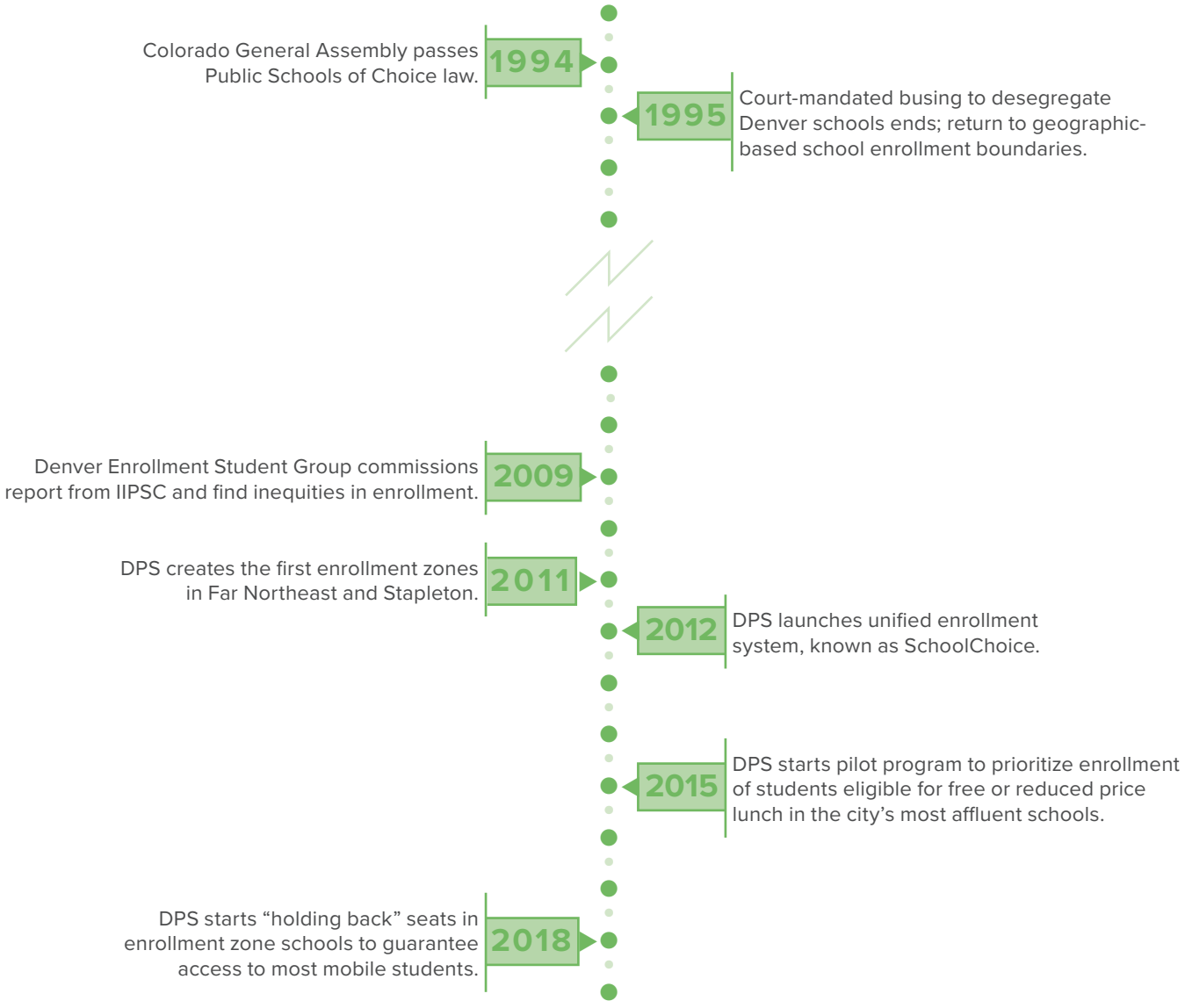
Denver's Next Journey:
SCHOOL CHOICE WITH UNIFIED ENROLLMENT


1994
Colorado General Assembly passes Public Schools of Choice law.
1995
Court-mandated busing to desegregate Denver schools ends; return to geographic-based school enrollment boundaries.
2009
Denver Enrollment Student Group commissions report from IIPSC and find inequities in enrollment.
2011
DPS creates the first enrollment zones in Far Northeast and Stapleton.
2012
DPS launches unified enrollment system, known as SchoolChoice.
2015
DPS starts pilot program to prioritize enrollment of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch in the city's most affluent schools.
2018
DPS starts "holding back" seats in enrollment zone schools to guarantee access to most mobile students.

Denver's Next Journey: School Choice with Unified Enrollment

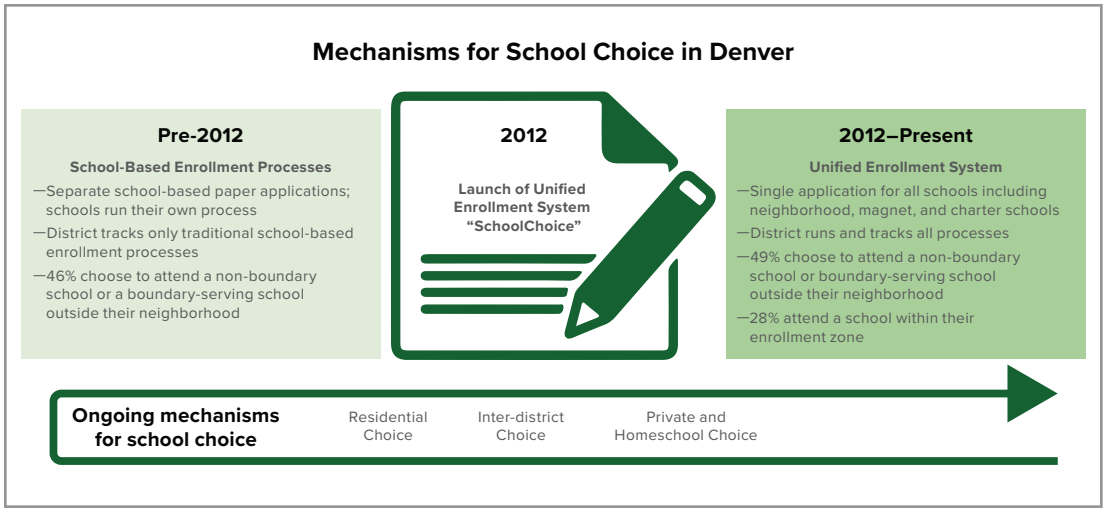
This is the third of a multi-part series of briefs that analyze some of Denver's big bets across the last decade to improve education for all students. For more content visit apluscolorado.org/denvers-next-journey

In 2012 when Denver Public Schools (DPS), along with New Orleans, became one of the first two school districts in the country to launch a unified enrollment system, families said goodbye to the 60 separate paper-based applications that served as gatekeepers to public schools across the city. Instead the district's unified enrollment system, called SchoolChoice, offered one streamlined process to apply to schools outside a student's assigned school including other neighborhood, magnet, and charter schools.

As explored in this brief, school "choice" has a long and complicated history not only in Denver but nationally. District and school boundaries, layered on top of redlined neighborhoods, created a system in Denver where some schools were walled off to many low-income communities and communities of color.[1,2] Though Denver was required to address this segregation under the Supreme Court's Keyes decision in 1973, the end of busing in 1995 led to redrawn school boundaries that continued to separate communities by class and race.[3]

Some families have always had "choice," typically exercised by buying or renting a home in a neighborhood with "good" schools. Denver's unified enrollment system was one of Denver's largest and most systemic efforts to compensate for existing inequities by race, wealth, and language in an effort to bring access to schools more equally to all families; Denver has been recognized as a leader in creating a system for families to choose a school.[4]

This brief explores the extent to which the SchoolChoice unified enrollment system has in fact broadened access to higher performing and unique school models for many students, and how schools, both in "quality" and model, still remain walled off to many students. A+ Colorado offers a look back at enrollment in Denver before 2012, the process to create unified enrollment, the strategies that have been implemented since the launch, and how unified enrollment has changed the educational experience for families and students. As we enter Denver's Next Journey, we need a clear-eyed look at the past, present and future of school choice.



The Choice Landscape Before Unified Enrollment

When DPS launched a unified enrollment system known as SchoolChoice in 2012, it was hardly the first time "choice" was happening when it came to families selecting from different school options for their students. Beginning in 1994, the state legislature passed the Public Schools of Choice law, allowing students in Colorado to attend a public school in another district, tuition-free, so long as they were able to provide their own transportation. In the 2011-12 school year 4,353 students residing outside of the City & County of Denver attended Denver Public Schools, while 7,797 students residing within the city choiced-out to another district. This was a net loss of 3,444 students out of the 80,890 students in DPS, or 4.3%.[5,6]

Further, there were dozens of private schools operating in and around Denver, attracting thousands of students. Add in homeschooling as an option, and all told, in 2000 24% of Denver's K-12 student population were taking advantage of these choice options outside of DPS. Not captured in the 1 of 4 school-age Denver residents attending school outside the district is the impact of the real estate market on choosing schools. Families with means were able to move within the city or to a desirable neighborhood in a suburb to gain attendance to the school of their choice.

Within Denver Public Schools there was also a high level of choosing schools before the launch of unified enrollment. A report from The Institute for Innovation in

Public School Choice (IIPSC), *"Assessment of Enrollment and Choice in Denver Public Schools,"* is referenced throughout this brief.[7] This analysis provides a great lens into the state of enrollment practices at that time, and it clearly paints a picture of an unpredictable, unsustainable, and inequitable system of choice. The analysis shows that in 2009, 46% of the nearly 80,000 students in Denver attended a school outside of their assigned boundary-serving school including magnets, charters, and other boundary-serving schools outside their neighborhood.[8] With 36,576 students attending schools outside of their assigned boundary-serving schools, choice was commonplace for many families across the city despite the lack of a unified system which made enrollment a cumbersome and confusing landscape to navigate.

School Choice Defined

Choice: Refers to any mechanism used by families to decide which school their student(s) attends. This includes actively deciding to attend their neighborhood boundary-serving school; enrolling their student to a different boundary-serving school; or non-boundary serving school like a magnet; renting or buying a home to change their assigned school; sending their student to a different district or a private school; homeschooling, etc.

School-Based Enrollment Processes: Prior to the launch of the district's unified enrollment system in 2012, there were discrete applications for individual schools. DPS monitored and tracked enrollment practices and outcomes only at traditional district-run school-based processes.

Unified Enrollment: The district process for all Denver school choice after 2012. Under this system there was one single unified application, called "SchoolChoice," for all schools, including boundary-serving schools, non-boundary serving schools, charters and magnets.

Transition Grade: The common grade at which students are entering elementary (Kindergarten), middle (6th grade), and high school (9th grade).

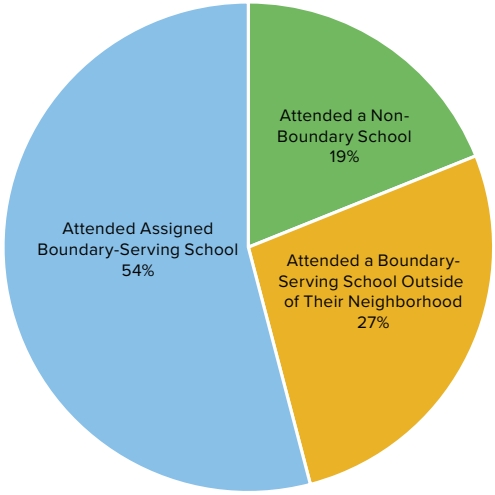
Boundary-Serving School: Students living within a certain geographic area are guaranteed a seat at the school. If a student does not choose to go to a different school, they will be assigned to this school.

Non-Boundary School: Any student within the school district can enroll in this school, regardless of where they live. Each school has a set of priorities to determine the order in which students are granted admission through the enrollment system. Some schools may have entrance requirements.

Enrollment Zone: Students living within a certain geographic area are guaranteed a seat at one of several schools, but not necessarily one school in particular.

Just the Facts:
Before the launch of SchoolChoice 46% of DPS students attended a school other than their neighborhood boundary-serving school.

Denver Public Schools Student Enrollment before Unified Enrollment (2009)



Prior to 2012 there were no centralized supports to help families learn about school options. Word of mouth was the most common way of learning about schools in a pre-social media era. Further, there was limited transportation to connect students with different options outside of magnet schools. The district had multiple mechanisms to enroll students in schools other than their boundary school, and district-run magnet schools, Early Childhood Centers, and charter schools all had their own processes. All told there were close to 60 different (paper) applications and timelines for applying to public schools in the city.

The convoluted school-based enrollment processes had consequences. First there were no data that traced participants across the dozens of charters and magnet application processes. Second, there was low participation in the one traditional school-based enrollment process for students to attend a district-run boundary-serving school other than their assigned school. Per the IIPSC analysis in 2009 only 13% of kindergarten students, 6% of 6th graders, and 10% of 9th graders, for a total of 3,134 students, participated in the traditional school-based processes.

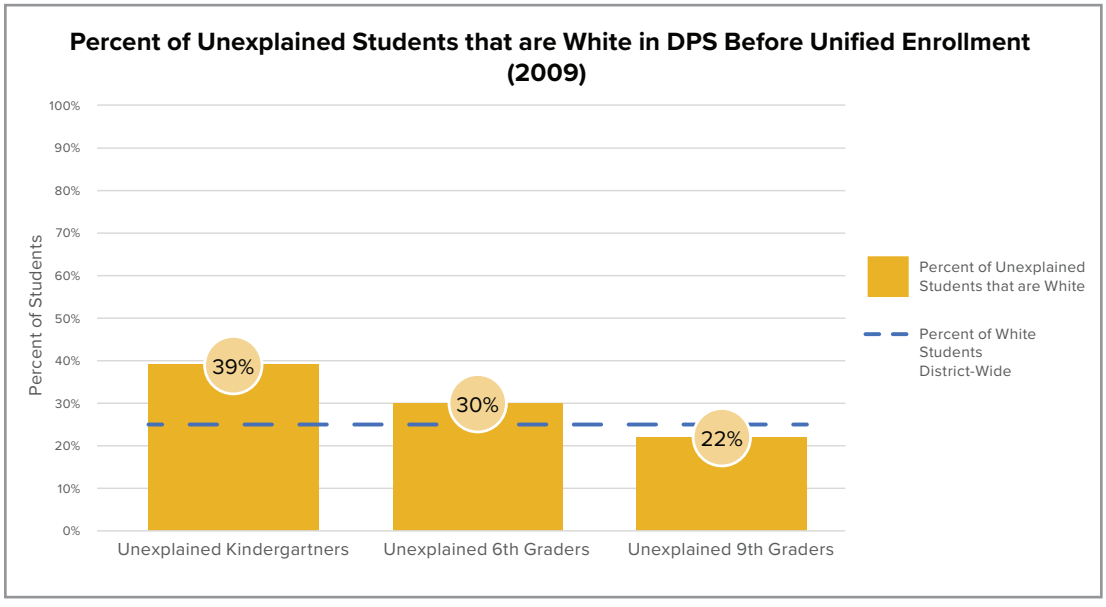
There were high levels of inequity in participation in the traditional school-based processes. The IIPSC analysis found that during transition grades, students ineligible for free or reduced price lunch were twice as likely to participate in round 1 of the traditional school-based processes to access boundary-serving schools outside their neighborhood than students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

The second consequence of the school-based enrollment processes was a large number of "unexplained students," meaning the student was neither assigned to the school nor went through one of the formal processes for enrollment. Specifically, according to the same IIPSC report, across the district between a quarter and a third of all non-boundary enrollment was unexplained, and it was even larger for certain schools.

The large instances of "unexplained" enrollment pointed to a lack of transparency into the school-based enrollment processes, and, potentially, to informal processes of enrolling students outside official lottery or admission processes. This was concerning for a number of reasons. At some schools, unexplained enrollment left other students, whose families had used formal processes, on the waitlist. While about 25% of DPS students were white in 2009, nearly 40% of "unexplained" kindergartners were white, and 30% of 6th graders were. The trend reversed in high school where students of color were overrepresented in unexplained enrollment save at some high schools like George Washington where 55% of "unexplained" students were white.[9]

Taken together, the significant number of students attending schools outside of their assigned school, coupled with unequal participation in school-based enrollment processes and large numbers of "unexplained enrollment" show that "choice" was a prominent experience in Denver before the launch of the district's unified enrollment system. What is also clear is that the choice system that did exist was not designed for equity, and left families to navigate the system on their own.

Just the Facts:
Before the launch of SchoolChoice white students were overrepresented in "unexplained" enrollment in schools in elementary and middle schools.



Time for a Change: Launching SchoolChoice

It is within this inequitable landscape that, roughly a decade ago, conversations paved the way for the implementation of unified enrollment in Denver. Armed with data and experience, it became increasingly clear for the district and community members that the status quo was not working. The district worked to create a "unified enrollment process" that would be more transparent and accessible, and would attempt to address the inequities the previous piecemeal system was perpetuating. SchoolChoice, the enrollment tool, launched in 2012 to even the playing field and to expand access to schools. SchoolChoice included:

- **One single application** that allowed families to apply to up to 5 public schools in the city in the main round including district-run neighborhood schools outside of a students' boundary, district-run choice schools, magnet schools, and all charter schools.
- Clarity and uniformity around the **application timeline.**
- **A "matching algorithm,"** akin to the process used to match medical students to residencies, to fairly assign students to their most preferred school using a lottery system combined with a set of transparent school priorities, such as children of staff, siblings, and neighborhood residents.

One of the reasons why Denver's system was and continues to be particularly unique is that it unified enrollment processes for both district-run and charter schools. Ensuring charter schools were part of the unified enrollment system was important not just for improving equitable access to charters, but for guaranteeing that they would serve all students including the city's most mobile students and students requiring center-based special education programs.

The launch and implementation of the process was closely monitored by the SchoolChoice Transparency Committee, convened by A+ Denver and made up of community members, district staff, and school leaders. The Committee commissioned two reports by researchers at University of Colorado-Denver to understand the process and outcomes.[10]

The Experience of Unified Enrollment

Unified enrollment and the supports in place were intended to improve equity of access to schools across the city, but how do we know if it has been successful? There are several lenses through which the impact of unified enrollment can be viewed. Below we explore whether students are participating in the process, the choices they make, and, ultimately, how students are matched with schools. Unless otherwise noted we look at participation and outcomes in the "Round 1" of unified enrollment which is the primary process for DPS choice.

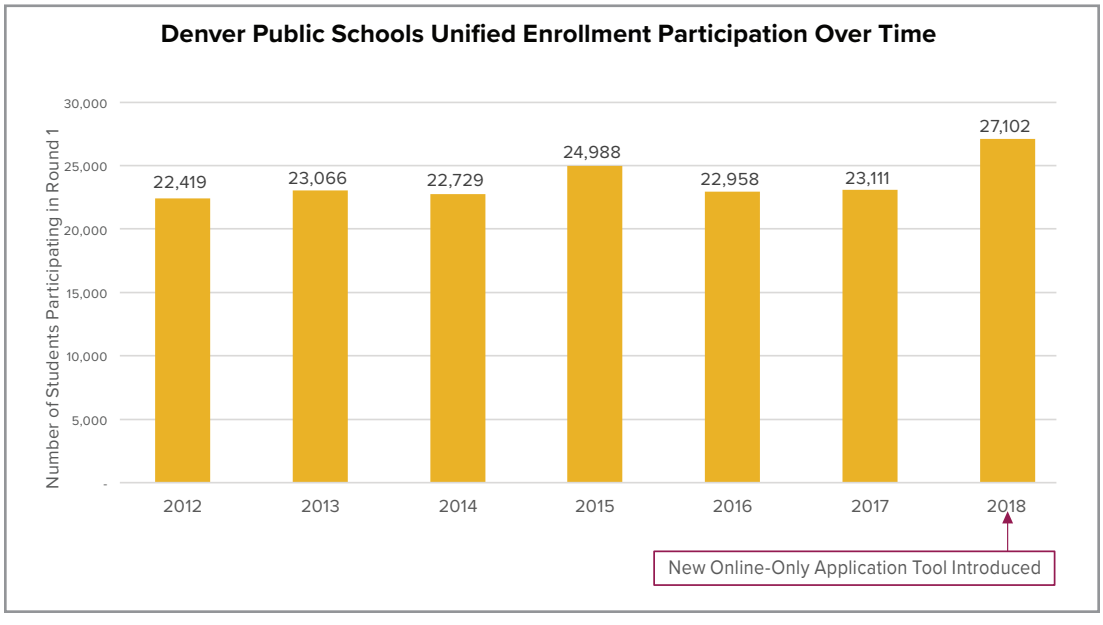
Participation: *Are families participating in the process?*

First, to understand this, we delve into whether families are engaging in the process.

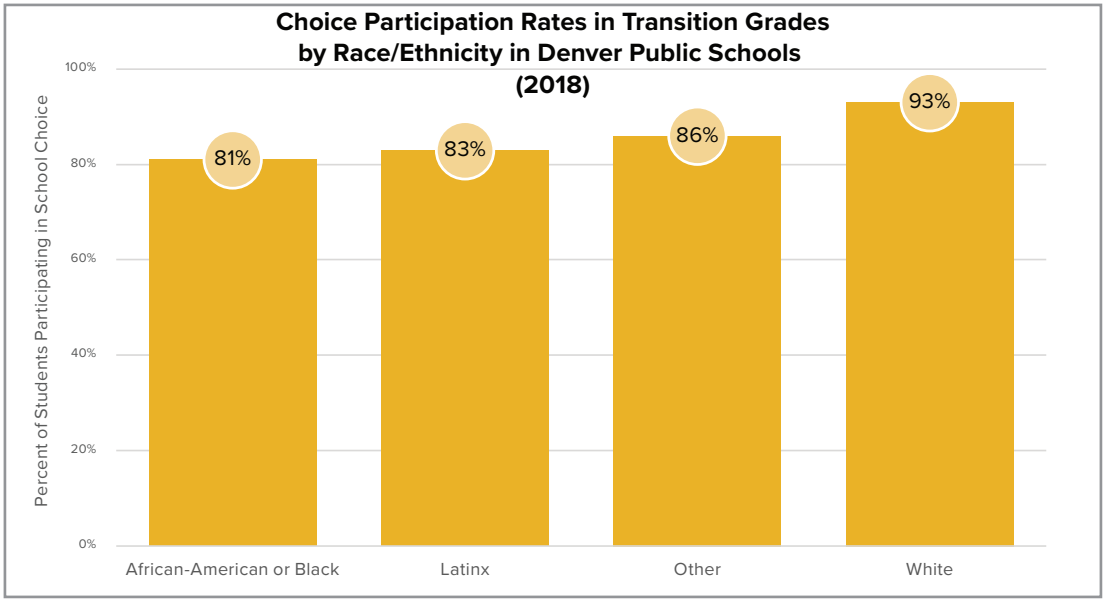
The launch of unified enrollment in 2012 led to a significant participation increase compared to the various systems that existed in the years prior. The number of participants hit a record high in 2018-19, the same year that the district introduced a new online application.

While overall participation has increased, the rates of participation by student groups are especially important. The IIPSC report highlighted that in 2009 paid lunch students were twice as likely to participate than students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch. In 2018, while gaps by income still exist, they are far smaller than under the previous system with 79% of families eligible for free or reduced price lunch participating compared to 86% of families who were not eligible. Gaps in participation for families of different racial and ethnic backgrounds also exist.

Just the Facts:
The number of students using the unified enrollment system has stayed fairly consistent since its launch with an increase in 2018.



Just the Facts:
White students participate in unified enrollment at higher rates than students of color.



Equally important as understanding who participates in SchoolChoice is also understanding who does not. In 2017 over 20,000 students participated in Round 1, or the primary round, of the unified enrollment system; 14,000 participated in Round 2, meaning they moved into or within the district, got off a waitlist, or changed their mind after their first assignment. Students who moved into or within the district were more likely to qualify for free or reduced price lunch, and to be emerging multilingual.[11]

School Selection: *What schools are families and students selecting?*

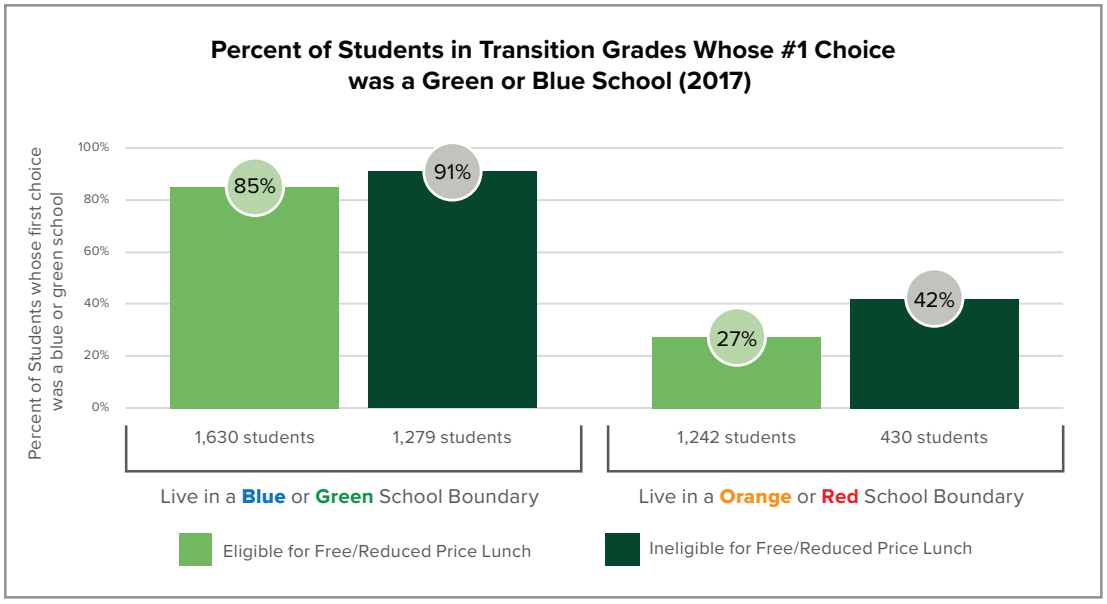
SchoolChoice, as a unified enrollment system, allows families to access schools outside of their assigned school should they choose. One key objective is to enable students who are assigned a school that is not a good fit to access a school that is a better fit. It also allows for students assigned to low-performing schools to potentially, or more easily, access a higher-performing school than in the pre-unified enrollment days.

"Fit" is particularly difficult to analyze systematically. One lens we can view is if there are differences in the families who are choosing schools with specialized programs like dual language, expeditionary learning, fundamental, Montessori, and single gender schools. According to a 2014 analysis of the choices families were making through the unified enrollment process, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) found that students ineligible for free or reduced price lunch were 2.5 times as likely to list a specialized program as their first choice as were students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.[12] Similar gaps were seen between white students and students of color. Regional differences were stark; 18% of students in the Northwest selected a specialized program, while only 1% of students in the Far Northeast did so.[13] This may be directly related to the fact that distinctive school models are not equally distributed across the city, and that Northwest offers the most diverse selection of school models.[14]

When looking at families that select high performing schools as measured by the district's School Performance Framework (SPF), we see that the majority of all families in any given region and across all backgrounds requested high quality schools, though with some notable differences. In the same analysis by CRPE, 73% of students in Southeast requested a "blue" or "green" school, the district's top ratings, as their first choice compared to 53% of students in Southwest. Across the city, 58% of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch requested blue or green schools compared to 66% of their non-eligible peers.[15]

When looking at how the quality of a student's boundary school impacts their choice, we see that students who are already assigned to a blue or green school are far more likely to list another blue or green school as their top choice in the SchoolChoice process than are students assigned to a red or orange school. Additionally, students who are ineligible for free or reduced price lunch are more likely to list a top performing schools as their first choice than are students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

Just the Facts:
Students are more likely to list a "blue" or "green" school as their first choice during unified enrollment if they live in a school boundary where they are assigned a "blue" or "green" school. Students ineligible for free or reduced price lunch are more likely to list a "blue" or "green" school as their first choice than students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.



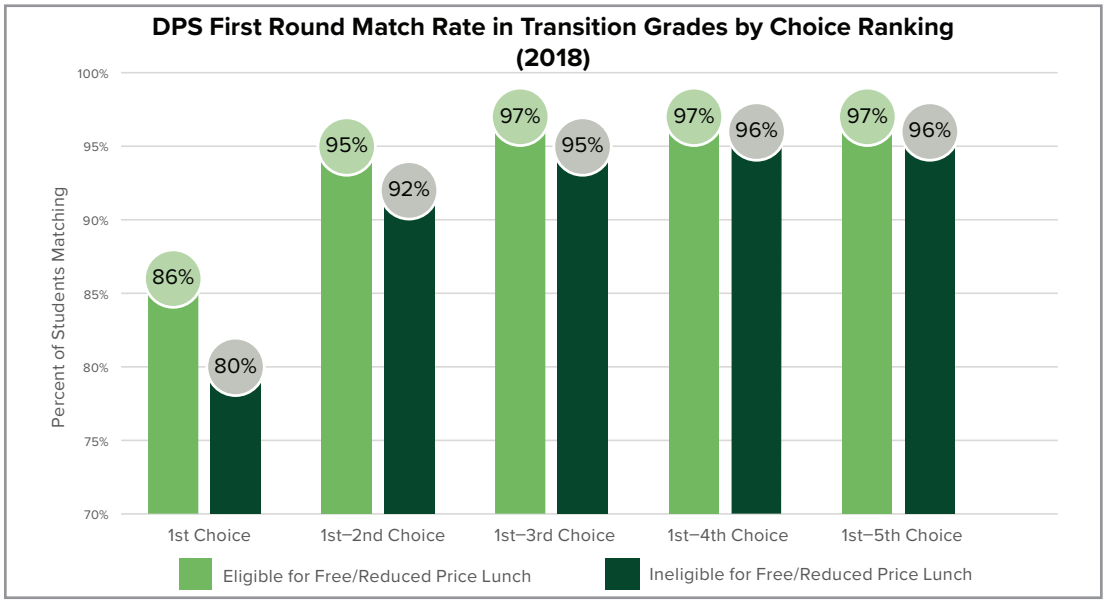
There are multiple reasons why this may be the case. One hypothesis is that proximity and logistics likely play a significant role in families' choices. Many of the city's lowest-performing schools are clustered geographically (see Denver's Next Journey: School Improvement); accessing higher performing options is not as simple as walking the other direction down the street. Research from CRPE found significant differences by family income and by race of families who can reasonably access Denver's top schools, meaning that, in particular, low-income families and families of color face limited transportation options and geographic isolation that could hinder their ability to consider higher-performing options.[16]

Matching Students and Schools

Whether students are able to access one of their preferred school options is key to understanding the effectiveness of unified enrollment. Even the best online application process can be forgotten weeks later if a student does not receive one of their top choices. This is particularly important in areas of town where there are limited high-quality seats and students may be waitlisted at high performing schools and enrolled at lower performing ones. Overall, around 80% of students receive their first choice, and another 13% are enrolled at the second or third.

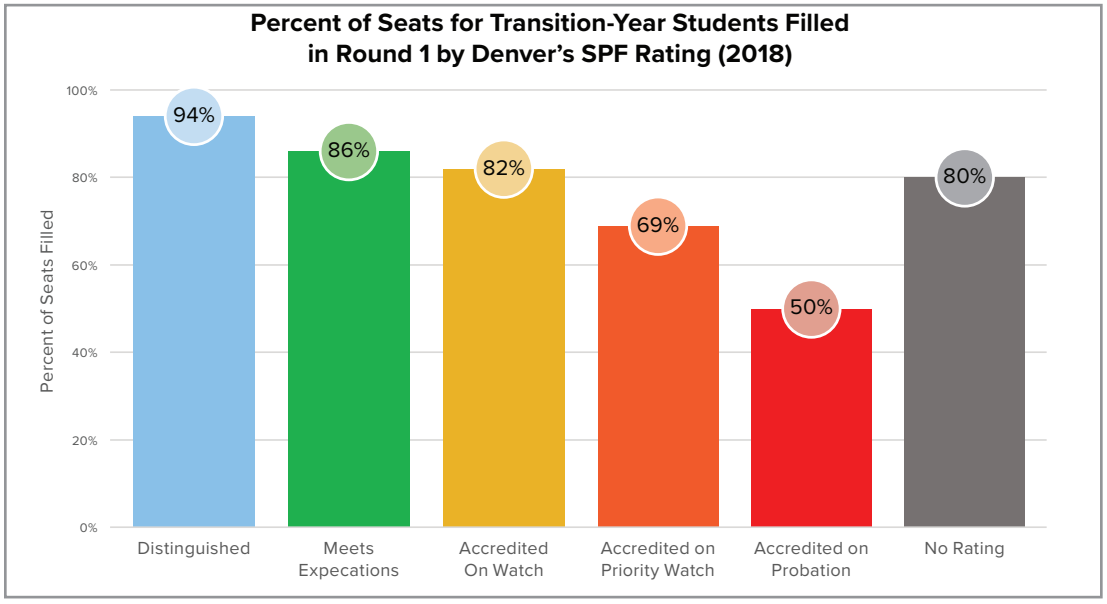
2018 data shows that students eligible for free or reduced price lunch match at slightly higher rates than their more affluent peers, even while participating at slightly lower rates. There are a variety of potential contributing factors, including that some schools prioritize enrolling students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch.

Just the Facts:
Students eligible for free or reduced price lunch are more likely to match their top choice school than students ineligible for free or reduced price lunch.



One of the goals of a unified enrollment system was to expand access to high quality schools, and ensure there was more of a fair shot at enrolling in those schools for all Denver students. We can see this by the fact that more open spots at higher performing schools are filled during the unified enrollment process than lower performing schools. While 87% of the space in the districts highest performing schools (those rated blue and green) were filled, only 63% of seats in the district's lowest performing schools (rated red or orange) were filled during Round 1.[17] Yet access to the district's highest performing schools continues to be unequal for different communities. Overall in Round 1 of 2017, 64% of students who were ineligible for free or reduced price lunch were assigned to blue or green schools, compared to 46% of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch who were.[18]

Just the Facts:
Spots in schools with higher ratings are more likely to be filled through unified enrollment than spots in schools with lower ratings.



"Choice without transportation isn't choice at all, and only serves to further concentrate privilege."

– Andrew Lefkowits, Co-Chair of Park Hill Neighbors for Equity in Education

Attempts at Making Unified Enrollment More Equitable

Expanding Supports for the SchoolChoice Process

While the streamlined application itself was an innovation, the district also developed supports for families over the years to make the process more accessible and easier. A major barrier for many families is transportation. Denver does not provide universal transportation; students are only guaranteed transportation if they live farther than 1 mile of the school as elementary students, and 2.5 miles as middle or high schoolers.[19,20] If a student wishes to attend a school other than their boundary school, with few exceptions they are not provided district transportation, limiting the options that are reasonably available to students.

The district has attempted to address these barriers in specific parts of the city. As the district implemented wide scale turnaround efforts in Far Northeast Denver (see Denver's Next Journey: School Improvement), expanding the number of schools in the region was a key strategy. There the district launched the Success Express, a regional bus servicing multiple neighborhoods and multiple schools, enabling thousands of students to attend a broader set of school options without the need for private transportation. This was then expanded with a second Success Express in Near Northeast Denver serving the Cole, Whittier, Five Points, Clayton, and Skyland neighborhoods. Then a further expansion occurred in Southwest Denver to connect middle school students with a broad set of regional middle schools, allowing more families with transportation challenges to select from a wider set of schools for their student. Yet ridership is low; on average in 2017, 11% of eligible students rode Success Express in Far Northeast, and 9% of eligible students did so in Near Northeast, raising questions about how transportation is leveraged to support students to access schools.[21]

Yet it is not just the logistics of attending schools outside one's neighborhood that are complicated. The streamlined process can be confusing and hard to navigate. In an effort to reduce barriers to access, the district built out a suite of supports to provide information to families. During the SchoolChoice application window the district provides enrollment assistance at roughly 150 locations. For year-round support, the district created family engagement centers in Far Northeast and Southwest Denver. Enrollment Guides publish key information like school location, hours, program details, academic quality, and support programs, about each school to support the research process for families. The district also hosts school expos in each region of the city that give families an opportunity to meet the school staff to learn more about them.

In December 2014, CRPE published an evaluation of how parents in eight cities experienced school choice in various contexts.[22] A testament to the supports Denver provides families, in terms of parents' access to information to support their choice process, Denver scored the most favorably for families across all education levels. In fact, Denver parents with an education level

of high school degree or less rated their access to information higher than college-educated parents in every other city. In 2018 the district moved the process entirely online with a multilingual computer and phone-based application. Although a bit of a risk, it had already been implemented in several other cities with positive results. After the completion of the choice process, 1,986 parents completed a DPS survey to answer questions related to their satisfaction with nearly 90% of English-speaking families and more than 90% of Spanish-speaking families reporting a positive experience of the entire unified enrollment process. Roughly 90% of both English and Spanish-speaking families reported a positive overall impression of the new online application.[23]

Changing Enrollment Policies to Broaden Access

Additionally, unified enrollment was supposed to level the playing field by starting to disrupt the tight relationship between housing patterns and access to high quality schools. One district strategy was to create enrollment zones, rather than individual school boundaries, meaning instead of being guaranteed a spot at a single boundary-serving school in their neighborhood, a student would be guaranteed a spot at one of multiple schools in a bigger area. The theory was that, not only would it help the district manage enrollment, but that it would encourage families to find the right fit for their students' learning and increase access to more schools as they served broader catchment areas.[24]

Another evolution in creating a more equitable unified enrollment system was ensuring all schools would serve all students, even if the student had moved between March, when schools are assigned, and August, when school starts. The district has started to do this by requiring schools in enrollment zones to "hold back" seats during the SchoolChoice process. This ensures that students who move to an enrollment zone get access to a school of their choice within the zone, and ensures all schools are responsible for serving some of the district's most mobile students. These students' families often are grappling with poverty, and students tend to be farther behind academically.[25]

Based on these findings, DPS increased the "hold backs" or "placeholders" in enrollment zones and ECE schools from 150 in 2017 to nearly 1,500 seats in 2018, reflecting the need for seats in enrollment zones to support families experiencing housing instability. Ultimately 416 seats were available to students who had moved into enrollment zones that would not have been available to them otherwise.[26]

Finally the unified enrollment process has enabled the district to gauge family demand for schools. Specifically, there are some schools with seemingly never-ending waitlists, and others whose enrollment has skyrocketed as more students have choiced into those schools. An illustrative example is McAuliffe International. When it launched in 2012 there were only 150 students in 6th grade, but it quickly became a high-quality popular option for families with long waitlists. In response the district relocated and expanded the size of the school such that there were 530 6th grade students in 2018. This expansion expanded access to a top choice for many families.

Unified Enrollment and Segregation

There is significant debate about whether socioeconomic or racial integration should be the responsibility or a goal of a public education system. Yet the fact that race and class are closely linked to education access means that it is important to understand the relationship between enrollment processes and segregation.

The end of court-ordered busing in Denver in the mid 1990s and return to the neighborhood school model have resulted in a high level of segregation due in large part to segregated housing patterns. Today families' school choices are still constrained by geography.[27] Some argue that choice—or allowing students to attend a school other than their assigned school—has been seen as one lever for countering segregated housing patterns. Yet in a city where neighborhoods have rapidly gentrified, others point to evidence that choice has enabled families to opt out of their local neighborhood school, potentially increasing segregation in schools relative to more integrated communities.[28,29]

Understanding how the unified enrollment system impacts school-level segregation is complicated, and requires much deeper inquiry than currently available. The district has used enrollment to address segregated schools. In the 2007 Supreme Court case Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, the Court ruled race-based enrollment initiatives unlawful. Thus, socioeconomic based strategies serve as the primary method for increasing integration between students with different backgrounds. DPS has sought to increase the level of integration through several actions, including creating shared enrollment zones that encompass several neighborhoods with different levels of income and introducing new school models that attract a wider set of families. The results have been mixed: in some cases, like Greater Park Hill-Stapleton socioeconomic segregation between middle schools significantly decreased. Yet in Near Northeast middle schools socioeconomic and racial segregation significantly increased after the implementation of an enrollment zone. Other zones have seen more modest or negligible impacts on segregation.[30]

In 2015, DPS took another step by starting a pilot program that gives a priority in the assignment system to students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch into roughly 30 of the most affluent schools in the city. Yet, given that many of the participating schools are filled to capacity with students living within the school boundary, the pilot did not have a large impact and the schools remain inaccessible to most of the city's students.[31]

The structure of enrollment policies, including a unified enrollment system, can act as levers or constraints to impact integration; the extent of the impact remains a question in Denver.

What if Choice Did Not Exist?

The unified enrollment system, in conjunction with other school improvement strategies like the development of new schools, the shift from school enrollment boundaries to enrollment zones in many neighborhoods, the change in school funding that allocates resources based on enrollment, and the pressures on schools to "sell" their program, have raised questions about whether Denver should return to the pre-SchoolChoice era and a refocus on neighborhood schools. Some suggest that the elimination of unified enrollment would solve some of the district's challenges. In a district focused on improving equitable outcomes for students, would this be the right course of action?

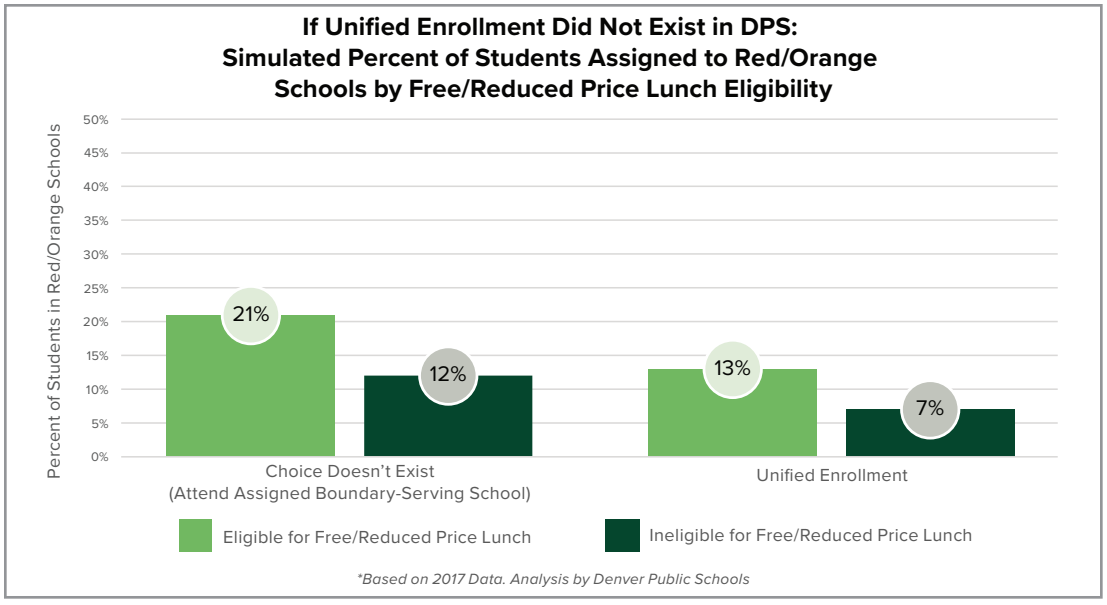
First, it is helpful to understand the magnitude of students and families who leverage choice. Even going back to 2009, close to half of DPS students were already attending a school other than their boundary school, a trend that continued. Some of these choice options are among the most popular and high-performing in the city, including district schools and charter schools, boundary-serving and non-boundary schools. A unified enrollment system helps connect students to those options in a more transparent and equitable manner.

Second, it is critical to understand whether unified enrollment has expanded students' access to high performing schools. To delve into this question we compare access to schools under unified enrollment with the hypothetical environment where all students attended their boundary school. Using 2017 round 1 data and the 2016 SPF, the unified enrollment process results in a large reduction in the number of students attending a school rated orange or red, the district's lowest ratings for academic outcomes in schools, versus if all students attended their boundary school. All students benefit, though students eligible for free or reduced price lunch benefit to a greater extent than their more affluent peers. There is an 8 percentage point reduction in the percent of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch attending a red or orange school because of the ability to attend a choice option. The percent of students ineligible for free or reduced price lunch in red or orange schools declines 5 points.

"If all schools were capable of (and willing to) provide equitable access to an exceptional, well-rounded education for all students—those of color, high poverty, special needs, gifted and etc., would we need to spend all of this time "marketing" choice?"

– Kristen Barnes, Northwest Denver Parent, Committee Chair of the DPS District Accountability Committee

Just the Facts:
Fewer students are assigned "red" or "orange" rated schools through unified enrollment than if all students attended their neighborhood boundary-serving school.



Unintended Consequences of Unified Enrollment

There are areas beyond what this brief explored where unified enrollment impacts schools, families, and educators. A key concern is how the process impacts school-based administrators and educators. In some parts of the city there are far more seats available for students than there are students to fill them. For example, in Central Denver there are 14,295 seats, yet in 2023 there are forecast to be 7,343 students who live in the region.[32] In this context, enrollment zones may provide families more stability and predictability, where as with smaller, neighborhood-centric boundaries the district would need to frequently re-draw boundaries to reflect student population changes.

As enrollment declines or capacity significantly exceeds the number of students in the region, the extent to which schools now have to "compete" for student enrollment has increased. It means that schools have to differentiate and articulate their program and offerings to families in a fundamentally different way than when boundary enrollment was guaranteed. It is critical that the district ensure that it supports schools to explain their work to students and families, and that school-level staff time spent on "marketing" the school does not take away from the classroom.

As schools continue to confront a world where student enrollment is not guaranteed, there are questions about whether the system leaves district-run boundary schools without resources to serve students in the building. The intersection of choice and capacity needs will be fundamentally different than the past decade in parts of the city with declining enrollment, and in particular the district will need to be transparent about the ways it manages small schools.

Looking to the Past Present and Future

Some of the key questions we set out to answer in this brief were: What are the systems the district has created that enable students and families to choose what school they attend? How have these structures impacted equitable access to quality schools? To different school options? How are different groups participating in choice?

Much of the evidence shows that the unified SchoolChoice system that DPS implemented in 2012 has increased equitable access for all families in Denver. More families are participating in SchoolChoice. Many families whose students qualify for free or reduced price lunch are gaining access to higher quality schools through SchoolChoice, reducing but not eliminating the correlation between zip code and educational opportunity.

And yet unified enrollment certainly does not fully solve a highly inequitable system where more affluent students are still more likely to access the city's highest performing schools. The critique that an emphasis on unified enrollment has resulted in the neglect of neighborhood boundary schools begs the question of how the district is also supporting schools to improve, and to offer a program and approach that is responsive and reflective of communities. There are key questions Denver needs to grapple with as it supports more students to access a school that meets their needs.

> "So many families don't think they have options, but they really do. Where we live all the schools are failing. But choice has allowed me to send my son to a great school. We drive far to make sure he goes and he is happy to be there. Choice has changed our lives."
>
> *– Martha Gonzales, KIPP Parent and Parent Leader with Transform Education Now (TEN)*

Essential Questions for the Next Journey

- Knowing that "choice" has long existed and will continue to exist, how will DPS make enrollment systems more equitable, ensuring all families can participate and the system works to equalize access to schools? How will enrollment systems support different families including low-income families, families with students receiving special education services and others?
- How does the district reflect upon and proactively address unintended consequences of the unified enrollment system, including supporting boundary-serving schools in a new role competing for enrollment?
- How can the district evaluate and eliminate more real and perceived barriers, including transportation and entrance requirements, for families to access different schools and programs?
- What are the pieces of information families need beyond heavily-weighted test scores to make informed decisions during any enrollment process? What role can community partnerships play to better support families during unified enrollment?
- How can schools and families have real opportunities to work in partnership to improve school performance as opposed to families leaving for higher performing options through the unified enrollment system?
- Can the Denver community and district better understand the relationship between community changes including gentrification, unified enrollment systems, and school access?

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