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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2005, Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) became a ‘choice district,’ allowing all 8th graders and their families to play an active role in selecting the City Schools high school they would attend. School choice—within or between districts—is a construct designed to provide better educational opportunities to lower-income children. Many urban districts, including Washington, DC, New York City, Denver, and Boston, offer their students some degree of school choice.

With four citywide selective admission (or ‘entrance criteria’) high schools, Baltimore had decades of experience with an academically-bounded model of school choice for its highest-performing students. The expansion of choice to all high schools in 2005, and then to middle schools in 2010, represented a significant shift for the thousands of poor and minority students who attend City Schools. A decade later, ‘choice season’—bookended by the choice fair in December and school assignment notifications in March—is a regular feature of the school year.

Given that choice is now an established part of Baltimore’s public education landscape, we wanted to examine the impacts and potential benefits for the City and its students. While looking at college readiness in City Schools for our 2015 report *Building a Bright Future*, we discovered a relationship between the high school a student attends and the likelihood that that student will enroll in college. We wanted to follow that up by looking at how the choices students and their parents make in 8th grade, or even in 5th grade, play out, and began our study of school choice in City Schools with three big questions in mind:

1. **What are students and families looking for in a school?**
2. **How do they experience the choice process? and**
3. **Do they feel that they have options that set them up for success in their adult lives?**

Founded in 1984, the Fund for Educational Excellence is a Baltimore-based non-profit that works to secure the resources necessary to support innovation and increase student achievement in City Schools. At the Fund, we focus our efforts on systemic changes to make City Schools a district where all children can thrive academically. For more information, call 410-685-8300, email info@ffee.org or visit us online at ffee.org.
Over a six-month period in 2016, we heard from 418 City Schools parents and high school students in a series of community conversations. What we learned fell into two major categories: what students and their families want in their schools and how they find what they want. Six primary themes came out of our conversations:

1. School options—what people want and what is available to them
2. Academics and instruction
3. School culture, with an emphasis on safety
4. Sources of information about schools
5. School staff
6. Centrally managed choice process, with communication left primarily to schools

More detail on each of these themes is included on pages 17 through 23. As in our previous listening campaigns, we heard a lot about how students’ relationships with their teachers are critical to their engagement with their coursework and about the importance of challenging academic experiences. Looking at where the most challenging academic opportunities are geographically located, we found real inequities in access that may impede Baltimore’s lower-income students in their pursuit of academic success.

Hundreds of parents and students told us about the challenges they face finding schools that fit their strengths and needs; their experiences and perspectives informed our recommendations for moving forward with choice in Baltimore. Implementation of these recommendations would begin to correct existing inequities that keep many low-income students from maximizing their educational opportunities and realizing their full potential:

1. Provide more access to advanced academic offerings to more students.
2. Offer middle grades students better preparation and coaching on navigating the choice process.
3. Give students better, deeper information about schools.
4. Provide on-demand preparation and coaching for parents on navigating the choice process.
5. Improve customer service to parents during the peak transfer period.

SCHOOL CHOICE IN CITY SCHOOLS: HOW DOES IT WORK?

Each year, 8th grade students enter the choice lottery to determine where they will go to high school the next school year.

**FALL**
In the fall, choice liaisons in middle schools (usually school counselors) work with 8th-grade students to identify the best options for them, based on factors like composite score and interests.

**DECEMBER OR JANUARY**
City Schools hosts a ‘choice fair’ for students and families that schools attend to showcase their schools and provide information about their offerings to prospective students.

**JANUARY OR FEBRUARY**
Lottery applications are due about a month after the choice fair. Each 8th grade student submits a lottery application ranking his or her top five high school choices.

**MARCH**
Students receive their school assignments in March. The district assigns a random lottery number to each student and uses an algorithm to match students in lottery number order to their highest ranked school where there is a space for them. (For entrance criteria schools this works slightly differently: the district ranks all qualifying applicants to a specific school by composite score, then assigns them to their highest-ranked school where there is a space available.)

Middle school choice is also managed by lottery. Fifth grade students attending K-8 schools do not have to enter the lottery, but they may choose to. Fifth grade students in K-5 schools must enter the choice lottery for a middle school spot, and they receive priority in the lottery over students attending K-8 schools. 1
Understanding the Relationship between School Choice and College Enrollment

In 2015, the Fund spent a year looking at college readiness for our report *Building a Bright Future: Understanding College Readiness in Baltimore City Public Schools*. We mapped out a comprehensive set of indicators of college readiness from pre-school through 12th grade from the available national research base, and we listened to City Schools students, alumni, and parents talk about their experiences preparing for college. As we analyzed our focus group discussions, it became apparent that there is a relationship between where a student attends high school and whether that student enrolls in college. The Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC) put some numbers to that relationship by breaking out college enrollment rates in City Schools by type of high school in its *College Opportunities and Success: Baltimore City Graduates through the Class of 2014*. City Schools has since gone even further, publishing three years of school-specific college enrollment rates in each school’s data profile.

![Figure 1: Percent of City Schools graduates from class of 2015 who enrolled in college the fall after high school graduation, selected high schools, as of August 2016.](image-url)
In City Schools, all incoming high school students are required to participate in the school choice process, and they can apply to attend any public school in the city, regardless of location. Over the past decade, City Schools has expanded career and technology education (CTE) and Junior Officers’ Reserve Training Corps (JROTC) offerings in both traditional neighborhood and newer small high schools in an effort to provide more career-focused options. Citywide academic entrance criteria high schools continue to accept only those students who meet their academic bar, a qualifying composite score that varies slightly by school. In 2016, there were 1,848 applicants for the 400 seats at Baltimore City College (City) and 1,736 applicants for the 425 open seats at Baltimore Polytechnic Institute (Poly), underscoring how competitive admission to these schools can be.

Students who graduate from City Schools academic entrance criteria and charter high schools enroll in college at higher rates than students who graduate from all other types of high schools. In our participant sample, almost three-quarters (74%) of high school students who live in the ten highest-income neighborhoods in Baltimore City attend academic entrance criteria and charter schools, while only 39% of their peers who live in the ten poorest neighborhoods do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF HIGH SCHOOL ATTENDING</th>
<th>STUDENTS LIVING IN HIGHEST-INCOME NEIGHBORHOODS</th>
<th>STUDENTS LIVING IN LOWEST-INCOME NEIGHBORHOODS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic entrance criteria</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTE with entrance criteria</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional neighborhood</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The long-term impact of this connection between high school choice and college enrollment is significant, since the surest path to the middle class runs through college, specifically a four-year degree. Someone with a Bachelor’s degree can expect to earn 84% more over a lifetime than someone with only a high school diploma. This relationship between high school attended and college enrollment rate raised questions about the district’s school choice system. Most pressing: given how outcomes vary by school, how are families making decisions about where they send their students to high school? Are students and families aware of the differences in outcome as they are applying?
Uncovering the Middle School Connection

Because much of high school admission in City Schools hinges on a student's composite score, we wanted to consider how a student’s middle school experience fits into the equation. (A student’s composite score is calculated from a combination of grades, test scores, and attendance from seventh grade and the first quarter of eighth grade.) City Schools offers middle school as well as high school choice, and we wondered if families entering middle school were thinking about which schools would best set their students up for success in high school.

Schools with middle grades (grades 6 through 8) provide a range of options to students. While there are a handful of schools that require a qualifying composite score for admission, there are also two special academic programs that do not require students to meet entrance criteria. Twenty-four (24) City Schools with middle grades advertise ‘gifted and advanced learning’ programming: “Gifted and advanced learners can enroll in honors classes….where they will prepare for higher-level classes, compete in district and statewide competitions, and work on challenging projects.” Schools offering gifted and advanced learning are disproportionately located in the higher-income areas of Baltimore City, and only six of them are designated as ‘choice’ schools, meaning an out-of-zone student could be admitted to the school through the choice lottery. Seventeen (17) schools offer a rigorous engineering career and technology education (CTE) program called Gateway to Technology: Project Lead the Way. The majority of these schools are also located in higher-income neighborhoods.

The distribution of schools with special academic programming for middle grades students underscores the challenge for students in low-income areas. The US Census Bureau’s 2015 American Community Survey estimates that 2,738 middle grades students who attend City Schools live in West Baltimore (Quintile 5)—the largest concentration of public middle school students in Baltimore City. Yet there are only two special academic programs located in West Baltimore to serve those students. In contrast, 2,032 middle grades students who attend City Schools live in the Hamilton area (Quintile 1), where five schools offer seven programs.
As these numbers indicate, while there are many schools positioned to set students up for success in high school, our low-income students and families do not have the same level of access to special academic programs—and the leg up on admission to the high schools that are best preparing City Schools students for college—as higher-income students.
Putting the Pieces Together: Choice and Equity

Middle school students living in our higher-income neighborhoods have greater access to special academic programming, and it is possible that the academic boost they get from such programming helps them earn higher composite scores than their lower-income peers. Also worth considering, the course grades for honors classes that students in gifted and advanced learning have access to are weighted at 1.10 for GPA purposes. GPA is a major component of the composite score, so middle school students who take honors classes receive an additional advantage when it comes to admission to entrance criteria high schools.

A high composite score opens up a wide range of high school choices. A student whose score does not qualify for entrance criteria schools has a more limited set of options—particularly options that will help him or her get into college. With these systemic inequities in mind, we wondered:

1. **What are students and families looking for in a school?**
2. **How do they experience the choice process? and**
3. **Do they feel like they have options that are setting them up for success in their adult lives?**

The premise—and promise—of school choice is that it gives poor and minority students who are more likely to attend under-resourced schools an opportunity to reach beyond the confines of a neighborhood. In theory, a choice system allows them to attend schools that offer greater diversity, more varied and challenging academic offerings, and a wider range of resources overall that can help lower-income students along a path to the middle class.

Baltimore’s school choice system is now an established part of the education landscape. But, if the introduction of school choice into City Schools was having the intended effect, what results should we expect to see a decade later? Unfortunately, our choice system in its current form has had the unintended consequence of replicating existing inequities, rather than correcting them.

In our most recent series of community conversations with City Schools students and families, we sought their responses to the three questions outlined above and listened to their stories of searching for a great education in Baltimore City.
FIGURE 5: School-specific college enrollment the fall after graduation, with percentage of non-minority and non-FARMs students.

Western
Baltimore School for the Arts
Poly
City College
Vivien T. Thomas
Coppin
NAF
Mergenthaler
Douglass
Edmondson
Renaissance
Augusta Fells

Non-FARMS student population
Caucasian student population
Enrolled in college
HOW WE DID IT

Our listening campaign about school choice kicked off in June 2016 with a pair of community conversations with parents and high school students at Benjamin Franklin High School at Masonville Cove in the Brooklyn area of Baltimore. We wrapped up in early December, hearing from parents at Coppin Academy. Community conversations were our primary method of data collection for this analysis. (We collected location, school, and demographic information from participants at the outset of each conversation to ensure that our participant sample was reflective of City Schools student population.) These conversations ranged in size from three to around twenty people, taking part in a facilitated discussion in either a school- or community-based setting. To ensure a consistent experience throughout the study, the Fund trained staff and volunteers to facilitate conversations using a defined protocol, approved through City Schools institutional review board (IRB) process.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION QUESTIONS
(high school student version)

What are the most important things to you about a school?

How did you think about where to apply for high school? What factors did you consider? What was most important? Did entrance criteria for certain schools factor into your decision?

What resources or information did you use when deciding where to apply? Who was involved in making the decision, and in what way?

How do you feel about the number and location of schools offering what you were looking for? [If not enough options] What is missing from City Schools’ portfolio of schools?

How satisfied were you with the high school assignment you originally received? Are you still attending that school? Have you considered transferring? Why, or why not?
WHO PARTICIPATED

Using data from the Census Bureau’s 2015 American Community Survey, we focused our efforts on hearing from City Schools students and parents in areas of the city where the largest absolute numbers of public school students live. We recruited conversation ‘hosts,’ who either live or work intensively in one of our geographic focus areas, to organize conversations and invite participants. Hosts were individual parents, leaders of community associations and churches, or staff at community-based organizations and schools.

We wanted to ensure that we heard from enough City Schools parents and students that we would get perspectives from a diverse array of neighborhoods, school types, and demographics, so we settled on a target range of 400-450 participants. Our participant total of 418 fell within that range and largely mirrors the demographics of City Schools student population.

### COMMUNITY CONVERSATION HOSTS

| Arlington Elementary/Middle School | Judy Center |
| Arundel Elementary/Middle School |  |
| The Ben Franklin Center/Benjamin Franklin High School at Masonville Cove |  |
| Better Waverly Community Association |  |
| Breath of God Lutheran Church |  |
| Brehms Lane Elementary School |  |
| Carrollton Ridge Community Association |  |
| Chateau & Riviera Apartments |  |
| City Neighbors Hamilton |  |
| City Neighbors High School |  |
| City Schools AP Academy |  |
| City Schools Office of College and Career Readiness |  |
| Coppin Academy |  |
| Dallas F. Nicholas, Sr. Elementary School |  |
| Druid Heights Community Center |  |
| Forest Park High School |  |
| Fred B. Leidig Recreation Center |  |
| Furman Templeton Preparatory Academy |  |
| Garrett Heights Elementary/Middle School |  |
| Glenmount Elementary/Middle School |  |
| Govans Elementary School |  |
| Hazelwood Elementary/Middle School |  |
| HeartSmiles/Cecil B. Kirk Recreation Center |  |
| The Intersection |  |
| J’aime Drayton |  |
| Jameka Mosby |  |
| KIPP Baltimore |  |
| Lanvale Towers |  |
| Laura Scott |  |
| Liberty’s Promise |  |
| Maree G. Farring Elementary/Middle School |  |
| Margaret Brent Elementary/Middle School |  |
| Moravia Park Elementary School |  |
| Nicole Howard |  |
| Park Heights Renaissance |  |
| Paul’s Place |  |
| Rognel Heights Elementary/Middle School |  |
| Rosemont Homeowners Association |  |
| Southwest Baltimore Charter School |  |
| St. Francis Community Center |  |
| Westgate Community Association |  |
| William Paca Elementary School |  |
| William Pinderhughes Elementary/Middle School |  |
FIGURE 6: Participant profile

PARTICIPANT TYPE

Students
Parents

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS, BY TYPE AND GRADE BAND

High school students
Middle grade parents
High school parents
Elementary parents

SCHOOL CHOICE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

CITY SCHOOLS STUDENTS

Black/African-American
Hispanic
White/Caucasian
Other
American Indian
Multiracial
Asian/Pacific Islander

Black/African-American
Hispanic
White/Caucasian
Other
ANALYSIS

The Fund’s Analysis and Engagement team examined hundreds of hours of community conversation transcriptions, using an inductive approach to identify key findings from the entire participant sample. In order to generate themes, the Fund had each community conversation transcribed and analyzed the transcriptions using mixed methods analytical software. Ten people performed the analysis of these conversations. Analysis team members applied codes to statements in each transcription reviewed. These codes were typically short phrases that described the content of the statement. The team lead conducted checks for data quality assurance at three separate points during the coding process.\textsuperscript{13}

The team then grouped the codes into like categories and quantified them. In this way, we were able to identify findings from the community conversations.

WHAT WE HEARD

From hundreds of hours of conversations, eleven large themes emerged that tell us what students and families want in a school and how they experience the choice process that should enable them to find those things. Beginning with the largest (e.g., what was heard most from participants), key themes are listed on pages 14 and 15 in descending order. Each theme is comprised of several findings that outline what we heard from students and parents. Findings express the student and/or parent point of view and come directly from community conversations with parent and student groups.

In the pages that follow, we take a closer look at the six largest themes, which fall evenly into the two categories of what students and families want from a school versus how they experience the choice process that should enable them to find those things.

It is worth noting that two of the themes dealing with what students and families want from a school have made prominent appearances in our previous reports, \textit{City Speaks} (2014) and \textit{Building a Bright Future} (2015). Specifically, academics and instruction was a major theme in both previous reports, underscoring how badly parents and students want rigorous academic preparation that will truly prepare students for success beyond high school. School-based staff was also a major theme in \textit{City Speaks}, highlighting the need to pay close attention to what students, parents, and community members repeatedly tell us about how critical interactions and relationships with teachers are to student success.
## THEMES AND FINDINGS

### THEME: School options—what people want and what is available to them

- Composite score defines high school choice.
- Those without composite scores qualifying them to attend an entrance criteria school have limited options.
- Families who do not perceive that they have good options consider enrolling their children in religious or independent schools or decamping to Baltimore County.

### THEME: Academics and instruction

- Students and parents want students to have access to challenging coursework.
- The availability of advanced academic programming is limited.
- All students should get the attention they need—with individualized classroom experiences that meet them where they are.
- Students and parents want ‘quality academics.’

### THEME: School culture, with an emphasis on safety

- Safety is an important consideration in school choice decisions.
- High school students want more independence in school settings and would like school staff to treat them like adults.
- Schools should demonstrate high expectations for students.

### THEME: Sources of information about schools

- School visits are the best source of information about schools.
- Many families also rely on word-of-mouth to learn about schools.
- The choice fair is a good way to learn more about schools you are interested in, if you go in with a plan.
- Many students and parents learn about school options that might be a fit for them from staff at their current school, particularly teachers and counselors.

### THEME: School staff

- Kind, committed school staff, particularly teachers, are one of the most important things about a school to students and parents.
- Students and parents have had mixed experiences with teachers.
- When students and parents talk about what they want in a teacher, it boils down to two qualities: effective and caring.
THEME:  **Centrally managed choice process with communication left primarily to schools**

- There is a fair amount of confusion about how to complete the choice application.
- How confident a student or parent feels about the school choice process is largely dependent on who the school choice liaison at the school is and how intensively he has engaged with students and families about it.
- Dealing with City Schools central office—particularly around transfers—was very difficult.

THEME:  **Extracurriculars and student supports**

- The availability of athletics programs is an important factor when choosing a school.
- Aside from athletics, students and families want access to clubs and other extracurricular activities at schools, including dance and singing.
- Individual supports for students, including structured opportunities like coach class, are important to parents.
- Students and parents would like to see more mentoring programs in schools.

THEME:  **School/family engagement**

- Many schools are doing a poor job communicating with parents.
- It is a big benefit to a school if there is a group of active, involved parents.
- Parents want more ongoing communication from their schools—about what is going on in classrooms and what students are learning, not just about behavior issues or one-time events.

THEME:  **Location of school, with emphasis on distance and travel time**

- Proximity to a student’s home is an important factor in choice decisions.
- It is also important that students feel comfortable and safe in the neighborhood their school is located in.
- The commute to school is often lengthy and stressful for students, because of bus connections and uncertainty about whether buses will be on schedule.
- The ease of getting to and from school is a factor in choice decisions. Students and families prefer to take only one bus, rather than having to make connections.

THEME:  **Post-secondary goals—college and career**

- The availability of CTE programs—for example in carpentry, cosmetology, business, health professions, or engineering—is an important factor in school selection.
- Students and parents want their schools to prepare students for college.

THEME:  **Influencers and decision-makers**

- Parents are usually involved in students’ decisions about which high schools to apply to. Some even dictate those decisions.
- Their middle grades teachers are a big influence on where students decide to apply for high school.
- Siblings often play a role in choice decisions as well.
### FIGURE 7: Comparison of largest themes for low-income participants to largest themes for all participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ALL PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>LOW-INCOME PARTICIPANTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>THEME 1</strong></td>
<td>School options—what people want and what is available to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THEME 2</strong></td>
<td>Academics and instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THEME 3</strong></td>
<td>School culture, with an emphasis on safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THEME 4</strong></td>
<td>Sources of information about schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THEME 5</strong></td>
<td>School staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THEME 6</strong></td>
<td>Centrally managed choice process with communication left primarily to schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### STUDENTS AND FAMILIES WHO SPEAK ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

There is a prevailing feeling among immigrant participants that they do not feel safe in and around school. Participants in four community conversations in the Highlandtown, Hopkins-Bayview, Brooklyn, and McElderry Park neighborhoods spoke of being targeted for robberies on the way home from school, particularly during the winter months when darkness comes late in the afternoon. In addition, immigrant students often feel bullied for speaking a language other than English.

Parents of ESOL students also mentioned wanting school staff who understand the unique challenges and needs of their children. Several wished for more Spanish-speaking school staff members. Immigrant students and parents noted the limited high school options for ESOL students and spoke of feeling that not speaking English implies not being capable.

### STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Parents of students with disabilities participated in almost one-third of our community conversations around the City. Many of them reported that schools are not providing all of the supports and accommodations outlined in their children’s individualized education plans (IEPs)—such as smaller class sizes or one-on-one aides—and their children are ‘falling through the cracks.’

There were many mentions of students with ADHD diagnoses and discussion about how teachers need to be equipped to both manage their behaviors and teach material in ways that take their needs and the needs of their classmates into account.
WHAT STUDENTS AND PARENTS WANT IN A SCHOOL

THEME: Academics and instruction

Participants expressed a real desire for students to be challenged at school and noted that the level of academic rigor is not consistent from school to school. There is a strong sense that challenging coursework at the middle school level is particularly lacking and that some high schools are more academically rigorous than others. While some students finally felt challenged when they reached high school, others noted that they were simply reviewing material learned in middle school in their high school courses.

Many students and parents expressed a desire for wider access to advanced academics, including more Advanced Placement (AP) courses, as well as honors and International Baccalaureate courses. They talked about wanting more variety in the AP courses offered at their schools. Participants also stated that students who qualify should be given an opportunity to try out AP courses, even if there are not a lot of other students at their schools who are eligible.

Parent participants relayed a lot of concern about every student in a class getting the attention that she needs, whether the student has an IEP or is working above grade-level. Parents stated that teachers have to be able to teach to the range of learning styles they encounter in their classrooms. They are worried that individual students’ learning needs get lost and slip through the cracks when class sizes are too large.

“Before I went to Poly I went to a school that was like—let’s just put it this way, it was almost like the opposite of Poly, because they didn’t even challenge you enough. So I had to work really hard to get my grades up, but I didn’t get that help from [the middle school]. The only reason I got into Poly [was] because at home by myself I had to do stuff like Khan Academy. Because they didn’t really give me necessarily what I needed in that school, so it was a bit of a hard transition.”

—Student

“I wish my school had AP classes for every class. Some of the classes I’ve needed AP for….like Spanish, I’m smarter than the teacher when it comes to Spanish, but they don’t have AP Spanish.”

—Student
A school’s culture—how it makes students and families feel—was a key variable in choice decisions. Many participants talked about safety, particularly at the high school level. Students and parents want schools to be safe, orderly environments. There is a strong sense that safety in school is not an end in itself, but a real pre-condition for learning. The ratio of adults to students in a school is seen as important to minimizing chaos and creating a safe environment for students.

Some participants noted concerns about their well-being on public transit as well. Students revealed that they sometimes feel unsafe on the bus on the way to or from school. Parents and students talked about students they knew being bullied or assaulted, while others worried that they or their children would be, particularly returning home from school after dark in the winter.

Participants also want schools to demonstrate high expectations for students. Right now, there is a prevailing sense that expectations are low. However, where specific schools do exhibit a culture of high expectations, students said that they pushed themselves harder to meet the challenges set out for them.

A number of high school student participants talked about wanting to be given greater independence at school and treated like adults. They want teachers in particular to interact with them like adults, rather than children. They also want more freedom to choose the courses they take, to depart from the ‘tracks’ their schools have them on.

“I don’t have anything to look forward to as far as sending him off to high school. Not just the school itself, but it may even be the area that the school is in. It may be a great school, but the area that the school is in—you got to be concerned about your child’s safety to and from school. That can play a big part in it, so I’m struggling right now.”
—Parent

“I think that, unfortunately, there are a lot of people who have given up on City kids, who hold us all to low expectations, and, in that way, people are going through the motions and stuff. So I think in that way we need a change in mindset and a critical mass of people to start demanding more.”
—Parent
School-based staff—and particularly how they interact with students and families—featured heavily in participant discussions about what is most important to them about a school. (As we note on page 22, they are also a primary source of information to students and families about school options.)

Of school-based staff, teachers were far and away the most important to participants. They talked a lot about their experiences with teachers current and past, as well as what they most want in their teachers.

Experiences with teachers were mixed. Many discussed the wonderful teachers they had who took the time to know their students’ strengths and gaps and made sure they learned the course material. Several participants felt like their teachers gave them a sense of possibility that they had not known before. Parent participants were particularly appreciative of teachers who communicated regularly via email or text about what was going on or coming up in the classroom.

Others relayed stories of teachers who seemingly do not care about teaching students—who hand out worksheets instead of engaging in instruction or who don’t check homework for student understanding of the material. There is a sense from many participants that some teachers are just there for the paycheck. Participants also spoke about teachers who did not know or understand the content they were teaching and others who engaged in unprofessional behavior in front of students.

When participants talk about what they most want in a teacher, it boils down to two qualities: effective and caring. Students and parents want teachers to be committed to student success, ensuring that students are actually learning the material they are teaching. They acknowledge that there may be a range of abilities in a given classroom, but they want teachers to strive to maximize the potential of each student. Students, in particular, want teachers to deliver engaging, interactive instruction—in other words, they do not want to be bored.

Participants also want teachers who really care about students as people. There was a widespread feeling that teachers expect respect from students but do not necessarily show students that same personal respect. Several students also expressed that they put more effort and thought into their work when there is a positive relationship with the teacher, when they feel like that person really cares about them. They don’t want to let that teacher down.

“I think it also has to do with the teachers….I’ve always had trouble with English. When I was at [my high school], my ninth-grade year, I had this teacher, and I could not stand his class worth nothing. I just thought that he didn’t do a good job of helping students that actually needed help. It was a lot of like, ‘You’re doing this wrong, you’re doing this wrong,’ but never, ‘This is how you do this right.’ I’ve always thought that I was the reason why I couldn’t do certain things in English, or why I wasn’t getting good grades. Then I got to tenth grade and I got a much better teacher, and when I asked a question I actually got an answer. Then my 11th grade year, I had arguably the best English teacher ever. And the difference wasn’t necessarily the curriculum—they all had their set things that they were supposed to do—but it was the way in which they did it.”

—Student

“Kids need that….and they need to know that the adults care. There’s got to be some caring in there somewhere, and you’re not just coming to work for a paycheck. You’re coming because you care, you’re coming because you want to see the kids succeed. You coming because it’s a partnership, you want to be the adult that they can look up to. You want to lead by example. You want to be an example for them as well.”

—Parent
PARTICIPANTS: 418
CONVERSATIONS: 58
COMMUNITIES: 41
KEY THEMES: 6
THE CHOICE PROCESS – HOW STUDENTS AND PARENTS FIND WHAT THEY WANT IN A SCHOOL

THEME: School options—what people want and what is available to them

There is an overwhelming sense among participants that a student’s composite score defines his or her high school choices. Students who earned a high enough composite score to get into an entrance criteria high school felt like they had plenty of choice. These students usually prefer and enroll in City, Poly, or Western High School and sometimes Paul Laurence Dunbar High School (Dunbar). Students who did not earn a qualifying score for admission to an entrance criteria school felt like their options were extremely limited to non-existent. Some in this latter camp spoke about how disheartening it was to work incredibly hard, do your absolute best and still not earn a composite score that would gain admission to an entrance criteria school. Others spoke about not taking middle school seriously enough and not understanding that their grades made them ineligible for the entrance criteria high schools they planned to attend.

Students without qualifying composite scores often feel like they are reduced to a score and shut out of the schools that offer what they are looking for. Some participants—parents and students—think that entrance criteria high schools should be open to all students by lottery, regardless of composite score. A few suggested replicating the Poly model somewhere else in the City, since there is so much demand for that kind of challenging academic programming with a math and science focus.

A great many parents with students at all grade levels were considering applying to parochial or independent schools or making a move to Baltimore County for schools, given the limited options they feel City Schools offers them.

“I think if there’s 20,000 students who want to go to Poly, make another school like Poly. Make another school that excels in math and science. Equip the students. Don’t give them only one option, and make it really hard to get into because so many people want to go there.”
—Parent

“[I]t only makes you think that there’s probably some that are kind of left out and forced to go to different schools that they don’t necessarily want to go to because maybe the teachers didn’t realize they were gifted, and so they didn’t push them or different things like that. And so, I feel like there should be a lot more opportunities out there or a lot more different schools out there for kids that want to go to these places that can challenge them, rather than just having a few schools that kind of do this.”
—Student

“So is it really school choice if they’re telling you you can choose, but then they’re judging which ones you can choose based off your composite score?”
—Student
Both students and parents feel that it is really important to visit a school to get a sense of whether it would be a good fit. Several parents said they would not consider a school for their child without being able to see how it was run, visit classrooms, etc. Participants noted that the best way to learn about a high school is for an eighth-grader to shadow one of its students for a day. Shadow days are the most popular type of school visit and are overwhelmingly seen as the most substantive and helpful.

Many families also rely on word-of-mouth to learn about schools, primarily from other parents and their own family members.

Participants feel that the City Schools choice fair is helpful, particularly if you go in with a plan. If you go into the choice fair with a list of schools you are interested in learning more about, and use your time there to engage with representatives from those schools, the choice fair is time really well spent. If you go without knowing what you are looking for, it can seem really overwhelming.

According to participants, staff at a student’s current school are also important sources of information about prospective schools. School counselors and teachers were mentioned in almost equal measure. There was a real range of views about the quality of information counselors provide. Some participants relayed stories of counselors who engaged in the choice process with each student really thoughtfully; others told of counselors who put in minimal effort. Teachers’ involvement in the choice process was seen as universally positive. Many participants spoke of teachers steering them toward or encouraging them to look at schools that they thought would be a good fit for the individual student.

“I would schedule a tour or a drop-in visit at the school. I want to see what’s going on right then. I don’t want you to know that I’m coming. I don’t want you trying to hide, sweep stuff under the rug, and get things prepared. I want to know what it is, what are your benefits.”

—Parent

“I would just say like a citywide shadow system, so….yeah, you’re asking students to choose, and you need to give them a way to see different schools, and I think right now it’s very disjointed about who does that, who doesn’t.”

—Parent

“My guidance counselor would really pump it up. When I was in middle school, I was thinking it was more than what it really was, they was talking about high school, she put it on a level like going to college like how you want your life to go.”

—Student

“All [the counselor] did was look at the book and write high schools down.”

—Student
Among participants, there was a great deal of confusion about some of the most basic steps and components of the high school choice process, as well as about how middle school choice works. Parents did not understand which students middle school choice applies to (e.g., can 5th graders in K-8 schools participate?) or how to apply to Ingenuity programs, for instance. When faced with the high school choice process, many participants expressed uncertainty about how the application should be completed. For example, they did not understand that schools should be ranked in order of preference on the form, or that you could list up to five schools, but did not have to list five schools.

Many participants felt that their school counselors were really helpful when it came to navigating the school choice process. Some counselors did intensive outreach to parents to engage them in the process, calling or texting them. Others scheduled one-on-one meetings with parents to talk through their student’s options; these meetings were especially appreciated.

However, many others participants wished for someone to help them navigate the school choice process. Some talked about not knowing there was a school choice point-person at the school that they could turn to for help or guidance. Several student participants provided examples of counselors who gave students the choice guide and told them to pick some schools or promised to visit classrooms to talk through the choice process but never followed through.

Still others talked about having access to counselors but finding the experience of working with them unhelpful. Some students felt underestimated by their counselors when they saw the list of schools the counselor had picked for them. Some students wished they had known about composite scores earlier.

In addition, many participants felt that dealing with the City Schools central office—particularly around transfers—was very difficult. A number of participants told stories about being given what felt like the runaround, for instance being sent from one location to another or having to come to the central office multiple days in a row to see a transfer through. Many participants noted that the Office of Enrollment and Attendance was always packed before the start of school. There was a strong suggestion that this office staff up significantly in the month preceding the start of school to better accommodate people seeking transfers.

“[I] wanted my daughter to go to Roland Park, because it was in my area. But they say she couldn’t because it’s a compository, and if it’s a compository school, you couldn’t put it on middle school choice….But later, we found out that we could have put it on there. They would have took the people with the scores first, and if they had room, they would have put you on a waiting list.”

—Parent

“I didn’t know that seventh grade mattered, like was a big part [of the composite score] until eighth grade, because that’s when they told us. I was just like, ‘Well, I can’t go back and change it.’”

—Student
WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

How do we level the playing field for our lower-income students, so they have better access to school settings that will help them to maximize their potential and set them up for success beyond high school? As with our two previous listening campaigns, we encourage City Schools and other community partners to listen to the words of students and parents—and to take action to correct the systemic inequities that exist today in our school choice model.

While the themes featured in the previous pages come solely from our community conversations, what follows are the Fund’s recommendations to address the challenges highlighted in those discussions:

1. Provide more access to advanced academic offerings to more students. City Schools should open magnet honors programs in several more high schools in the district, particularly on the south side of the City, where, currently, no academic entrance criteria programs are located. We also need to heed the requests of students and their parents for greater access to more challenging work in our middle schools. All middle grades students, regardless of zip code, deserve access to offerings that would prepare them for the rigorous academics at entrance criteria high schools and beyond. This includes correcting the inequities that exist now and expanding Gifted and Advanced Learning and Project Lead the Way programming to more schools in our lower-income neighborhoods. Because passing Algebra I in the 8th grade is a key indicator for college readiness, expanded access to rigorous coursework should also include offering Algebra I to every middle grades student eligible to take the course.

2. Offer middle grades students better preparation and coaching on navigating the choice process. Given that teachers are a primary source of information for students making decisions about which schools to apply to, let’s get teachers more involved in advising students about the choice process. Schools should use advisory periods starting in 5th and 6th grade to start students thinking about the choice process through facilitated discussion of different options and how to identify schools that would be a good fit. At the beginning of 7th grade, advisory teachers can help students calculate their own composite scores based on their 6th grade performance, so they understand what goes into it and what they need to do in the year ahead.

3. Give students better, deeper information about schools. City Schools should set up a centrally managed online system where students district-wide can sign up for shadow days at any high school they are interested in. All high schools would need to offer high-quality, structured shadow experiences to middle grades students and post shadow day opportunities through the online system.

4. Provide on-demand preparation and coaching for parents on navigating the choice process. City Schools, the Fund or another community partner should develop and make available on-demand a school choice workshop for City Schools parents. This offering would be available to any organization or individual who requested it—a school, parent-teacher organization, church group, community organization or neighborhood association, employer, library, apartment or housing complex, etc.—free of charge and at a time and location convenient to the parents on the receiving end. A more intensive effort to engage parents around school choice might involve bringing to Baltimore an organization like EdNavigator, which partners with local employers to offer the services of its seasoned ‘navigators’ to employees’ families to find schools that will meet their needs.

5. Improve customer service to parents during peak transfer period. While we have to believe that students and parents having a better understanding on the front end about how choice works would result in fewer transfer requests, there will still likely be a number of these that crop up before the start of school each year. City Schools should expand office hours and increase staffing in the four to six weeks leading up to the start of school. It might also be helpful for any staff who interact with parents during this time to complete customer service training in preparation.
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ENDNOTES

1 Interview with City Schools Office of Enrollment and Attendance staff associate, June 6, 2016
2 City Schools features a variety of high school options for students including selective admission or "entrance criteria" high schools that focus on rigorous academics and those that provide career and technical education as well. There are also charter high schools, operator-run smaller high schools called "transformation" schools, traditional neighborhood high schools and alternative schools.
3 Baltimore City Public Schools, http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/Page/30346
6 Middle and High School Choice Results for 2016-17, Presentation to the Baltimore City Public School Board of Commissioners, May 24, 2016
7 Anthony P. Carnevale, et. al., The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013.
8 Advanced Academics at Cross Country, Francis Scott Key, Mount Royal, Roland Park and Waverly elementary/middle schools and the Ingenuity Project at Hamilton, Mount Royal and Roland Park elementary/middle schools.
9 Baltimore City Public Schools 2017-18 Middle & High School Choice Guide, p. 4.
10 Calculated by looking at income and public school enrollment data from the US Census Bureau’s 2015 American Community Survey, location data from Baltimore City View, and school offerings from City Schools’ 2017-18 Middle & High School Choice Guide.
11 These data reflect a sample of City Schools high schools. Data for every high school can be found in Baltimore City Public Schools school profiles at http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/Page/30346
12 Sixty-three percent (63%) of our participants who reported annual household income and household size were FARMS-eligible based on data they reported. City Schools definition of "low-income" students was recently changed to be narrower: it is based on eligibility for programs including Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance.
13 The inter-rater reliability statistic, a measure of agreement, validity, and consistency among team members was a high of .89 (89%). This reliability statistic of .89, also referred to as Cohen’s kappa statistic, is rated as "excellent agreement" according to University of California at Los Angeles qualitative researchers and developers of the qualitative analytical online application Dedoose. A rating of “excellent agreement” indicates the highest quality of data was produced by the analysis team through strict adherence to the proper protocols of qualitative data analysis.
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