



# Getting Into High School in Philadelphia

The workings of a complicated system



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## About this report

This report was researched and written by Michelle Schmitt, an officer with The Pew Charitable Trusts' Philadelphia research initiative. Assistance by Pew colleagues included a methodology review by Alan van der Hilst. The report was edited by Larry Eichel, director of the Philadelphia research initiative, along with Elizabeth Lowe, Daniel LeDuc, and Bernard Ohanian.

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## About the Philadelphia research initiative

Pew's Philadelphia research initiative provides timely, impartial research and analysis on key issues facing Philadelphia for the benefit of the city's residents and leaders.

**Contact:** Elizabeth Lowe, communications officer

**Email:** [elowe@pewtrusts.org](mailto:elowe@pewtrusts.org)

**Project website:** [pewtrusts.org/philaresearch](http://pewtrusts.org/philaresearch)

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**The Pew Charitable Trusts** is driven by the power of knowledge to solve today's most challenging problems. Pew applies a rigorous, analytical approach to improve public policy, inform the public, and invigorate civic life.

## Overview

In the School District of Philadelphia, students are not required to attend a particular high school. A wide—and potentially bewildering—variety of choices confronts eighth-graders and their parents. To go anywhere other than their neighborhood high schools, students must identify the options they think fit their needs and apply to them.

Counting charter schools, Philadelphia has 98 publicly funded high schools, some of which offer multiple programs. These include 24 neighborhood schools, the majority of which are rated as low-quality under the district's accountability system. Most eighth-graders apply to other programs that get better ratings and are more selective, including 21 highly competitive "special admission" programs—all of which have academic standards for admission—and 121 less competitive programs categorized by the district as "citywide admission." Also available are 43 charter high schools, which are publicly funded but not operated by the school district.

The Pew Charitable Trusts, working with data provided by the School District of Philadelphia, analyzed the process of matching students who were eighth-graders in 2014-15 with district-run high schools for the subsequent school year. The analysis sought to shed light on two central topics: How the application, admission, and enrollment process worked for students applying to ninth grade—and who attended the special admission schools, presumably the most desirable of the district-run institutions. In the end, 3,468 students went to these schools, accounting for 26 percent of the ninth-graders districtwide. The system, which has changed little since then, had elements that were complex and potentially challenging for students and parents to navigate.

The vast majority of students participated in a centralized application process. First they filled out an online form, listing up to five schools in order of preference. Then they found out which schools had admitted them and chose among the available options. In addition, other decisions made by students and their families affected the outcomes.

Some eighth-graders with qualifying test scores made no attempt to get into the special admission schools. Other students, once accepted, turned down the offers, enrolling at their neighborhood schools or somewhere else. And a number of students, once enrolled, did not come to school when the academic year opened in September. Opting out at these decision points was more common among certain groups of students, particularly Latinos. Superintendent William R. Hite Jr. called the disappearance of any qualified student from the special admission pipeline a "lost opportunity" for both the district and the student.

The analysis found that acceptance to the special admission schools for 2015-16 depended on three factors:

- The academic qualifications of the student, with test scores playing a key role. For each school, minimum applicant scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test were listed in the district's high school directory; many students who did not have those scores applied anyway.
- Student and parent/guardian participation in the application process, through which they selected the schools the students wanted to attend.
- Admission decisions made independently by administrators at individual schools.

Even though school officials said a student's test scores are a key to acceptance at the special admission schools, some eighth-graders who lacked the minimum scores got in—11 percent of admitted students came from this group—and some who had the scores were rejected. District officials said the admission of students who did not meet the test-score criteria occurred in some cases because individual schools did not have enough qualified applicants. Rejections of students who did have the minimum scores were probably based on their grades, poor performance in an interview or audition, attendance and behavior records, or lack of space.

All of these factors resulted in ninth-grade student bodies at the special admission schools in 2015-16 that differed in a number of ways from the district's ninth-graders as a whole:

- There were higher percentages of Asians and whites, and lower percentages of Latinos and blacks. Among all ninth-graders, 56 percent were black, 19 percent Latino, 14 percent white, and 7 percent Asian. At the special admission schools, the numbers were 51 percent black, 12 percent Latino, 16 percent white, and 17 percent Asian.
- There were smaller percentages of low-income students. Although individuals receiving federal poverty assistance accounted for 60 percent of all ninth-graders, they represented 51 percent of those in the special admission schools.
- There were more girls and fewer boys. In the district as a whole, 51 percent of ninth-graders were boys and 49 percent girls, but at the special admission schools, the figures were 41 percent boys and 59 percent girls.

Also present at lower percentages in special admission schools than in the district as a whole were English language learners and students receiving special education support because of learning difficulties or physical disabilities.

The analysis indicates that test scores were a key reason for some groups' greater success in getting into the special admission schools. For instance, 61 percent of white and 71 percent of Asian students for whom data were available—mostly eighth-graders who attended district-run schools—had the minimum standardized test scores for nearly all of the special admission schools. But only 33 percent of black and 34 percent of Latino students had the necessary scores.

Among students with qualifying test scores, the special admission schools rejected higher percentages of some groups of students. Those groups included Latinos, blacks, boys, students receiving federal poverty assistance, and those getting special education support. And among those who did not meet the test score criteria, acceptance rates at the special admission schools were higher among Asians and individuals not receiving federal poverty assistance—and lower among Latinos and students receiving special education support.

Analysis of the data indicated that students' neighborhoods mattered as well. In five city ZIP codes, covering mostly high-income parts of Center City and Northwest Philadelphia, more than half of the eighth-graders enrolled in Philadelphia public schools wound up in special admission schools. In much of West Philadelphia, North Philadelphia, and Northeast Philadelphia, the percentage of eighth-graders who went to these schools was below 25 percent. This appeared to be not just a matter of where the students lived but where the schools were located. Enrollment was lower in ZIP codes where the schools were relatively far away or not readily accessible by public transportation.

Finally, the type of schools that students attended in eighth grade was a factor. In 2014-15, there were eight special admission schools or programs open to eighth-graders, all of which had academic admission standards. Eighty percent of eighth-graders who attended these programs went on to special admission high schools. Seventy-three percent of students who went to charter schools for ninth grade also attended charters in eighth grade.

In some ways, this mirrors the college application process: Students apply to multiple schools, some more difficult to get into than others, with the differences in quality having potential implications for students' futures. Each school has its own standards, and administrators at each one make decisions on the applications without knowing where else the student has applied. Students may be admitted to multiple schools or none at all.

In some other urban districts, each student is admitted to a single school after expressing a preference. The central question examined in this report is how the Philadelphia system for placing students in various high schools and programs works—with particular focus on the highly competitive special admission programs.

## The high school application and selection process

### Types of high schools

In terms of admissions, high schools and high school programs in Philadelphia fall into four categories: three for district-run schools—special admission, citywide, and neighborhood—and the fourth, a collection of charter schools, which are independently run but receive public funding. (See Table 1.)

Table 1

### Types of High Schools and Number of Ninth-Graders, 2015-16

School type	Number of schools and programs	Ninth-graders
Special admission	21	3,468
Citywide	121	2,111
Neighborhood	24	3,603
Charter	43	4,013

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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The special admission category is the most selective. Twenty-six percent of ninth-graders (3,468 students) attended special admission high schools in the 2015-16 school year. The category includes entire schools, such as Central High School and the Philadelphia High School for the Creative and Performing Arts. It also includes magnet and International Baccalaureate Diploma Programs at other schools.

These schools and programs have the most stringent academic, attendance, and behavioral criteria. The school district's policy is that acceptance decisions to special admission high schools depend on a combination of these factors. But the importance of each criterion varies from school to school, based on the judgment of the principal. Special admission school principals also have considerable leeway in how they enforce their criteria, sometimes ignoring their school's stated admissions standards. For example, a principal could decide to overlook a student's poor behavior record, even though the admission criteria state that no disciplinary infractions are tolerated. Or a principal might give differential treatment to two students with the same grades, based on which of their previous schools was the more rigorous academically. In the selection process for the academic year 2015-16, standardized test scores were the most clear-cut, objective, and quantifiable of the admissions criteria, although principals said high test scores alone did not guarantee admission.

All special admission schools offer ways for students to earn college credit during high school, through Advanced Placement coursework, the International Baccalaureate program, or dual enrollment options with local universities.<sup>1</sup> Some also require interviews or auditions for admission. All students living in Philadelphia are eligible to apply to them.<sup>2</sup>

Another category consists of citywide schools and programs, most of which are selective but with less stringent academic, attendance, and behavior criteria than the special admission schools. These schools and programs enrolled 16 percent of ninth-graders (2,111 students). Many are small career and technical education (CTE) programs housed in large neighborhood schools. There are also four larger stand-alone CTE schools.<sup>3</sup> Also included in this category are selective high schools with curricula based on specific themes such as Constitution High School, which focuses on law, democracy, and history. Nonselective citywide schools also include three opened by the school district in 2015 to provide project- and experience-based learning. Some offer geographic preferences for students within specific catchment areas or ZIP codes where district officials said students needed more options.<sup>4</sup>

The third category is general education programs at neighborhood schools, which 27 percent of ninth-graders (3,603 students) attended. Most neighborhood schools are operated by the district, but some are Renaissance schools, which are run by charter operators. General education programs at neighborhood schools are open to anyone who can prove residence within a school's neighborhood boundaries. Students may also apply to neighborhood schools outside their area and can be awarded seats based on availability. This report does not distinguish between students attending their own or another neighborhood high school. About 75 percent of citywide and neighborhood schools offered Advanced Placement courses, although they typically offered fewer than the special admission schools.

The last category consists of charter schools, enrolling 4,013 ninth-graders, or 30 percent of ninth-grade students.<sup>5</sup> The Pennsylvania Law for Charter Schools requires these schools to enroll students on a first-come, first-served basis, except when there are more applicants than slots available. In that case, enrollment is determined through a lottery. Some charters have preferences for specific geographic areas or for students with siblings already attending the school.

## How the process worked in 2015-16

For the 2015-16 academic year, according to the School District of Philadelphia's high school directory, eighth-graders seeking to attend any of the publicly funded high schools in Philadelphia had three options:

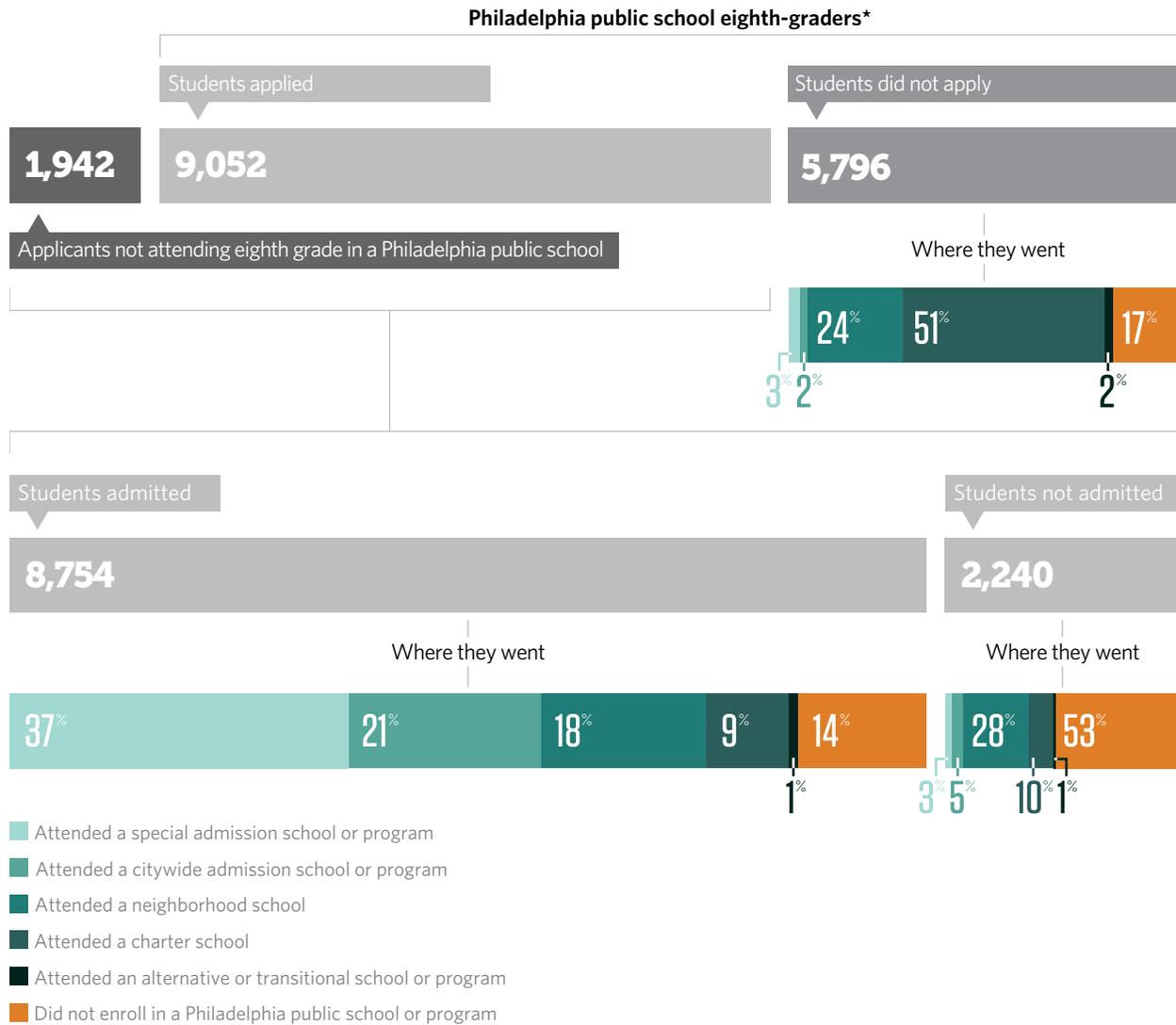
- Without filing an application, they could attend their designated neighborhood school.
- By submitting an online application to the school district, they could seek entry into one or more special admission, citywide admission, or neighborhood schools.<sup>6</sup> They could apply to as many as five different schools or programs, ranking their selections, and could receive multiple offers of admission.
- They could, at the same time, apply to one or more of the 43 charter schools, each with its own admission process.

Students wishing to attend a special admission school were asked to meet minimum criteria for standardized test scores, grades, and attendance and behavior histories; in some cases, an interview, essay, or audition was required. Although some special admission programs looked for advanced scores (the highest level) in both reading and math, most indicated that either advanced or proficient scores were minimally sufficient.<sup>7</sup> Admission criteria for each program were listed in the district's high school directory.

The vast majority of students who attended a special admission school or program in 2015-16 followed this pathway. But 13 percent were admitted without filing online applications or were initially rejected but later admitted.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1

## Eighth-Grade Applications and Admissions to Philadelphia's Public High Schools



\* Includes charter school students

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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## Key Dates and Deadlines in the School Selection Process

For the 2015-16 school year, these were the key dates in the official high school application process:

**Oct. 17 and 18, 2014:** Expo held at the Armory at Drexel University for eighth-graders and their families to meet representatives from all district-run high schools. Students can start filling out their online applications.

**Dec. 12, 2014:** Deadline for students to submit applications for up to five schools.

**Feb. 1, 2015:** Students notified about which schools admitted them; individuals could be admitted to multiple schools.

**Feb. 5, 2015:** Deadline for students to select a school or program or to accept admission if admitted to only one.

## Getting accepted by special admission schools

Four elements influenced which students were accepted to the special admission schools:

- Qualifications in academics, behavior, and attendance.
- Students' decisions about whether to apply.
- Admissions decisions by the schools.
- Choices by admitted students to enroll and then attend class in September.

## Performance on standardized tests

Each special admission high school set minimum standardized test scores as part of its entrance criteria, along with grades and attendance and behavior history. The seven most selective schools asked for PSSA advanced scores in both reading and mathematics. For the 14 less selective special admission schools, the criteria called for advanced or proficient scores in these subjects.

Eighteen percent of all incoming ninth-graders recorded advanced scores on both the reading and math PSSAs. The results varied widely among different groups. (See Table 2.) Forty-six percent of Asian students received advanced scores on both tests. As a group, white students had lower scores than Asian students but did better than black and Latino students. Boys, special education students, and students receiving federal poverty assistance also had lower-than-average scores.

The patterns were similar for students who received either advanced or proficient scores on the two tests. Forty-one percent of all students met these criteria. Seventy-one percent of Asian students did so, as did 61 percent of white students, 34 percent of Latino students, and 33 percent of black students. Boys, low-income

students, English language learners, and special education students all had lower percentages, meaning that fewer of these students had the standardized test scores to be admitted at special admission schools through the official pathway.

**Table 2**  
**Percentage of Students With Advanced and/or Proficient Standardized Test Scores**

	Percentage scoring advanced in both reading and math	Percentage scoring advanced or proficient in both reading and math
All students	18%	41%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
Asian	46%	71%
Black	11%	33%
Latino	11%	34%
White	32%	61%
Other	29%	52%
<b>Gender</b>		
Boys	15%	37%
Girls	22%	46%
<b>Economic status</b>		
Receive federal poverty assistance	13%	35%
Do not receive federal poverty assistance	27%	53%
<b>Language</b>		
English-language learners	-	3%
Speak English proficiently	20%	44%
<b>Special education support</b>		
Receive special education support	1%	6%
Do not receive special education support	21%	48%

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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The pool of students meeting the test score entrance criteria differed from the pool of public school eighth-graders overall, with lower percentages of black and Latino students and higher percentages of whites and Asians than in the general student population. (See Table 3.)

**Table 3**  
**Selected Characteristics of Eighth-Graders Attending Philadelphia Public Schools**  
 2014-15 school year

	<b>Eighth-graders attending Philadelphia public schools</b>	<b>Eighth-graders meeting test score entrance criteria</b>
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
Asian	6%	15%
Black	56%	42%
Latino	19%	15%
White	14%	24%
Other and multiple races	5%	4%
<b>Gender</b>		
Boys	52%	46%
Girls	48%	54%
<b>Economic status</b>		
Receive federal poverty assistance	59%	52%
Do not receive federal poverty assistance	41%	48%
<b>Language</b>		
English language learners	7%	1%
Speak English proficiently	93%	99%
<b>Special education support</b>		
Receive special education support	19%	2%
Do not receive special education support	81%	98%

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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## Students' decisions to apply

Before administrators at a special admission school could decide whether to admit a student, that student had to apply. And students were free to apply regardless of whether they met the stated admission criteria. Indeed, 48 percent of all applicants to the special admission schools for whom test scores were available to Pew did not have the minimum standardized test scores.<sup>9</sup> Any student could apply to multiple schools; in all, 9,085 students submitted 28,762 applications to special admission schools.

Most students who had qualifying scores filed applications. But, as shown in Table 4, 14 percent did not. All but 3 percent of qualified Asians applied, and 24 percent of qualified Latinos did not, the highest of any of the groups. These findings were consistent even when controlling for a student's specific test score within the higher categories. (See Table C.1 in Appendix C.)

When informed of Pew's finding regarding Latino students, school officials and community leaders offered explanations and expressed concern. Some said young Latinos can be reluctant to leave their neighborhoods to travel to a high school in another area, particularly if a time-consuming commute is involved. This view is supported by research about Latino families and school choice in New York City.<sup>10</sup> In addition, district officials wonder whether the relatively small number of Latino students in the special admission schools makes visiting eighth-graders feel uncomfortable. "If you visit a school and you don't see people who look like you, you may not see yourself attending the school," said Karyn Lynch, the district's chief of support services. And several officials questioned whether enough is being done to attract Latino students to the schools, particularly those whose parents may not speak English. Said Daniela Romero of the district's office of community engagement: "Language access is not just translating papers. You have to do workshops and make sure people understand the process and know why it is important."



Lexey Swall / GRAIN photography collective

Students write songs together in a hallway of Academy at Palumbo High School, a special admission school.

Table 4

## Students With Advanced and/or Proficient Standardized Test Scores Who Did Not Apply to Special Admission Schools

	Number	Percentage
All students	463	14%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
Asian	17	3%
Black	163	12%
Latino	120	24%
White	150	19%
Other	13	11%
<b>Gender</b>		
Boys	275	18%
Girls	188	11%
<b>Economic status</b>		
Receive federal poverty assistance	272	16%
Do not receive federal poverty assistance	191	12%
<b>Language</b>		
English-language learners	4	21%
Speak English proficiently	459	14%
<b>Special education support</b>		
Receive special education support	27	38%
Do not receive special education support	436	14%

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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### Schools' acceptance decisions

How individual administrators made their admissions decisions is the most difficult part of the process to examine and understand. Although the application process is centralized, each school makes admissions decisions on its own. Schools list admission criteria in the high school directory, but decision-makers at

each school—sometimes the principal, sometimes a committee—decide independently whom to admit; they have discretion about how to weigh the various criteria and how to determine whether any one shortcoming is disqualifying. But test scores are always a key element.

As Table 5 shows, the demographics of students who applied to the special admission schools differed from the students who attended publicly funded schools in Philadelphia for eighth grade and those who had met the minimum stated test scores.

**Table 5**  
**How Eighth-Graders Applying to Special Admission Schools Differed From Other Eighth-Graders**  
 2014-15 school year

	<b>Eighth-graders applying to special admission schools</b>	<b>Eighth-graders attending Philadelphia public schools</b>	<b>Eighth-graders meeting test score entrance criteria</b>
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>			
Black	57%	56%	42%
White	14%	14%	24%
Latino	16%	19%	15%
Asian	10%	6%	15%
Other and multiple races	3%	5%	4%
<b>Gender</b>			
Boys	47%	52%	46%
Girls	53%	48%	54%
<b>Economic status</b>			
Receive federal poverty assistance	60%	59%	52%
Do not receive federal poverty assistance	40%	41%	48%
<b>Language</b>			
English-language learners	5%	7%	1%
Speak English proficiently	95%	93%	99%

*Continued on next page*

	Eighth-graders applying to special admission schools	Eighth-graders attending Philadelphia public schools	Eighth-graders meeting test score entrance criteria
Special education support			
Receive special education support	11%	19%	2%
Do not receive special education support	89%	81%	98%

Note: Of the 7,920 students with test score data, 3,279 had minimum qualifying test scores.

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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### Applicants From Outside the Philadelphia Public School System

Seventeen percent of all applicants for ninth-grade placements (1,942 students) did not attend a public school in Philadelphia for eighth grade but instead went to private or parochial school.<sup>11</sup> They were more likely to apply to special admission schools than applicants already enrolled in a Philadelphia public school.

These applicants tended to cluster in just a few of the most selective special admission schools. A third of them applied to just four schools: Central High School, Science Leadership Academy, Academy at Palumbo, and the Philadelphia High School for the Creative and Performing Arts. Thirty-eight percent of them were accepted, compared with 57 percent of applicants who attended a public school for eighth grade.

Only 293 of them enrolled at a district-run high school. No data are available on where the others went.

### Students with qualifying standardized test scores who were not admitted

Twenty-two percent of applicants meeting the minimum criteria for standardized test scores (629 students in all) failed to gain admittance to any of the special admission schools to which they applied. As Table 6 shows, rejection rates were higher than 22 percent for some groups of students, with the minimum standardized test scores, including Latinos (34 percent), black students (26 percent), English-language learners (40 percent), special education students (32 percent), and students receiving poverty assistance (27 percent).

According to Pew’s analysis of school district data, 19 percent of these students were not admitted because they did not perform well enough in their interview or audition. Twenty-seven percent were rejected because they lost out to applicants with higher test scores. Nineteen percent were not admitted because their grades were too low.

Ten percent of applicants meeting the minimum test scores were not admitted as a result of nonacademic criteria, such as attendance and behavior. Schools could be reluctant to admit “a student who had the test scores but also a suspension for behavior or was absent more than 10 times,” said the district’s Lynch. The stated reason for not admitting the remaining 25 percent of students was a lack of space at the school.

**Table 6**  
**Students With Advanced and/or Proficient Standardized Test Scores Who Were Not Admitted to Special Admission Schools**

	Number	Percentage
All students	629	22%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
Asian	39	8%
Black	318	26%
Latino	128	34%
White	125	20%
Other	19	18%
<b>Gender</b>		
Boys	339	28%
Girls	290	18%
<b>Economic status</b>		
Receive federal poverty assistance	394	27%
Do not receive federal poverty assistance	235	17%
<b>Language</b>		
English-language learners	6	40%
Speak English proficiently	623	22%
<b>Special education support</b>		
Receive special education support	14	32%
Do not receive special education support	615	22%

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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## Students without qualifying standardized test scores who were admitted

As stated earlier, many students applied to special admission schools even though they did not have the minimum standardized test scores. There was nothing in the system to prevent them from doing so. As Table 7 shows, 20 percent of the applicants for whom test scores were available to Pew, 526 in all, got into at least one of the schools, accounting for roughly 11 percent of all students admitted.

In some cases, district officials said, this occurred because individual schools lacked enough qualified applicants and/or found themselves undersubscribed when the official admission process ended. Ultimately, final admission decisions were at the discretion of the principals.

Superintendent Hite said the phenomenon was “concerning, and I want to better understand the pathway that is allowing these students to be admitted into those schools.” The special admission schools admitted a higher percentage of unqualified Asian students, students not receiving poverty assistance, and English language learners while accepting lower percentages of unqualified Latino students and those receiving special education support.<sup>12</sup>

Table 7

### Percentage of Applicants Admitted to Special Admission Schools Who Did Not Meet Minimum Academic Qualifications

	Number	Percentage
All students	526	20%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
Asian	59	39%
Black	336	20%
Latino	62	15%
White	55	23%
Other	14	23%
<b>Gender</b>		
Boys	230	18%
Girls	296	23%
<b>Economic status</b>		
Receive federal poverty assistance	329	18%
Do not receive federal poverty assistance	197	25%

*Continued on next page*

	Number	Percentage
<b>Language</b>		
English-language learners	69	27%
Speak English proficiently	457	20%
<b>Special education support</b>		
Receive special education support	87	15%
Do not receive special education support	439	22%

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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At five special admission high schools, at least half the students enrolling for ninth grade did not meet the minimum standardized test scores. Three of the schools—Lankenau, Walter B. Saul, and Parkway West—had high percentages of students receiving special education services relative to other special admission schools. These students probably were admitted under the LeGare Consent Decree process, which ensures equal access for students with disabilities.<sup>13</sup> At the other two schools, Parkway Northwest and Motivation, the schools did not have enough applicants with qualifying test scores to fill the seats.

At the 16 other schools or programs, small percentages of unqualified students were admitted.

### Accepting the admission offer

The vast majority of students accepted by special admission schools went to one of the schools in September 2015, but 14 percent did not. Some of those students enrolled at neighborhood or citywide schools, and nearly half did not attend any Philadelphia publicly funded school, including charters. The 14 percent included students who chose not to accept admission, as well as those who accepted but did not show up for class in September.

As shown in Table 8, the nonenrollment rates were lower for Asian students and higher for white and Latino students as well as students receiving federal poverty assistance. School officials and community leaders said that, here again, the location of the schools and the ability to get to them played a role in students deciding not to enroll.

Table 8

## Students With Advanced and/or Proficient Standardized Test Scores Who Were Accepted by Special Admission Schools but Declined to Attend

	Number	Percentage
All students	297	14%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
Asian	25	6%
Black	120	14%
Latino	58	24%
White	82	17%
Other	12	13%
<b>Gender</b>		
Boys	126	15%
Girls	171	14%
<b>Economic status</b>		
Receive federal poverty assistance	172	17%
Do not receive federal poverty assistance	125	12%
<b>Language</b>		
English-language learners	1	13%
Speak English proficiently	296	14%
<b>Special education support</b>		
Receive special education support	6	21%
Do not receive special education support	291	14%

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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Pew used a logistic regression model, a statistical tool used to isolate causal factors, to measure and quantify the impact of each variable on a student's likelihood of attending a special admission school. The logistic regression model shows that students with high math and reading test scores were more likely to attend a special admission school if admitted. Students receiving federal poverty assistance were less likely to go, controlling for all other variables. (See Table C.2 in Appendix C.)

## High School Selection in Other Cities

A number of other cities give students a choice of public high schools. Matching students and schools has been a challenge for all of them.

Philadelphia has a centralized application process but a decentralized admission process, with decisions made independently by individual schools. This leaves some students with multiple options and others with no choice other than their neighborhood high schools.

School districts in some other large cities have moved to a universal enrollment process. Students file one application listing their preferences and receive admission to a single school, based on a formula with a variety of factors.

In 2014, the Great Schools Compact—a coalition of leaders from public, district, and Catholic schools—tried unsuccessfully to move Philadelphia to universal enrollment. Opponents expressed concern that it would reduce student choice and be expensive to administer. There were also questions about who should run it; whether charter and parochial schools would be involved; and what the impact would be.

Here is a look at how a number of large urban districts that offer numerous high school options handle applications and enrollment.

### **New Orleans**

After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, New Orleans dramatically altered its public school system. Traditional neighborhood catchment areas were eliminated, and most high schools were turned into charters. Initially, students could apply directly to any school in the district, with admissions decisions made by the schools. Now the selection process is largely centralized. Students can apply to most high schools with a single application, ranking their choices. The school system uses an algorithm to assign students to one school. Some selective admission schools do not participate in this process and still decide admissions independently.<sup>14</sup>

### **New York City**

New York City offers more than 750 programs at more than 440 school district-run high schools through a centralized application process. Students may apply to as many as 12 programs. An algorithm assigns a student to one program based on the student's preference, grades, home address, and standardized test scores. Students wishing to attend one of nine highly regarded, specialized high schools must take a special test or audition. Black and Latino students, who represent 68 percent of all students in the New York public schools, make up only 11 percent of students at the specialized high schools.<sup>15</sup> A recent report showed that part of this difference was due to some black and Latino students who perform well on other standardized tests not taking the required entrance exam.<sup>16</sup>

*Continued on next page*

### **Washington**

Since 2014, the District of Columbia Public Schools has operated a centralized school admissions process based on a common application and lottery system for all students. A student wishing to attend a school other than the neighborhood school, including charters, submits an application ranking up to 12 schools. In 2016, 84 percent of ninth-graders were matched with one of their top three choices. The switch to the unified process was largely smooth, with little pushback from parents or other stakeholders.<sup>17</sup>

### **Denver**

In January 2012, Denver centralized its school selection process. Students use one application for all district-run and charter schools, list up to five schools, and are matched by a computer algorithm. Most schools give an enrollment preference for siblings and residence. Only two of the more than 200 schools in the district have entrance requirements related to auditions or academic standing. In the 2016-17 school year, 87 percent of ninth-graders enrolled in their first-choice school.<sup>18</sup>

### **Newark, New Jersey**

Newark's transition to school choice and a centralized enrollment system has been contentious. Introduced as One Newark, the common application was met with student protests, and the process was widely criticized for not soliciting community input. Under the new system, now known as Newark Enrolls, students may apply to up to eight district-run or charter schools using the centralized process, including special admission schools. Students are matched to one school.<sup>19</sup>

## **Who attended the special admission schools**

### Student characteristics

After the incoming students applied to the special admission schools, were accepted, and made their decisions, the makeup of the ninth grades at those schools looked somewhat different from the makeup of the ninth-grade student body of the School District of Philadelphia as a whole.

Special admission schools enrolled a lower percentage of Latino students than in the entire ninth grade. Latinos accounted for 12 percent of the students in the special admission schools, well below their 19 percent share of all ninth-grade students. Black students, who made up 56 percent of all ninth-graders, were less numerous in the special admission schools, at 51 percent. Asian students, who made up 6 percent of all ninth-graders, accounted for 17 percent of students in special admission schools.

Students receiving poverty assistance—60 percent of the overall sample—represented 51 percent of the population of the special admission schools.

Boys, who made up 51 percent of the ninth-grade cohort, accounted for 41 percent of the population of the special admission schools while girls made up 59 percent, far above their 49 percent representation among all ninth-graders. One factor contributing to this outcome is the existence of the Philadelphia High School for Girls, the district's only single-sex special admission school.

Table 9

## Demographics of Ninth-Graders Attending Philadelphia Special Admission Schools

	All ninth-graders	Special admission
All students		26%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>		
Asian	7%	17%
Black	56%	51%
Latino	19%	12%
White	14%	16%
Other and multiple races	5%	4%
<b>Gender</b>		
Boys	51%	41%
Girls	49%	59%
<b>Economic status</b>		
Receive federal poverty assistance	60%	51%
Do not receive federal poverty assistance	40%	49%
<b>Language</b>		
English language learners	7%	3%
Speak English proficiently	93%	97%
<b>Special education support</b>		
Receive special education support	19%	6%
Do not receive special education support	81%	94%

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

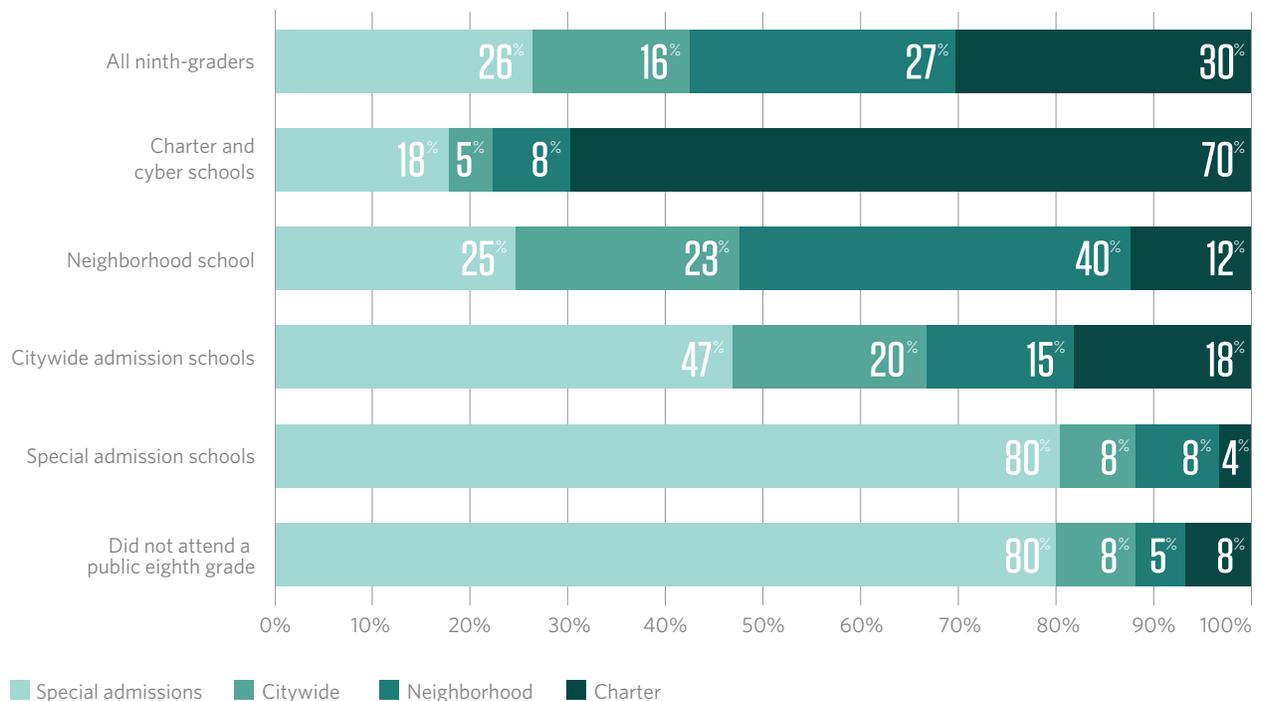
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## Type of school for eighth grade

Where students went to school in eighth grade often played a role in where they ended up for high school. Figure 2 indicates that 80 percent of students enrolled in a special admission school for eighth grade wound up in a special admission high school, sometimes the same school. (A few special admission schools start in fifth grade.) These students had to reapply for ninth grade, even to stay in the same school. At some of these special admission schools, attending eighth grade there was a de facto requirement for admission to high school.

Similarly, 70 percent of students who attended a charter school for eighth grade also attended one for ninth. Often this was because the students simply progressed to ninth grade at the same school without having to reapply.

Figure 2  
Ninth-Grade Enrollment by Eighth-Grade School Type



Note: Due to rounding, the percentages in some lines do not add up to 100.

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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Students are on their way to class in a stairway of South Philadelphia High School, a neighborhood school with a citywide career and technical education program.

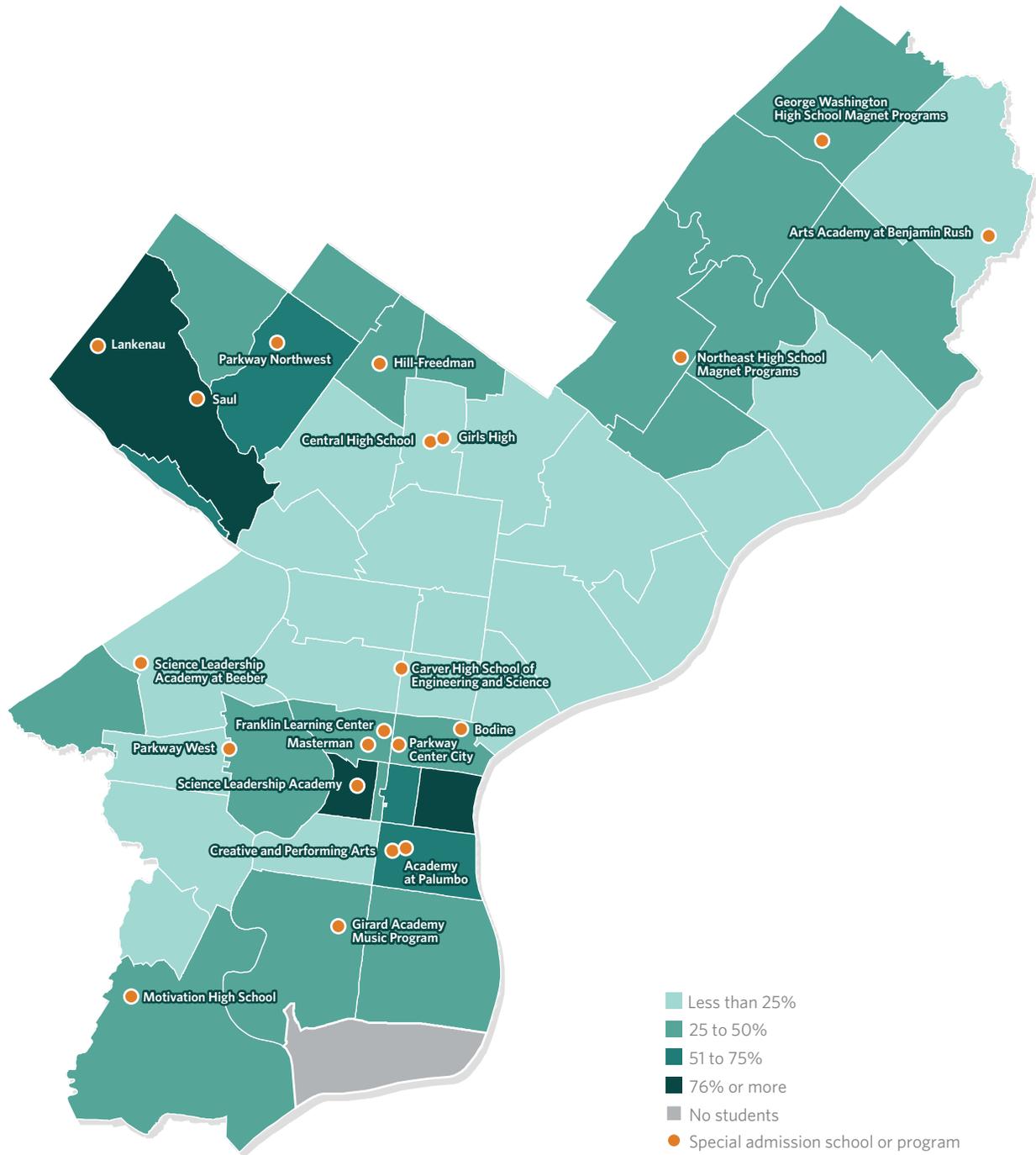
## The role of geography

The neighborhood in which students lived was another factor in who enrolled in special admission schools and programs.

In several parts of the city, more than half of all public school ninth-graders enrolled in special admission schools. These included parts of Center City, South Philadelphia, and Roxborough; in some of those areas, the actual number of students was quite small: fewer than 20. The lowest percentages of students in special admission schools were recorded in North Philadelphia, West Philadelphia, and parts of Northeast Philadelphia.

Students in the ZIP codes with high attendance rates at the special admission schools were more likely to have strong standardized test scores, to be white or Asian, and to not receive poverty assistance, all of which are characteristics associated with higher rates of application and enrollment in special admission schools. As Figure 3 indicates, many of these students were living in areas near special admission schools. In addition, ZIP codes with low attendance rates tended to be areas with fewer of these institutions.

Figure 3  
 Percentage of Students Enrolled at Special Admission Schools or Programs



Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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## School-Level Differences

The Pew analysis found demographic differences among the special admission schools that cannot be explained entirely by geography.

Philadelphia is home to 21 special admission schools and programs, but more than half of special-admission white ninth-graders (54 percent) are enrolled in just four of the schools. Six other special admission schools and programs enrolled a total of seven white ninth-graders. The four that attracted a disproportionate number of white students were:

- Central High School, with 23 percent of all white, special-admission ninth-graders and 16 percent of all students attending special admission schools.
- The Arts Academy at Benjamin Rush, which had 13 percent of all white, special admission ninth-graders and 4 percent of all special admission ninth-graders.
- The magnet programs at Northeast High School, with 10 percent of all white, special admission ninth-graders and 6 percent of all special admission ninth-graders.
- Julia R. Masterman School, which had 8 percent of all white, special admission ninth-graders and 3 percent of all special admission ninth-graders.

A similar pattern emerged for Asian students: 49 percent of the Asian ninth-graders in special admission schools were enrolled in Central High School and the magnet programs at Northeast High School.

Seven special admission programs enrolled a high percentage of black students: Parkway West (97 percent), Parkway Northwest (94 percent), Lankenau (94 percent), Motivation (92 percent), Hill-Freedman (89 percent), Carver (71 percent), and Parkway Center City (70 percent). Six special admission schools enrolled an especially low percentage of black students: Girard Academic Music Program (27 percent), Arts Academy at Benjamin Rush (26 percent), Central High School (25 percent), Northeast High School (17 percent), Masterman (11 percent), and George Washington High School International Baccalaureate program (8 percent).

Two schools enrolled a disproportionately high percentage of Latino students: Bodine High School and Franklin Learning Center. Masterman, Science Leadership Academy, Girard Academic Music Program, and the magnet program at George Washington enrolled an especially low percentage of students receiving federal poverty assistance; Parkway West, Motivation, Philadelphia High School for Girls, and Franklin Learning Center enrolled a high percentage of those students.

The relatively small number of special education and English language learners who made it into special admission high schools were concentrated in a few schools. Forty-one percent of all special education ninth-graders in such programs went to three institutions: Franklin Learning Center, Hill-Freedman World Academy, and Saul High School. One-third of all special admission ninth-graders who were English language learners went to Central, Philadelphia High School for Girls, and the Academy at Palumbo.



Students outside of South Philadelphia High School.

## Who attended other schools

### Citywide admission schools

For the 2015-16 school year, 7,556 students applied to citywide schools, and 2,111 students ultimately enrolled. These schools are open to all students living in Philadelphia, and most have grade, attendance, and behavioral criteria for admission, though not minimum PSSA scores. Schools in this category include comprehensive career and technical education (CTE) schools; CTE programs at neighborhood high schools; and themed high schools such as Constitution High School, which focuses on law, democracy, and history, and Paul Robeson High School for Human Services, which prepares students for careers in that field.

Sixty-one percent of students applying to citywide schools were admitted to at least one of them. Application and attendance rates for citywide schools were higher for black students, Latino students, students receiving poverty assistance, English language learners, and students with PSSA scores in the lowest two tiers, compared with the general population of ninth-graders. Application, admission, and enrollment rates were slightly higher for boys than for girls. Thirty-seven percent of students admitted to citywide schools ultimately attended school elsewhere. Most went to a neighborhood or charter school, 10 percent never enrolled at a public school in Philadelphia, and the rest attended schools to which they did not apply.

Citywide admission schools enrolled a higher proportion of black and Latino students and lower proportion of white and Asian students relative to all ninth-graders. These schools also had a higher percentage of boys and of students receiving poverty assistance. For a list of all district-run high schools, the number of applicants they received, and the number they accepted, see Appendix B.

Table 10  
Demographics of Ninth-Graders by School Type

	All ninth-graders	Special admission	Citywide	Neighborhood	Charter
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>					
Asian	7%	17%	2%	5%	2%
Black	56%	51%	64%	56%	54%
Latino	19%	12%	23%	25%	18%
White	14%	16%	8%	10%	17%
Other and multiple races	5%	4%	2%	3%	9%
<b>Gender</b>					
Boys	51%	41%	55%	59%	51%
Girls	49%	59%	45%	41%	49%
<b>Economic status</b>					
Receive federal poverty assistance	60%	51%	71%	72%	52%
Do not receive federal poverty assistance	40%	49%	29%	28%	48%
<b>Language</b>					
English language learners	7%	3%	7%	12%	4%
Speak English proficiently	93%	97%	93%	88%	96%
<b>Special education support</b>					
Receive special education support	19%	6%	20%	30%	19%
Do not receive special education support	81%	94%	80%	70%	81%

Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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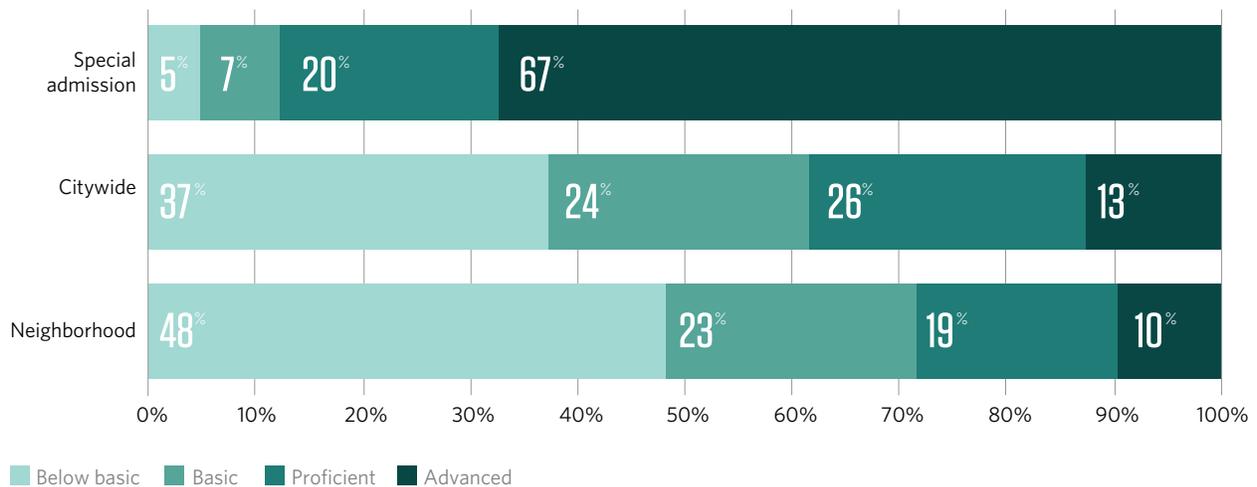
The highest percentages of students attending citywide admission schools and programs were in North Philadelphia and Port Richmond. These students were more likely to be black or Latino or receiving poverty assistance than the applicant pool as a whole. As Figure D.1 in Appendix D indicates, many of the citywide admission schools and programs are located in neighborhoods where large numbers of black, Latino, and low-income students live.

## Neighborhood schools

The remaining 3,606 students enrolled in neighborhood schools. Nearly 60 percent of those students had applied to attend a special admission or citywide school instead. Thirty-six percent of students attending neighborhood schools were admitted to a citywide or special admission school but did not attend. Another 23 percent applied but were not admitted, and the rest never applied to any other district-run school.

Unlike special admission and citywide schools or programs, neighborhood high school programs do not require students to submit online applications or meet any academic criteria; any student living within a school's attendance boundary may attend. Because many students with advanced or proficient standardized test scores go to special admission and citywide schools, those with lower scores are concentrated in neighborhood schools. For instance, students scoring basic or below basic on their math PSSAs made up 12 percent of students at special admission schools, 61 percent at citywide admission schools, and 71 percent at neighborhoods schools. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4  
Math PSSA Scores of Ninth-Graders by School Enrollment Type



Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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Neighborhood schools had substantially higher percentages of boys, students receiving federal poverty assistance, and students receiving special education than in the ninth grade overall; all groups had relatively low test scores. Seventy-two percent of students at neighborhood schools received federal poverty assistance compared with 60 percent of all ninth-graders. Boys made up 59 percent of ninth-graders in neighborhood schools and 51 percent of all ninth-graders. Students receiving special education support accounted for 30 percent of ninth-graders at neighborhood schools, 19 percent overall.

## Conclusion

The School District of Philadelphia operates a system with a wide range of high school options, led by the special admission schools, which include the system's highest-performing institutions. The makeup of incoming students at these schools differed in 2015-16 from the ninth grade as a whole. Latinos, students receiving federal poverty aid, boys, and African-Americans were less numerous at these schools than in the ninth grade overall, while Asians and whites were more numerous. There were disproportionate numbers of black and Latino students, low-income and special education students, and English language learners at neighborhood high schools, most of which have comparatively low standardized test scores, high dropout rates, and fewer college-preparatory course options.

Admission to high-performing schools in Philadelphia is based largely on academic performance, including standardized test scores. But boys, whites, Latinos, students living in poverty, and special education students were less likely to apply to special admission schools even when they met the minimum academic criteria. And rejection rates for students with advanced math and reading PSSAs were higher for blacks, Latinos, and students receiving poverty assistance. Among admitted students, more blacks and Latinos did not show up for class when their ninth-grade year began. Nearly half of black and Latino students who were admitted to but did not attend special admission schools and programs instead attended citywide or neighborhood schools; 24 percent never enrolled in a public school in Philadelphia.

School district officials say that, on the whole, the current method of giving students choice about where to attend high school has been a success, and 73 percent of ninth-graders in the 2015-16 academic year attended a school or program of their choosing. "We've created more options for children, and they're taking advantage of them," Hite said. "But we have a lot more to do when it comes to improving the options in all neighborhoods."

## Appendix A

### 2015-16 high schools and programs in Philadelphia by type

#### Neighborhood schools

ASPIRA Charter School at Olney\*  
John Bartram High School  
Thomas A. Edison High School  
Samuel Fels High School  
Frankford High School  
Benjamin Franklin High School  
Furness High School  
Kensington Health Sciences Academy  
Kensington High School for the Creative and Performing Arts  
Kensington International Business, Finance, and Entrepreneurship High School  
Kensington Urban Education Academy  
Martin Luther King High School  
Abraham Lincoln High School  
Mastery Charter School at Simon Gratz High School\*  
Northeast High School  
Overbrook High School  
Penn Treaty High School  
Roxborough High School  
William L. Sayre High School  
South Philadelphia High School  
Strawberry Mansion High School  
Universal Charter School at Audenried\*  
George Washington High School  
West Philadelphia High School

#### Special admission schools and programs

Academy at Palumbo  
Arts Academy at Benjamin Rush

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\* Renaissance charter schools, which have school attendance zones like district-run neighborhood schools but are run by charter school operators.

William W. Bodine High School for International Affairs  
Central High School  
Franklin Learning Center  
Girard Academic Music Program  
High School of Engineering and Science  
Hill-Freedman World Academy  
Lankenau High School  
Julia R. Masterman School  
Motivation High School  
Northeast High School (medical, engineering, and aerospace magnet and pre-International Diploma programs)  
Parkway Center City High School  
Parkway Northwest High School  
Parkway West High School  
Philadelphia High School for the Creative and Performing Arts  
Philadelphia High School for Girls  
Walter B. Saul High School of Agricultural Sciences  
Science Leadership Academy  
Science Leadership Academy at Beeber  
George Washington High School (pre-International Diploma programs)

### Citywide admission schools and programs

John Bartram High School—career and technical education programs  
Building 21  
Constitution High School  
Murrell Dobbins Technical High School  
Thomas A. Edison High School—career and technical education programs  
Samuel Fels High School—career and technical education programs  
Frankford High School—career and technical education programs  
Benjamin Franklin High School—career and technical education programs  
Furness High School—career and technical education programs  
High School of the Future  
Kensington Health Sciences Academy—career and technical education programs  
Kensington High School for the Creative and Performing Arts—career and technical education programs  
Kensington International Business, Finance, and Entrepreneurship High School—career and technical education programs

Martin Luther King High School—career and technical education programs

The Linc

Abraham Lincoln High School—career and technical education programs

Jules Mastbaum High School

Northeast High School—career and technical education programs

Overbrook High School—career and technical education programs

Philadelphia Military Academy

A. Philip Randolph Career Academy High School

Paul Robeson High School for Human Services

Roxborough High School—career and technical education programs

South Philadelphia High School—career and technical education programs

Strawberry Mansion High School—career and technical education programs

Swenson Arts and Technology High School

The U School

George Washington High School—career and technical education programs

West Philadelphia High School—career and technical education programs

The Workshop School

### Charter and cyberschools

21st-Century Cyber Charter School

Achievement House Charter School

ACT Academy Cyber Charter School

Agora Cyber Charter School

Architecture and Design Charter School

ASPIRA Bilingual Cyber Charter

Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School

Mariana Bracetti Academy Charter School

Commonwealth Connections Academy Charter School

Community Academy of Philadelphia Charter School

Delaware Valley Charter High School

Eastern University Academy Charter School

Education Plus Academy Cyber Charter School

Esperanza Cyber Charter School

First Philadelphia Preparatory Charter School

Franklin Towne Charter High School

Freire Charter School  
Imhotep Institute Charter High School  
KIPP DuBois Collegiate Academy  
Maritime Academy Charter School  
Mastery Charter School at Lenfest Campus  
Mastery Charter School at Pickett Campus  
Mastery Charter School at Shoemaker Campus  
Mastery Charter School at Thomas Campus  
Mastery Charter School at Hardy Williams High School  
Math, Civics, and Sciences Charter School  
Mathematics, Science, and Technology Community Charter School  
Multi-Cultural Academy Charter School  
New Foundations Charter School  
New Media Technology Charter School  
Nueva Esperanza Academy Charter School  
Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School  
Pennsylvania Distance Learning Charter School  
Pennsylvania Leadership Charter School  
Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School  
Philadelphia Academy Charter School  
Philadelphia Electrical and Technology Charter High School  
Philadelphia Performing Arts: A String Theory School  
Philadelphia Virtual Academy  
Preparatory Charter School of Mathematics, Science, Technology, and Careers  
Sankofa Freedom Academy Charter School  
Taony Academy Charter School  
World Communications Charter School

## Appendix B

### Applications and Acceptances by High School

Neighborhood schools			
School name	Total applications	Admissions and waitlists	Not admitted
John Bartram High School	23	23	0
William L. Sayre High School	16	16	0
South Philadelphia High School	61	60	1
Benjamin Franklin High School	32	32	0
Furness High School	24	24	0
Overbrook High School	32	32	0
Penn Treaty High School	37	37	0
Kensington International Business, Finance, and Entrepreneurship High School	60	43	17
Kensington High School for the Creative and Performing Arts	56	10	46
Kensington Health Sciences Academy	36	6	30
Kensington Urban Education Academy	20	3	17
Roxborough High School	34	34	0
Frankford High School	47	47	0
Samuel Fels High School	52	48	4
Abraham Lincoln High School	81	27	54
George Washington High School	161	161	0
West Philadelphia High School	24	24	0
Strawberry Mansion High School	6	6	0
Thomas A. Edison High School	33	33	0
Martin Luther King High School	21	21	0

*Continued on next page*

## Citywide schools and programs

School name	Total applications	Admissions and waitlists	Not admitted
John Bartram High School— career and technical education	40	40	0
West Philadelphia High School— career and technical education	77	77	0
South Philadelphia High School— career and technical education	189	189	0
Benjamin Franklin High School— career and technical education	253	252	1
Furness High School— career and technical education	17	17	0
Overbrook High School— career and technical education	24	24	0
Murrell Dobbins Technical High School	1,601	687	914
Strawberry Mansion High School— career and technical education	15	15	0
Thomas A. Edison High School— career and technical education	508	508	0
Jules Mastbaum High School	1,282	798	484
Kensington International Business, Finance, and Entrepreneurship High School—career and technical education	167	60	107
Kensington High School for the Creative and Performing Arts—career and technical education	90	0	90
Kensington Health Sciences Academy— career and technical education	95	52	43
Roxborough High School— career and technical education	125	125	0
Martin Luther King High School— career and technical education	51	51	0
A. Philip Randolph Career Academy High School	1,055	621	434
Frankford High School— career and technical education	77	77	0
Samuel Fels High School— career and technical education	249	52	197
Abraham Lincoln High School— career and technical education	157	157	0
Northeast High School—career and technical education	873	322	551

Continued on next page

### Citywide schools and programs

School name	Total applications	Admissions and waitlists	Not admitted
George Washington High School—career and technical education	212	212	0
Swenson Arts and Technology High School	2,533	857	1,676
High School of the Future	1,651	594	1,057
Paul Robeson High School for Human Services	388	388	0
Constitution High School	1,509	225	1,284
Philadelphia Military Academy	850	237	613
Building 21	901	901	0
The U School	632	632	0
The Linc	465	464	1
The Workshop School	632	189	443

### Special admission schools and programs

School name	Total applications	Admissions and waitlists	Not admitted
Philadelphia High School for the Creative and Performing Arts	2,080	416	1,664
Franklin Learning Center	1,877	702	1,175
Arts Academy at Benjamin Rush	1,069	272	797
Motivation High School	562	393	169
Julia R. Masterman School	1,275	141	1,134
Girard Academic Music Program	588	195	393
Academy at Palumbo	2,466	1,177	1,289
Science Leadership Academy	2,234	411	1,823
Science Leadership Academy at Beeber	505	142	363
George Washington Carver High School of Engineering and Science	1,941	930	1,011
Parkway Northwest	396	195	201
Parkway Center City	1,988	510	1,478
Parkway West	516	255	261

Continued on next page

## Special admission schools and programs

School name	Total applications	Admissions and waitlists	Not admitted
<b>William W. Bodine High School for International Affairs</b>	1,850	606	1,244
<b>Central High School</b>	4,033	1,055	2,978
<b>Walter B. Saul High School of Agricultural Sciences</b>	682	455	227
<b>Philadelphia High School for Girls</b>	1,723	860	863
<b>Hill-Freedman World Academy</b>	684	257	427
<b>Lankenau High School</b>	441	310	131
<b>Northeast High School—medical, engineering, and aerospace magnet and pre-International Baccalaureate Diploma Program</b>	1,724	808	916
<b>George Washington High School—pre-International Baccalaureate Diploma Program</b>	128	115	13

## Appendix C

Pew created logistic regression models to learn more about the connection between various student characteristics and the likelihood of applying and attending a special admission high school. The results are reported in Tables C.1 and C.2. Here is how to read these tables:

The odds ratios in the first column of each table estimate the change in the likelihood of the specified outcome for a member of each group compared with students not in that group. In Table C.1, for instance, the odds ratio for students with advanced math PSSAs is 3.22. This means these students were 3.22 times more likely than students who did not have advanced PSSA scores to apply to a special admission school when all other variables (race or ethnicity, poverty status, English language learner status, etc.) were held constant. Odds ratios of less than 1 mean that the student characteristic reduced the likelihood of the specified outcome. The ratio for boys of 0.56 means they were 0.6 times as likely to apply to special admission schools as girls, controlling for all other characteristics studied.

The standard errors in the second column indicate the precision of the results to a 95 percent confidence interval. In Table C.1, where the odds ratio for advanced math PSSAs is 3.22, the standard error is .33. This reflects 95 percent confidence that the odds ratio is between 2.89 (3.22 minus .33) and 3.55 (3.22 plus .33).

The p-values listed in the third column assess the level of significance of each student characteristic. P-values of less than .05 are considered statistically significant; p-values of .05 or above are not. In Table C.1, the 1.29 odds ratio for black students has a p-value of .12, which is greater than .05. This means that the odds ratio associated with being black is not statistically significant when controlling for all other variables in the model.

Table C.1

## Results of Logistic Regression: More or Less Likely to Apply to a Special Admission School or Program

Variable	Odds ratio	Standard error	P-value
Advanced math PSSAs	3.22	0.33	0.00
Advanced reading PSSAs	3.16	0.36	0.00
Asian	2.74	0.58	0.00
Proficient reading PSSAs	1.78	0.13	0.00
Male	0.56	0.03	0.00
Proficient math PSSAs	1.74	0.13	0.00
Receives federal poverty relief	0.83	0.05	0.00
Latino	0.60	0.10	0.00
Has an individualized education plan	0.84	0.06	0.01
White	0.69	0.12	0.04
Black	1.29	0.22	0.12
English-language learner	0.96	0.10	0.73

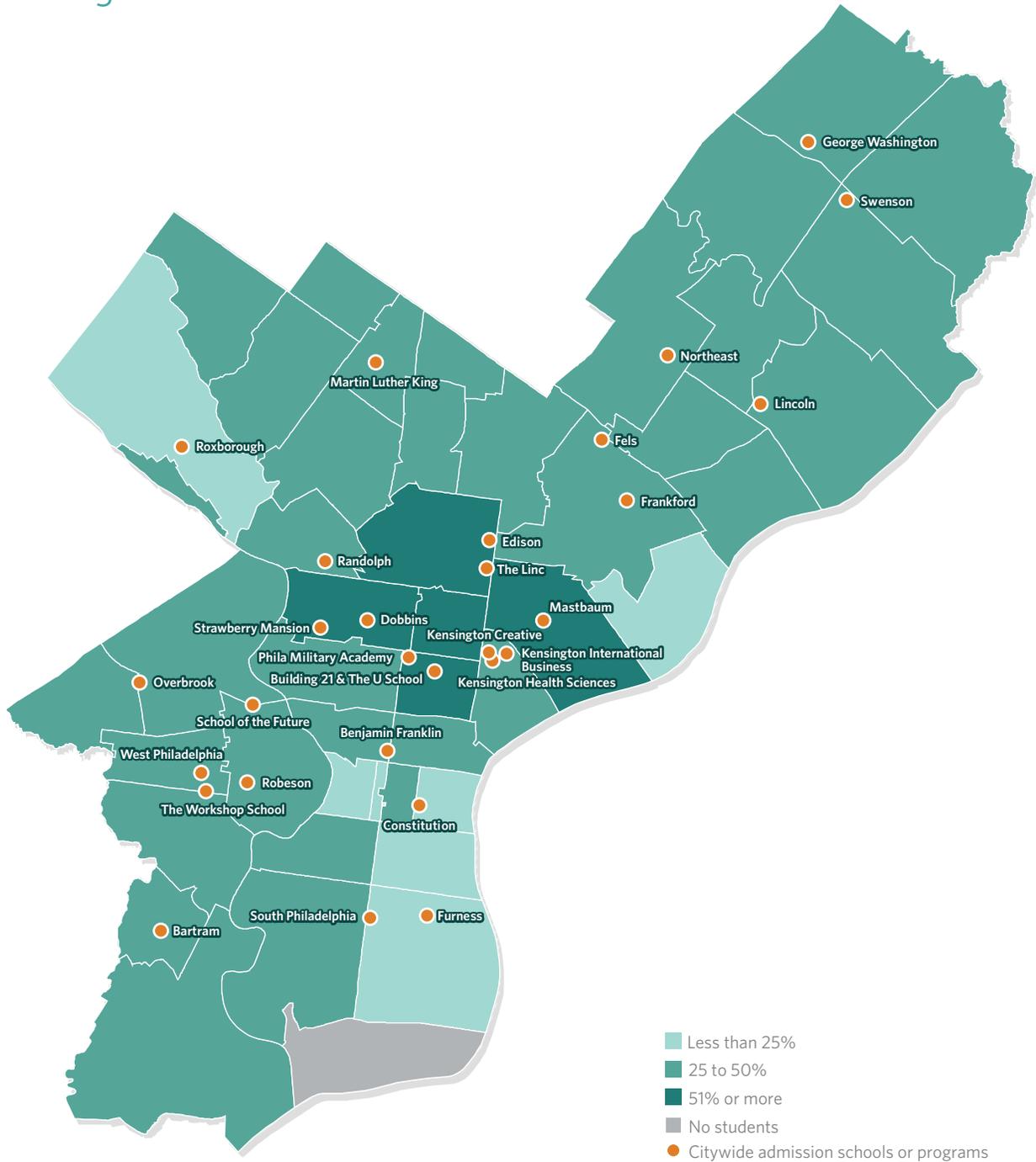
Table C.2

## Results of Logistic Regression: More or Less Likely to Attend a Special Admission School or Program if Admitted

Variable	Odds ratio	Standard error	P-value
Reading PSSA score	1.67	0.18	0.000
Math PSSA score	1.68	0.16	0.000
Receives special education support	1.98	0.50	0.007
Receives federal poverty relief	0.77	0.09	0.019
Latino	0.57	0.19	0.088
Boy	0.84	0.10	0.132
Asian	1.60	0.55	0.168
White	0.66	0.21	0.193
English-language learner	1.44	0.44	0.226
Black	1.21	0.38	0.539

# Appendix D

Figure D.1  
 Percentage of Students Enrolled at Citywide Admission Schools or Programs



Source: Pew analysis of School District of Philadelphia data

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## Methodology

This report used two different data sets. One contains high school selections made by students through the School District of Philadelphia's online application process for the 2015-16 school year. The other combines application and admission data from participating charter schools.

### Data from the School District of Philadelphia

This data set consists of student-level data supplied by the School District of Philadelphia, including:

1. Information for each eighth-grader who was enrolled in a district-run or charter school in Philadelphia for the 2014-15 school year, including school attended for eighth grade, race/ethnicity, gender, home address, English language learner status, whether the student received special education services, and whether the student received federal poverty assistance.
2. Raw scores and performance categories for seventh-grade English language arts and math Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exams for students attending district-run schools.
3. School and program selections made by each eighth-grader participating in the online high school selection process for the 2015-16 school year, including students who had not been enrolled in public school in Philadelphia.
4. Whether the student was admitted, rejected, or waitlisted at each program or school to which the student applied. The data included reasons for rejection, if applicable.
5. The school each student committed to attending in February 2015.
6. The school each student ultimately attended in fall 2015.

### Charter school data

Pew asked each of the city's 31 publicly funded brick-and-mortar charter schools that had a ninth grade in 2015-16 to share information about students applying for admission. Each of these schools conducted its own application and admission process independent of both the school district and other charter schools. Eleven of the 31 charter schools with ninth grades agreed to participate. The participating schools were:

- Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School
- Mariana Bracetti Academy Charter School
- Freire Charter School
- KIPP DuBois Collegiate Academy
- Mathematics, Science, and Technology Community Charter School
- Mastery Charter School at Lenfest Campus
- Mastery Charter School at Pickett Campus
- Mastery Charter School at Shoemaker Campus
- Mastery Charter School at Thomas Campus
- Mastery Charter School at Hardy Williams High School
- New Foundations Charter School

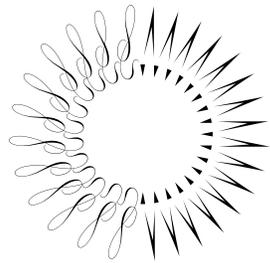
These schools accounted for 40 percent of all the ninth-grade seats in the city's charter schools (not including Renaissance charter schools). Pew merged the application and acceptance data from the 11 participating charter schools, identifying 1,901 individual applicants who had attended eighth grade at a district-run or charter school, based on addresses and, in some cases, race, ethnicity, or gender.

The data set from the School District of Philadelphia was used for the analysis of where students applied, were admitted, and enrolled. Pew characterized the schools and programs based on information in the 2015 high school directory published by the School District of Philadelphia. The combined charter school data set was used to analyze which students were overrepresented and underrepresented in the charter school application process.

## Endnotes

- 1 The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program is a comprehensive college preparatory curriculum. While the Advanced Placement program offers particular courses, the International Baccalaureate program is a more comprehensive approach. Both usually allow students to earn college credit in high school.
- 2 Special admission schools considered standardized test scores, grades, behavior, punctuality, and attendance in admissions decisions. The 2015 high school directory indicated that all special admission schools wanted students with advanced or proficient standardized test scores; grade of A's and B's, with some schools allowing for one C; records of exemplary or good attendance and punctuality; and no negative disciplinary reports. The directory for students beginning ninth grade in September 2017 gave specific percentiles for standardized tests and a more precise description of attendance and punctuality criteria specifying no more than five instances of lateness and no more than five absences on the most recent final report card. Criteria regarding grades were unchanged.
- 3 Research from the school district shows that students in citywide career and technical education programs do better than those in general education programs, even when those options are offered in the same neighborhood high schools. In those situations, the graduation rate for CTE students was 22 percentage points higher than for non-CTE students. Katherine Stratos, Amber Goldberg, and Tonya Wolford, "The School District of Philadelphia Career and Technical Education (CTE) Evaluation Report" (February 2015).
- 4 Dale Mezzacappa, "SRC Approves Creation of Three Small, Innovative High Schools," *The Philadelphia Public School Notebook*, Feb. 21, 2014, <http://thenotebook.org/articles/2014/02/21/src-approves-creation-of-three-small-innovative-high-schools>.
- 5 This figure includes cybercharter schools, one of which is run by the School District of Philadelphia.
- 6 A survey by the School District of Philadelphia indicated that 65.8 percent of students accessed the internet from a computer in their home during the 2015-16 school year. No official offline application process existed, except in certain situations involving students receiving special education or students moving into the school district after the application window had closed.
- 7 In the school district's 2015 high school directory, which students used to get information about each school's admission criteria, all special admission schools described the minimum standardized test scores for admissions using the category descriptions advanced or proficient. In the 2017 edition of the directory, the schools instead cited the minimum standardized test score percentile.
- 8 According to district officials, there are a number of reasons why this could happen. English language learners and students receiving special education support are considered for special admission schools under the LeGare Consent Decree, issued by the state courts in 1994. The decree requires the school district to ensure that students with disabilities are not excluded from attending selective high schools if they can do so successfully, given reasonable accommodations. Additionally, it gave rejected students the right to an impartial review of that decision. These students can be accepted to special admission schools without meeting specific entrance criteria. For the 2015-16 school year, there also was a unique situation at Science Leadership Academy (SLA) at Beeber. Although SLA Center City and SLA Beeber are separate schools, they conducted a joint admission process. A student who applied to SLA Center City could have been offered a seat at SLA Beeber. That student would be recorded as having been denied admission to SLA Center City and having been admitted to SLA Beeber without applying. This was the case for 18 students. Finally, a small number of principals have been known to work outside the formal admissions process. District officials strongly discourage this practice.
- 9 Test scores were available for 5,383 applicants.
- 10 Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, *Unaccompanied Minors: Immigrant Youth, School Choice, and the Pursuit of Equity* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2014).
- 11 Students moving to Philadelphia and wishing to attend ninth grade at a facility other than their neighborhood high school did not go through the centralized application process but instead worked individually with the school district for placement.
- 12 The special admission students here may have also been admitted through the LeGare advocacy process. For an explanation, see endnote 8.
- 13 For an explanation of the LeGare Consent Decree process, see endnote 8.
- 14 Danielle Dreilinger, "OneApp 2014-15 Opens Monday to Accommodate Selective New Orleans Schools," *The Times-Picayune*, Nov. 1, 2013, [http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2013/11/oneapp\\_for\\_2014-15\\_opens\\_monda.html](http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2013/11/oneapp_for_2014-15_opens_monda.html).
- 15 See Sophia Rosenbaum and Erica Pearson, "45% of New York City Eighth-Graders Got Into Top High School Choice: Education Dept.," *New York Daily News*, March 11, 2014, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/education/45-city-students-no-1-high-school-choice-article-1.1717700>.

- 16 Bruce Cory and Nicole Mader, "Tough Test Ahead: Bringing Racial Diversity to New York's Specialized High Schools," *Urban Matters*, June 15, 2016, <http://www.centernyc.org/high-school-diversity>.
- 17 Steven Glazerman and Dallas Dotter, "What Do Parents Want? A Good School, Not Too Far, and Some Other Kids Who Look Like Them," *Greater Greater Washington*, Aug. 31, 2016, <http://greatergreaterwashington.org/post/33297/what-do-parents-want-a-good-school-not-too-far-and-some-other-kids-that-look-like-them>.
- 18 Melanie Asmar, "Denver Public Schools Opens School Choice Process for 2016-17," *Chalkbeat*, Jan. 5, 2016, <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2016/01/05/denver-public-schools-opens-school-choice-process-for-2016-17>.
- 19 Sarah Tully, "Newark Schools Try to Help Parents With New Open Enrollment Process," *Education Week*, Feb. 16, 2016, [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/parentsandthepublic/2016/02/newark\\_schools\\_try\\_to\\_help\\_parents\\_with\\_new\\_open-enrollment\\_process.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/parentsandthepublic/2016/02/newark_schools_try_to_help_parents_with_new_open-enrollment_process.html).



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