

Chicago: A Choice District

Only half of students across the district choose to attend their zoned schools. At the high school level, only 27% of students attend their zoned schools.



By: Kasia Kalata and Jelani McEwen

Chicago's public school system has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past twenty years. The transformation has gone largely unnoticed, but it has had a profound impact on the city's overall educational performance. Unlike twenty years ago, Chicago students are now just as likely to attend a school choice option as they are to attend their local zoned school. As we demonstrate in this issue brief, Chicago students are far better off because of school choice.

In 1988, U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett declared Chicago's public schools "the worst in the nation." In the decade following this remark, Chicago took a series of steps designed to create higher quality schools. The district established new selective enrollment schools and, beginning in 1997, launched the first generation of charter public schools, which created open enrollment schools in communities across the city with the greatest needs. Chicago's strategy to address the dire state of its public school system was to create new high-performing schools and increase access to these schools for all families.

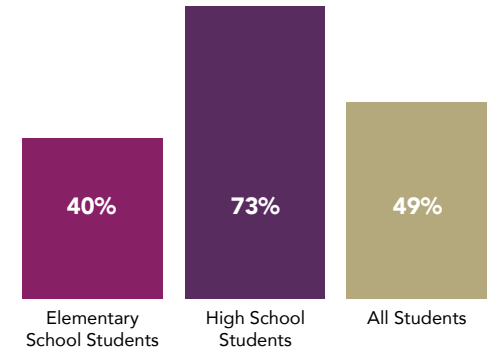
Mayor Richard M. Daley and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) CEO Arne Duncan renewed the city's commitment to this strategy in 2004 through the Renaissance 2010 initiative. This effort sought to close low-performing schools and open 100 new innovative schools, mostly charter public schools, in a continued effort to increase student performance and parent options. Renaissance 2010 had a bold vision to provide all students with access to high-quality schools, not just those students in the top academic tiers.

Since these schools first opened, parent demand has fueled the growth of additional schools in Chicago. In 1996, the year the charter law was passed, charter public schools served 76 students. Today, that number exceeds 64,000 across the state. Tens of thousands of families choose to send their children to charter public schools, and many

thousands more exercise their right to choose a district-run school other than the one assigned to them by the system.

Today, half of Chicago families send their children to a school other than the one they are zoned to based on their address.² For high schoolers, this pattern is even more dramatic: only one in three students attends his or her zoned high school. This issue brief examines the choices parents are making and answers a critical question: Has 20 years of evolution into a "choice district" been good for students?

How many CPS students are opting out of their zoned schools?



"There are a number of reasons I choose to send my children to Catalyst Maria Charter School. They have phenomenal teachers who keep parents informed about what their scholars are learning and whether they need additional support. The teachers set high standards for their students and work with families to ensure that no child is slipping through the cracks. With the support of Catalyst Maria's dedicated teachers, I know that we are setting my daughters up for success for college and beyond."

– Carol Coker, proud Catalyst Maria Charter School parent and resident of Chatham on the South Side of Chicago

Two Decades of Chicago Charter Public School Growth¹

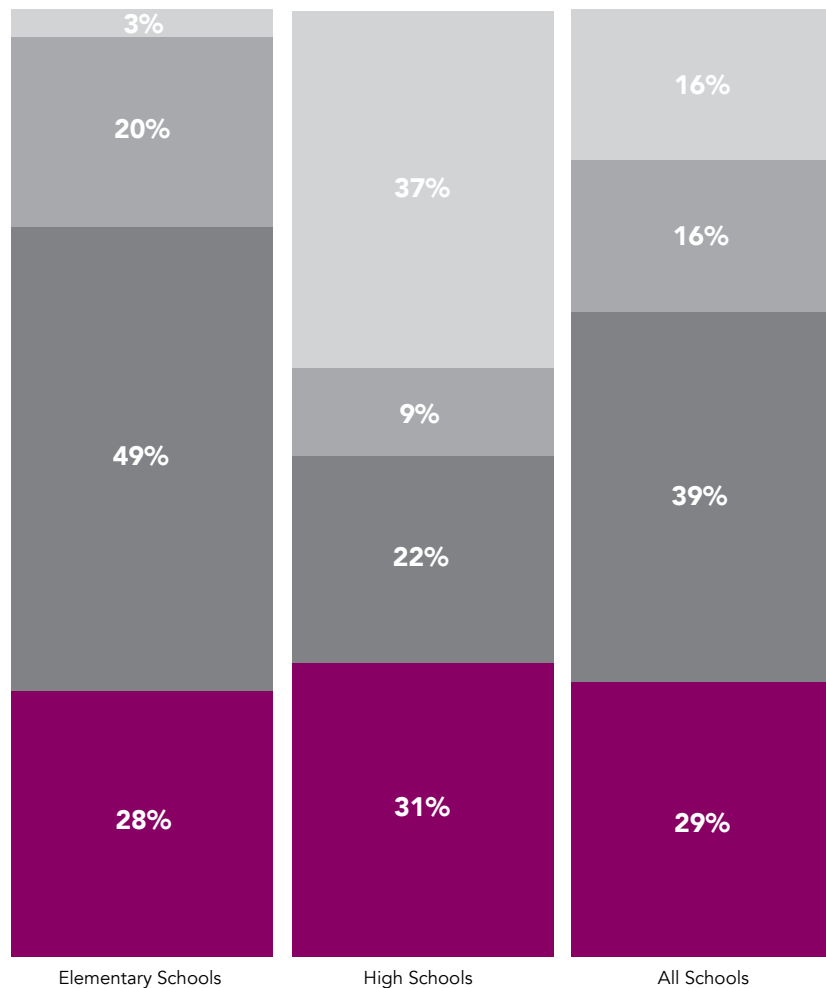


Where are parents opting to send their children?

Students across the city are opting out of their zoned schools at record rates. Contrary to claims that charter public schools are driving this trend, parents most often opt out of their zoned schools for other district-run schools. Accordingly, the claim that charter public schools are “stealing” students from their zoned schools misses the point entirely. Families are making choices every day among a variety of public school options.

At the elementary level, more than half of the students who leave their zoned schools enroll in other district-run schools outside of their attendance boundaries; for high schoolers, more than two-thirds opt out for other district-run schools. Taken together, only 29% of Chicago students who leave their zoned schools attend charter public schools, while the majority attend other district-run schools. Put simply, charter public school enrollment is a relatively small contributor to the enrollment declines facing some other Chicago public schools. Overall, this dynamic proves that parents are actively exercising their right to choose a school that better fits their children’s needs, regardless of school type.

Of students who opt out, what type of school are they attending?

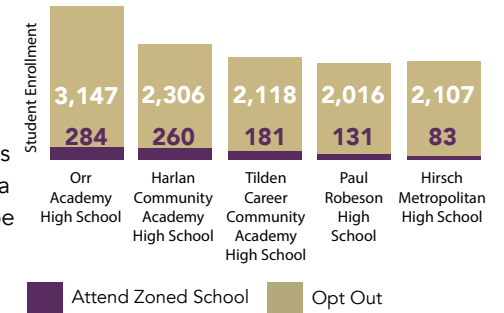


Students Who Choose:



The lowest performing high schools have been losing students for years. The effect is most pronounced among a dozen or so high schools that had once been fully utilized but have now lost hundreds of students. For example, 12,633 students are zoned to five of the lowest-performing high schools in the city. That’s more than enough students to fully enroll each of those high schools, yet only 939 attend.

The lowest rated high schools retain as few as 4% of their zoned students.



So what is really happening?

The problem is not only that these communities have lost population. It is that parents who live there have lost faith in these schools and are opting out for schools that promise a better future for their children. This should be celebrated, not criticized.

SCHOOL TYPE DEFINITIONS

Selective Schools: Selective schools provide students who meet certain academic criteria with a challenging and enriched experience. Any school that has selective admissions practices using test scores for at least 50% of its seats is considered a selective school in our analyses. The majority of selective schools are citywide schools that do not have attendance boundaries. However, there are a few selective schools in which a portion of the students are zoned to the school, while the majority come from outside the neighborhood boundary by way of a selective admissions process.

Citywide Non-Selective Schools (e.g. Magnet Schools): Citywide non-selective schools are district-run, open enrollment schools that offer another option to parents and students who are interested in schools outside of their neighborhood. Students may apply and are randomly accepted for available spaces through a computerized lottery.

Attendance Area Non-Selective Schools: Every child residing in Chicago has a CPS district-run school they are assigned to in their attendance boundary. Students who live within the attendance boundary do not need to submit an application. Students living outside of the area may apply if there are open seats.

Charter Public Schools: Charter public schools are independent and mission-driven public, open enrollment schools. Charter schools are tuition free and open to all children. There are no entrance requirements or admission tests required to attend a charter school. Students are selected through a randomized lottery if there are more applications than available seats.

School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP)³

The CPS School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) is the district’s policy for measuring annual school performance. The SQRP is a five-tiered performance system based on a broad range of indicators of success, including, but not limited to, student test score performance, student academic growth, closing of achievement gaps, school culture and climate, attendance, graduation, and preparation for post-graduation success. High SQRP scores indicate a school’s ability to drive positive academic and life outcomes for students.

SQRP Level Rating	1+	1	2+	2	3
Overall Score	4.0 or more	Between 3.5 and 3.9	Between 3.0 and 3.4	Between 2.0 and 2.9	Less than 2.0
Accountability Status	Good Standing	Good Standing	Good Standing	Provisional Support	Intensive Support

How are parent choices affecting their children's educational opportunities?

Parents are aware of the quality of their local schools, and when zoned to a low-performing school, a staggering number of families are choosing to go elsewhere. The lower the performance level of the school, the more likely families are to opt out. Eighty-three percent of families zoned to schools with the worst CPS rating are finding a better option for their children, while only 30% of families who are zoned to the highest performing schools, or Level 1+ schools, are choosing other schools.

By a wide margin, this enrollment mobility has led to more students getting a better education. In fact, of all students who opt out of their zoned school, over 80% attend a higher or equally-performing school. At the high school level, 95% attend a higher or equally-performing school. This trend holds even if students who are fortunate enough to gain entrance at one of the official selective enrollment high schools in CPS, like Walter Payton College Prep, Northside College Prep, and Whitney M. Young Magnet High School, are excluded.

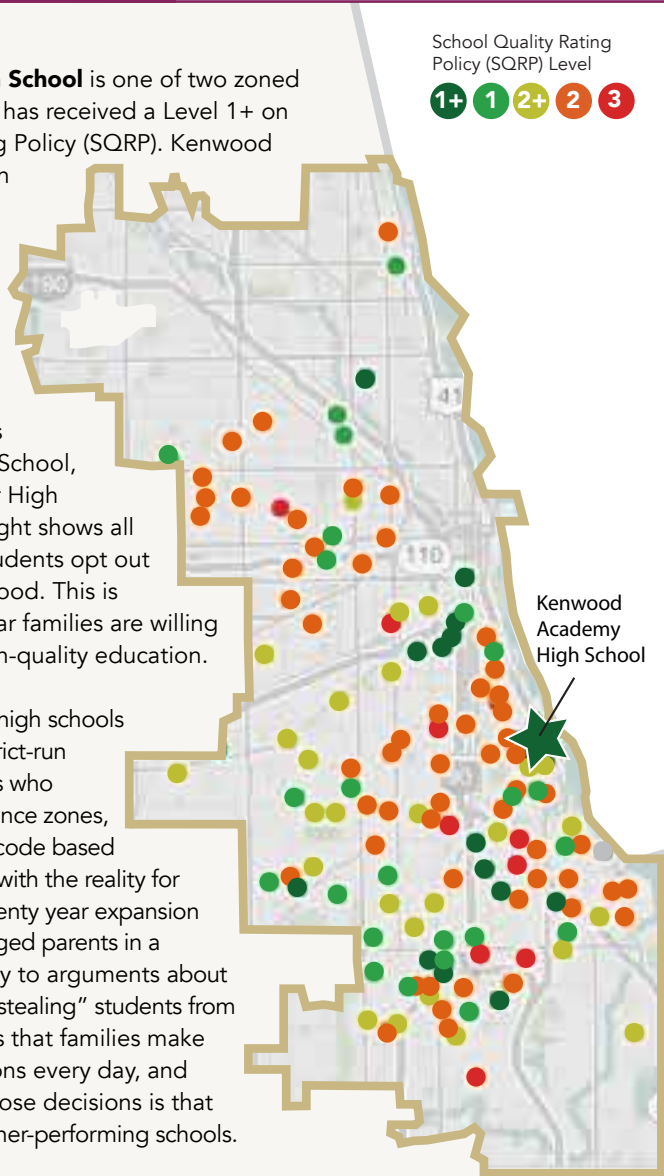
Expanded school choice has led to better opportunities for students. Unlike 25 years ago, when zip code truly determined educational opportunity, today parents have more choices and are finding better schools by any means necessary.

SCHOOL CHOICE IN ACTION

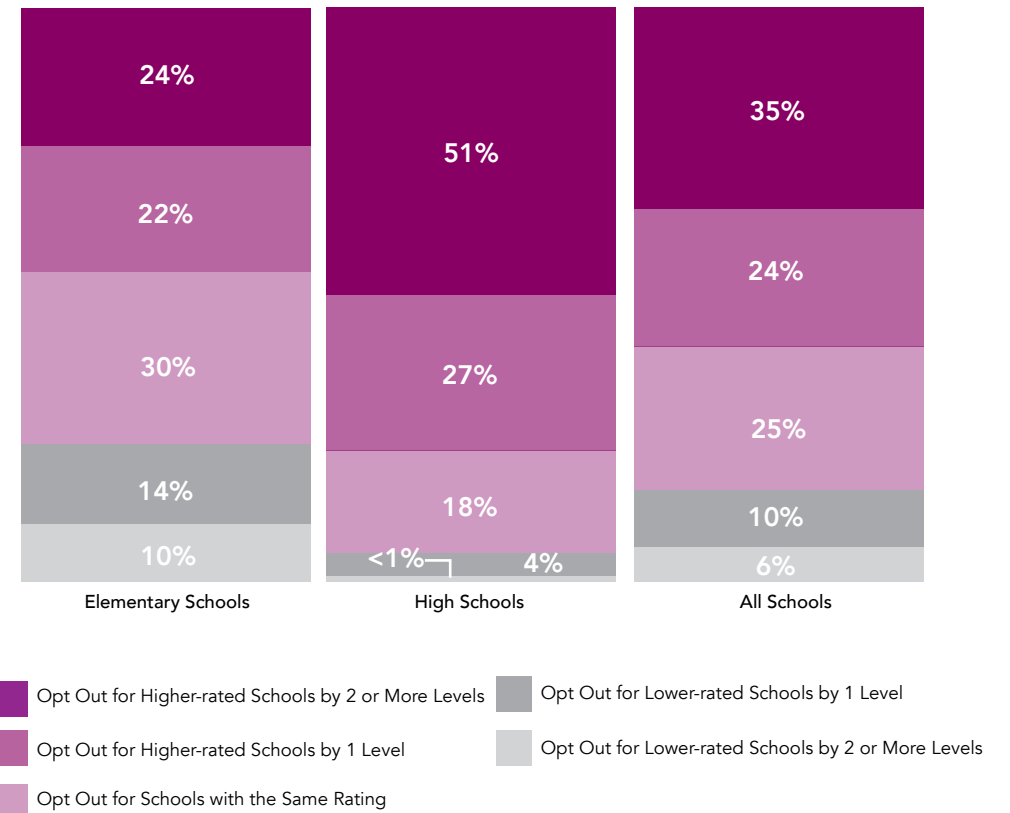
Kenwood Academy High School is one of two zoned Chicago high schools that has received a Level 1+ on CPS' School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP). Kenwood is the attendance area high school for students living in the Hyde Park and Kenwood communities.

At present, Kenwood enrolls students from all over the city, as far north as Sullivan High School, as far west as Kennedy High School, and as far south as Fenger High School. The map on the right shows all 134 zoned schools that students opt out of to instead attend Kenwood. This is just one example of how far families are willing to travel in search of a high-quality education.

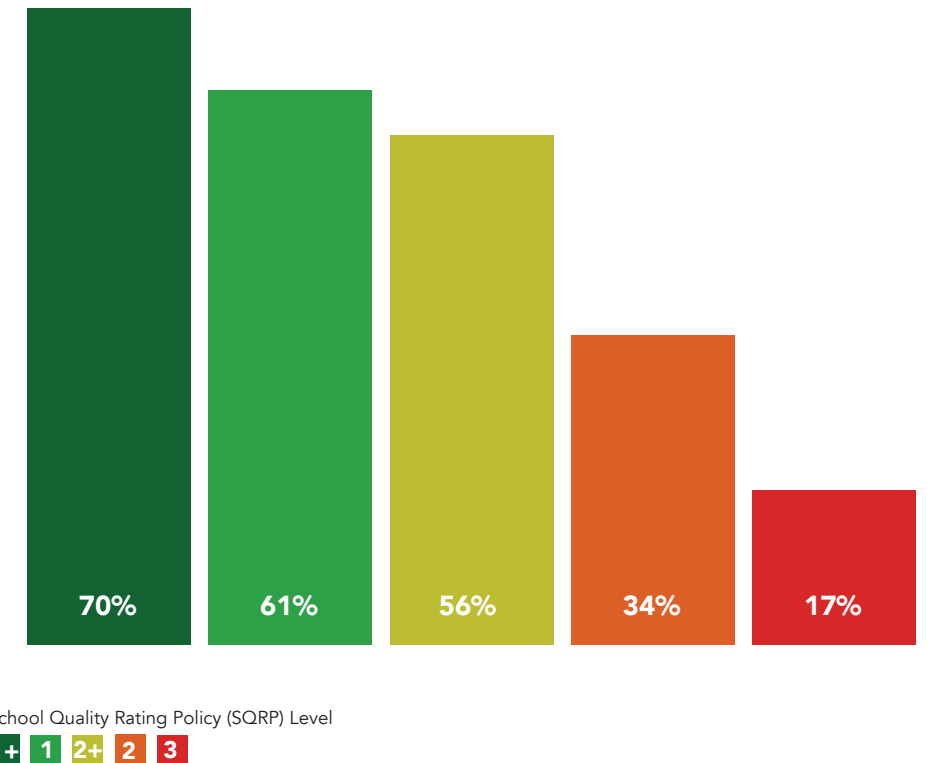
This pattern is repeated at high schools throughout the city. All district-run high schools enroll students who reside outside their attendance zones, making the notion of a zip-code based enrollment system at odds with the reality for most families. Chicago's twenty year expansion of school options has engaged parents in a very personal way. Contrary to arguments about one type of public school "stealing" students from another, the simple reality is that families make rational enrollment decisions every day, and the cumulative effect of those decisions is that more students enroll in higher-performing schools.



Do students who opt out of zoned schools attend better schools?



Based on the quality of their zoned schools, what proportion of students choose to attend them?



What role do charter public schools play within a "choice district"?

In many respects, Chicago charter public schools have led the way for district-wide achievement since their inception. Today, nearly 3 out of every 4 charter schools outperform the average SQRP score of their students' zoned schools. The figure below shows how each charter school's score on the district accountability rating scale compares to the average score of the schools their attending students were zoned to. Schools farther to the right outperform their students' zoned school average to a greater degree.

SCHOOL CHOICE IN ACTION

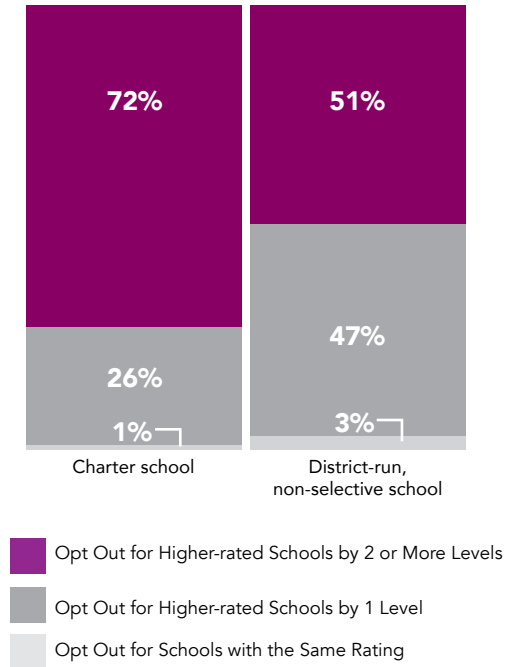
CICS Lloyd Bond is a Level 1+ charter public school that is providing a safe, high-quality school option for families who may not have the resources to travel to another school outside of their neighborhood. While the majority of schools enroll students from other neighborhoods, most CICS Lloyd Bond students live in or near the Altgeld Gardens housing project on the far South Side of Chicago, where the school is located. Many of the students living in this community have limited access to high-performing schools and are zoned to schools rated at least two SQRP levels or lower than CICS Lloyd Bond. This charter public school is defeating the odds and improving education outcomes for students in one of Chicago's most isolated neighborhoods.

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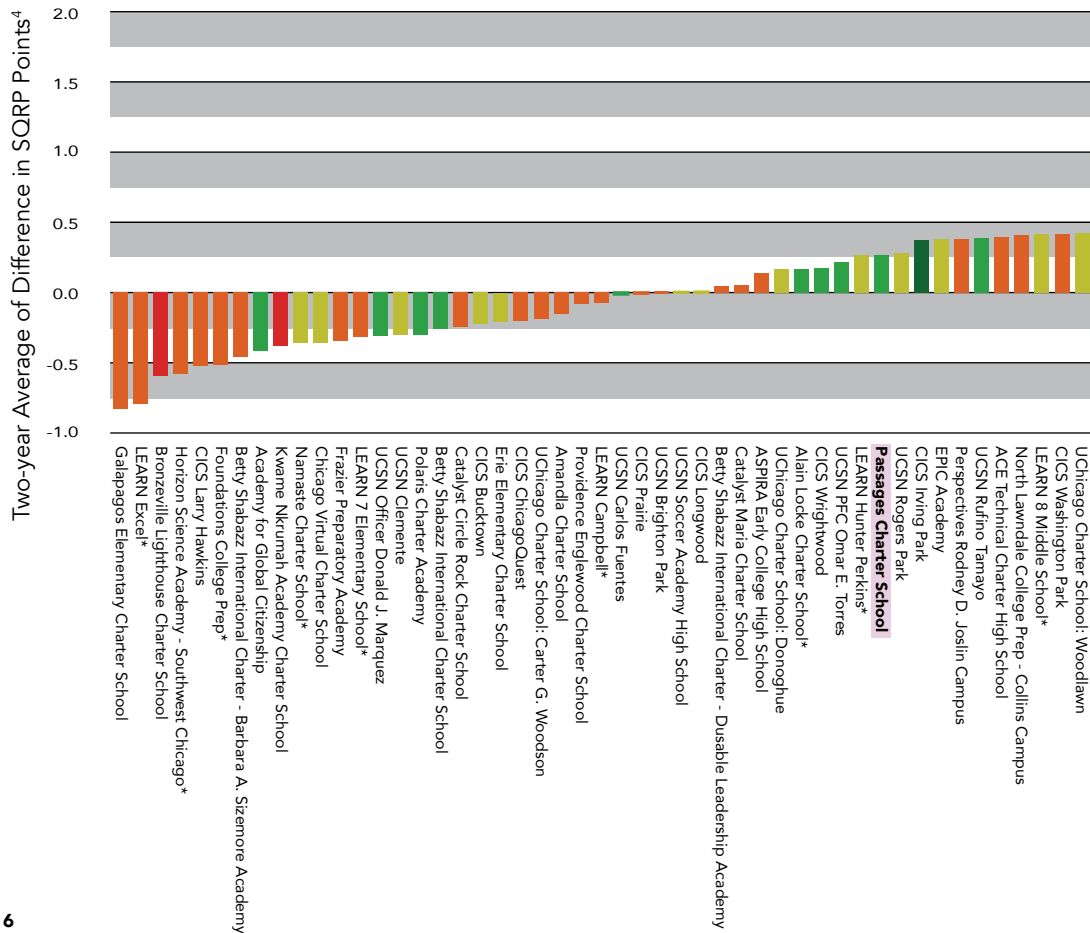
Some parents might be choosing a charter school explicitly for a higher-rated school. But other factors may also come into play. In the case of **Passages Charter School**, highlighted below, many of the students attending Passages opted into the school from other highly-rated schools. In this case, quality may not be the sole motivator for choosing a new school. Passages has a unique mission, curriculum, and culture focused on supporting the needs of immigrant families. As a division of Asian Human Services (AHS), parents and students at Passages have access to social service programs that help them transition to a new country, including adult literacy classes, computer training, employment services, health education, and medical assistance.

After studying the overall trends, some may be concerned that only students who already have access to high-quality schools are benefiting from this system that empowers parent choice. However, after considering the impact on students zoned to the lowest rated schools in the city, it is clear that charter public schools provide better options for these students as well. The figure to the right shows that among students opting out of the lowest rated zoned schools for a charter school, 72% end up with a school at least 2 full SQRP points better. In other words, 7 in 10 students zoned to a failing school are able to enroll in a school that is not just better than their failing school, but meets objective standards of 'good standing' by the district. What's more is that families zoned to a failing school have a higher probability of choosing a school in 'good standing' if they choose a charter school over a district-run school (72% vs. 51%).

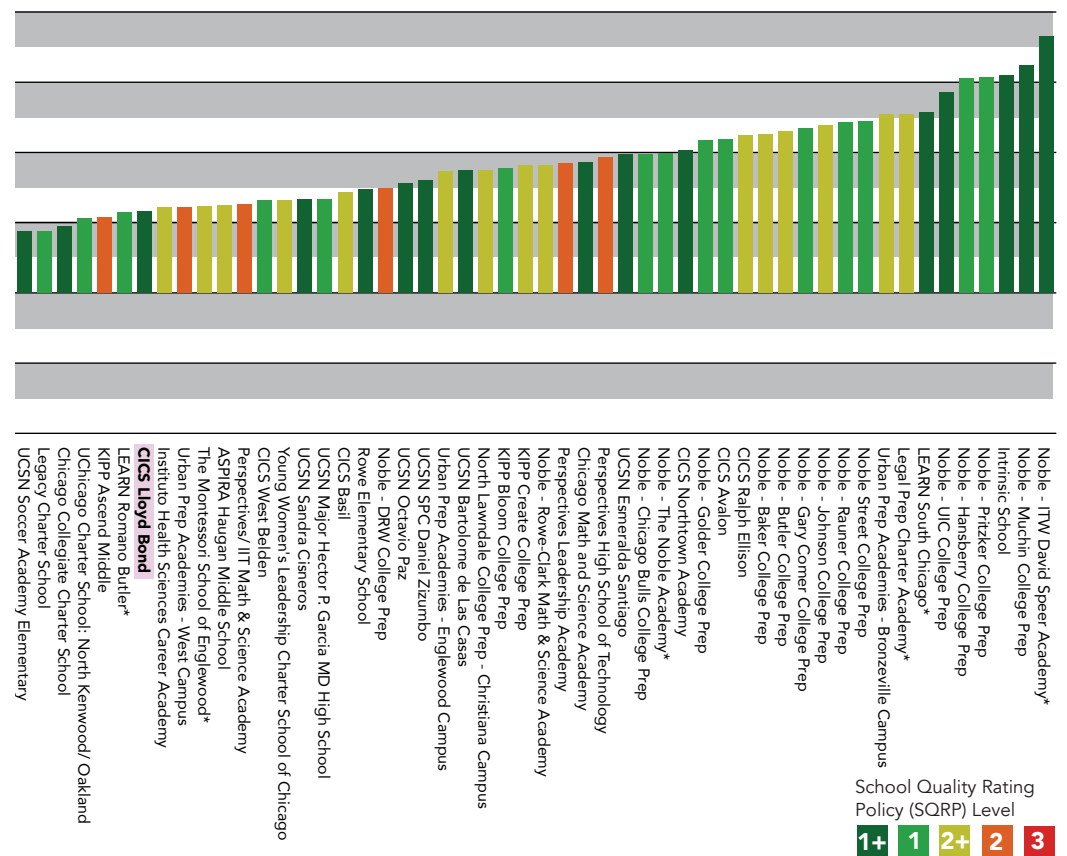
Among students zoned to a Level 3 school, how much better off are students who opt out and choose a charter school or another district-run, non-selective school?



How does the two-year average performance of a charter school compare to the



two-year average performance of the schools its students were zoned to?



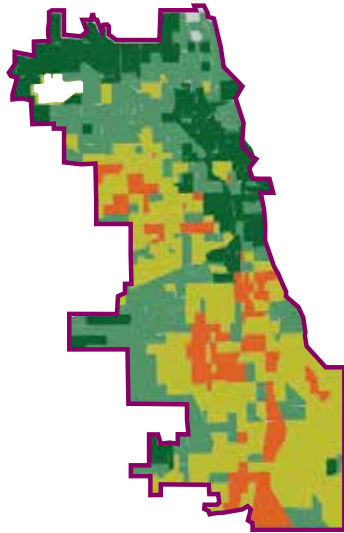
*Charter school SQRP points are based only on ratings received in 2015-2016; the school did not receive a rating in 2014-2015, so a 2-year average cannot be calculated.

Do all families have a choice?

What is the average SQRP level of schools attended by students living in each census tract?

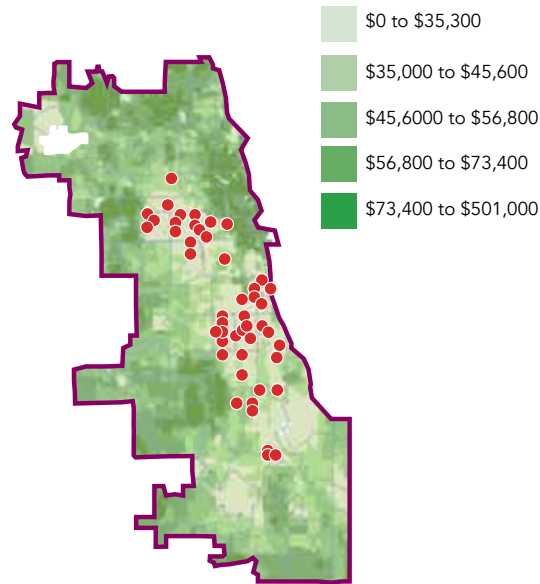
School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) Level⁵

1+ 1 2+ 2 3



Where in the city are the lowest rated (Level 3) schools from the past two years located?

Household Income By Census Block⁶



Just because school choice is working for thousands of families does not mean the city's work is done. Every child in Chicago deserves a seat in a high-quality school. The sad reality is that there are still pockets of our city where few, if any, of these opportunities exist nearby. Low-quality schools, including all five of this year's Level 3 high schools, are located in communities that are almost exclusively low-income. When families face competing priorities, such as safety, logistical ease, and academic rigor, some are forced to sacrifice academic outcomes due to the constraints on their resources, information, or mobility. The city is not serving these students well.

In a recent ethnographic study,⁷ Mary Pattillo, Harold Washington Professor of Sociology and African American Studies at Northwestern University and Faculty Affiliate at the Institute for Policy Research, explored how parents living in a predominantly African American neighborhood in Chicago utilized their school choice options. She noted that several parents' preferences for nearby schools "did not stem from a limited worldview or reluctance to make sacrifices for their children's learning, but rather reflected real safety risks, coordination impossibilities, economic hardships, and concerns for their children's special circumstances. In each of these cases, parents exercised individual agency by weighing options and making the best decisions they could, under the circumstances." If traveling to a better school is not a feasible option for families, our city must do more to provide them with a high-quality education. Every student deserves a close, safe, and rigorous education that meets his or her needs and learning style.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sophie Wharton Smith, Data Manager, Illinois Network of Charter Schools
Yuanqi Wang, INCS Education Pioneer, Summer 2015

FOOTNOTES

1. Enrollment figures from the Illinois State Board of Education Fall Enrollment Counts: isbe.net/research/htmls/fall_housing.htm
2. All data on enrollment patterns are from Chicago Public Schools and the 2015-2016 school year. All analyses exclude students who attend alternative, special education, or therapeutic schools instead of their assigned zone school. All analyses include students who are admitted to selective enrollment schools.

After nearly 20 years of evolution into a "choice district," has school quality improved?

Yes. Parents are opting out of lower-performing schools at staggering rates, and on the whole, children are receiving a better education as a result. But, the work is not done. In our vision for Chicago, children born to any zip code have the same great chance at leading a life full of opportunity. This starts with ensuring access to a great education for every student living on every block in Chicago.

So what's next?

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Illinois Network of Charter Schools stands ready to work with any organization seriously committed to improving the quality of public schools in our city. We envision a day when every school in Chicago is high-quality and every family has the power, access, and information to make the best choice for their child. To further these aims, Chicago should take the following steps:

1. Expand High-Quality School Options to Areas of the City without Access to Quality Schools

For many families, economic status or geography limit their ability to activate all choices. Chicago needs a dedicated plan to increase the number of quality school options in communities with the highest number of low-performing schools. A choice that is inconvenient is no choice at all.

2. Create a Common Application for Families

Chicago has an extraordinarily complicated application process for high school. There are selective enrollment schools, charter public schools, contract schools, IB programs within schools, options schools, turnaround schools, and many more varieties for parents to choose from. Most of the 140 high schools in Chicago have separate applications. The result is that a CPS parent maneuvering the system is faced with more than 100 unique applications and a terribly difficult process to navigate, especially for families with the least resources. Chicago Public Schools should streamline the enrollment process, consolidate applications, and create consistent enrollment timeframes across all CPS high schools to fix this problem.

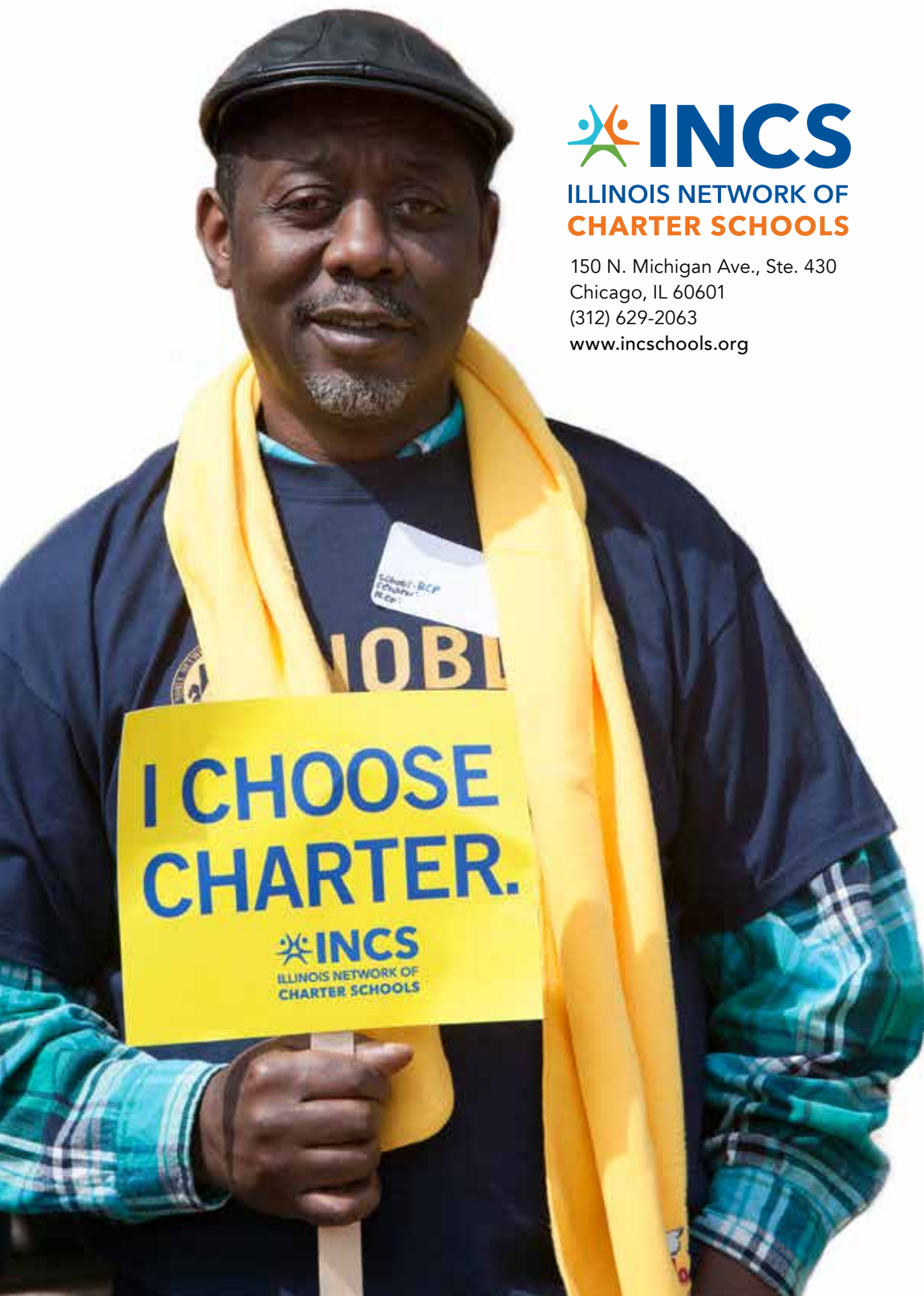
3. Enroll Students in the Highest-Performing Schools

In light of the reality that comparatively few students attend their zoned schools, we propose that students be zoned to a school on the basis of quality instead of address alone. The district should zone students to the highest-performing schools with capacity within three miles of their address. Families could still choose to opt out and return to the school closest to home if that served their needs. This practice would make quality the driving factor while still affording students access to a school nearby. Families in Chicago have long faced barriers to educational opportunities and inequities along racial and socioeconomic lines, but this system would help break down those barriers and allow many more students to attend higher performing schools.

3. For more information on SQRP, visit cps.edu/sqrp. Unless otherwise indicated, all analyses of school quality use the most recent SQRP ratings released in the 2015-2016 school year and are available on cps.edu/schooldata.
4. For each charter school, we calculate the 2-year average SQRP points of the schools its enrolled students were originally zoned to and derive a weighted average of those zoned schools. This weighted average is then compared to the 2-year average SQRP points earned by the charter school in order to find the difference in performance.
5. Census tract SQRP averages are calculated by taking a weighted average using the number of the students living in each tract and the SQRP points of the school students attend. Student information aggregated by census tract is from Chicago Public Schools, 2015-2016 school year.
6. Income data from Nielsen "Pop-Facts" via Tableau (tableau.com/mapdata)
7. Pattillo, Mary. "Everyday Politics Of School Choice In The Black Community." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* Du Bois Rev. 12.01 (2015): 41-71.

About the Illinois Network of Charter Schools (INCS)

INCS is dedicated to the improvement of public education by establishing high-quality charter public schools that transform lives and communities. As the voice of Illinois charter schools, INCS advocates for legislation on behalf of the charter sector, provides support to strengthen charter schools, and influences education policy for the benefit of all public school students. Learn more at www.incschools.org.



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