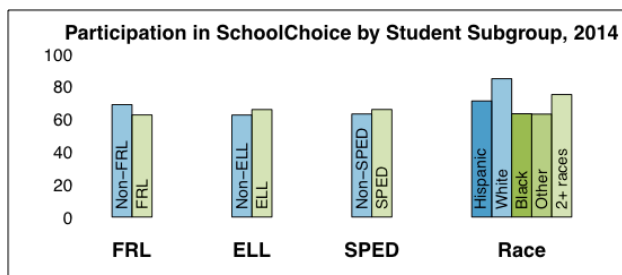


Though high participation rates were common among racial, socio-economic and other subgroups, there were some important differences.

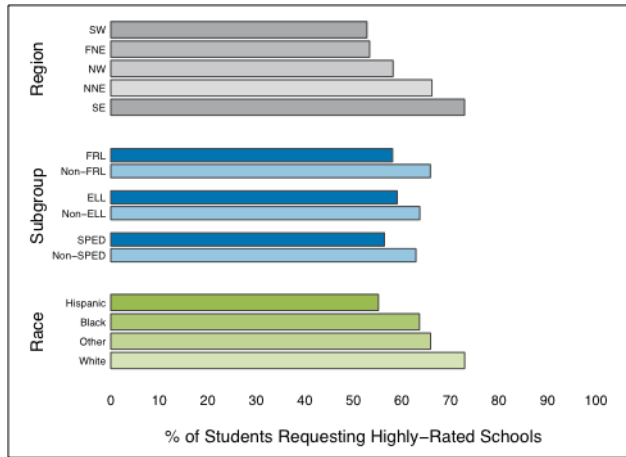
For the 2014–15 enrollment, 63 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) participated in school choice, compared with 69 percent of non-FRL-eligible students. The percentage of English language learners (ELL) who participated (66 percent) was higher than native English speakers (63 percent).<sup>1</sup>

White students, at 85 percent, had the highest level of participation in school choice in 2014, followed by 75 percent of mixed-race students, 71 percent of Hispanic students, and 63 percent of black students and students classified as “other.”

The higher a student’s standardized test scores, the more likely he or she was to participate in school choice. In addition to the impact of individual student achievement on choice participation, students attending high-performing schools participated in choice at a higher rate than their counterparts attending lower-performing schools.



1. The 15 percentage point gap in participation between students in special education and students in general education reversed itself by 2014, largely as a result of a policy change in which more special education students were given the opportunity to enroll through SchoolChoice.

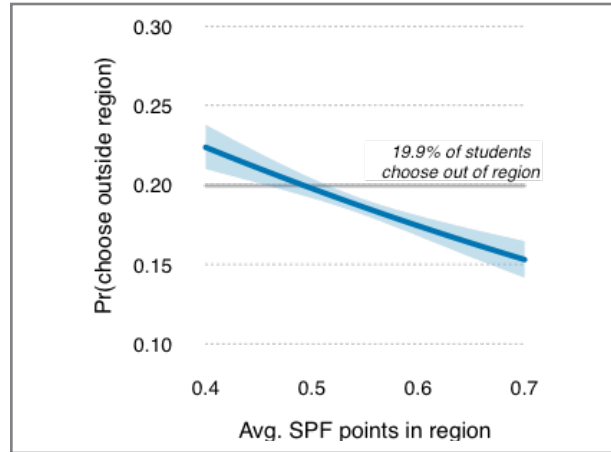
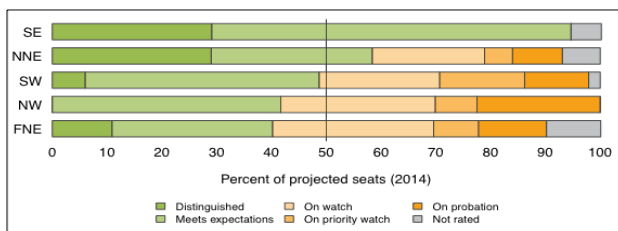


### Parents' preference for the city's highest-performing schools drives some families to look for schools outside their neighborhood.

Parents' choices show a clear preference for higher-performing schools. Seven out of the ten most-requested schools for both 6th and 9th graders, and eight of the ten most-requested schools for kindergartners, were rated as either "distinguished" or "meets expectations" on the city's School Performance Framework. Parents across the city share this preference for higher-ranking schools.

Unfortunately, higher-ranking schools, though growing in number, remain unevenly distributed across the city. The vast majority of projected seats in the Southeast in 2014—over 90 percent—are at schools rated as "meeting expectations" or "distinguished." But only about 40 percent of the projected available middle and high school seats in the Far Northeast are at schools with these ratings.

Many families, driven to enroll their children in higher-performing schools, appear to look outside their neighborhood for schools, essentially trading proximity to home for school quality. Overall, one in five Denver families selects a school outside of their neighborhood as their first choice. Parents in neighborhoods hosting schools scoring



Notes: The blue line represents the predicted probabilities that a student listed a school outside their home region as their first choice at each value of the average neighborhood SPF rating (using a multivariate logit regression that holds background variables at their means). The light blue shading represents the 95% confidence interval about the predicted probabilities. The darker gray line indicates the average percentage of students in the sample (19.9%) who select a school outside their region as their first choice.

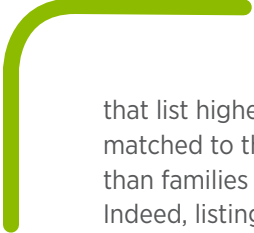
below the city average are even more likely to opt for schools outside their neighborhood.

### Match rates are high, but it is still hard to get into a high-performing school.

Between 76 and 89 percent of all students are matched with one of their choices, and most students are matched with their first-choice school. But student demographic traits, where they live, and what they prioritize all impact a successful match.

Hispanic students, black students, white students, and those in "other" racial groups have roughly the same likelihood of being matched with their first-choice school. But students who qualify for FRL are 19 percent more likely to receive their first choice than non-FRL students. Students in special education have 11 percent lower odds of being matched with their first choice than students in general education. There is no difference in first-choice matches between ELL and non-ELL students. Students in the Far Northeast are far less likely to be matched with their first-choice school than students living elsewhere in the city.

Placement in one of the city's highest-performing schools is much more difficult, especially when the school is outside a family's home region. Families



that list higher-quality schools are less likely to be matched to their first choice or any of their choices than families who select lower-quality schools. Indeed, listing a “distinguished” school as the first choice lowers a family’s odds of being matched to that school by about 15 percentage points compared to having listed a school “on probation” as the first choice. Selecting a first-choice school outside the family’s home region lowers the likelihood of being matched with it by nearly 6 percentage points.

## Implications

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Since its 2012 implementation, Denver Public School’s SchoolChoice process has been stable and successful, but lingering gaps remain in terms of participation and families’ reasonable access to higher-performing schools. White students participate at far higher rates than minority students. Low-income students and special education students participate at lower rates than their counterparts. And high-performing students, as well as those at high-performing schools, have higher rates of participation.

Though the proportion of available seats in high-performing schools has grown over time, particularly at the high school level, it is still not enough to meet citywide demand. Families are sometimes forced to choose between quality and proximity. One-fifth of SchoolChoice participants requested schools outside of their neighborhood. The lack of quality options is particularly acute in the Northwest and Far Northeast regions of the city. And families requesting a high-quality school as their first choice are less likely to be matched to that school—or any of their choices—than families who choose lesser-quality schools.

There’s more analysis and more work to be done to investigate the trade-offs parents make regarding quality and proximity, as well as opportunities to further expand school choice participation and to provide a consistent supply of high-quality options for families to choose from.