

School choice and new information about academic performance have not changed Chicago's unequal system of educational access.

Over the last two decades, education policymakers have sought to improve access to education via school choice reforms aimed at improving poor families' access to better schools. Using evidence from one such school choice reform policy in Chicago, [Peter Rich](#) finds that such measures did not encourage parents to send their children to high achieving schools, likely because of the geography of school provision.



In the United States, financial resources play a critical role in the types of schools that students can access. Families with more money can pay tuition for private schools or can afford to live in school districts and neighborhoods where public school test performance (and the cost of housing) is high. As a result, many of the poorest students end up concentrated in the lowest performing schools. The importance of family resources contributes to a cycle of educational and economic immobility between generations, and presents a major challenge for educational policy-makers.

[School choice reform](#), which describes a range of policies such as open enrollment, charter school expansion, and privatized vouchers, intends to improve how poor families access high-performing schools, thereby improving educational equity. Broadly, these policies propose greater enrollment flexibility and more information about test performance, liberating families who seek better schools but who do not have the resources to move to a high-demand neighborhood or to find schools with high achievement levels. A population that is actively engaged in school choice may also stimulate competition between schools for enrollment, adding an extra market incentive for teachers and administrators to improve the services they provide.

The logic of school choice has motivated policy changes in various school districts across the United States, and was even included in the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002. New evidence from an initiative in Chicago Public Schools from the 1990s, however, suggests that school choice policies are limited in their ability to address the scale of social inequity governing school access, particularly within a large, urban school district characterized by high levels of economic and racial segregation.

In a September 1996 district initiative (a precursor to NCLB), 109 of 557 Chicago schools were placed on “probation” for low reading proficiency. The list of schools on probation was [reported publicly](#) in local newspapers, giving families a simple metric for assessing school quality. At the time of the new policy, Chicago already had open school enrollment, so the probation plan infused new information into a pre-existing school choice system. It informed families which schools were the lowest performing in the district, and also indicated potential future closure or re-staffing if the schools did not improve. Chicago Public Schools serves nearly 400,000 elementary and high school students annually, and is the third largest school district in the United States. Notably, black students in Chicago were disproportionately exposed to the probation policy: they comprise 54 percent of students in the district and 84 percent of students attending probation schools.

Overall, families in Chicago whose children attended schools put on probation were responsive to the new policy. In the summer of 1997, elementary students at probation schools were 19 percent more likely to transfer to other schools in the district than comparable students attending those same schools just two years prior. Furthermore, the odds of students leaving the district altogether—either enrolling in private school or moving to a new public district

(the available data do not track where students attended after leaving the district)—increased by 16 percent. Thus, the new policy in Chicago increased student outflow from the schools that were assigned probation.

The response to probation policy in Chicago provides a rare window for understanding more about school choice. There was a [limited uptake](#) of the school choice option under NCLB, for instance, with less than one percent of families opting out of their neighborhood school in the first three years of implementation. Similarly weak choice policy responses were found in [Florida's A-F school grading system](#). In contrast, the probation plan in Chicago stimulated a substantial amount of school choice activity, giving us an opportunity to evaluate how new information affected patterns of inequality in the choice process.



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Despite increased school choice in Chicago during the implementation of probation, educational access did not become more equitable among students in the district. Two key patterns emerge from student administrative enrollment records.

First, families' responses to the probation policy varied by their financial resources. Families with an income near or below the federal poverty level were more likely than non-poor families to transfer schools within the district. Non-poor families, however, were much more likely to leave the district altogether. In this way, households with more resources accessed a wider range of options.

Second, nearly 74 percent of students who transferred from a probation school moved to a school that performed at the bottom half of all schools in the district. This pattern went almost completely unchanged before and after the implementation of the probation policy. Thus, even in a period of increased attention to school academic performance and of active school choice, families leaving probation schools did not begin sending their children to high achieving schools. The new information about school performance had little effect.

What explains this lack of school upgrading? There are no adequate survey data to assess the underlying motivations of families who transferred, but there is one plausible explanation: geography. Low-performing schools on probation in Chicago are spatially clustered together, so students leaving a probation school would need to travel a further distance to access a high-performing school. Therefore, even though there were no bureaucratic restrictions preventing transfers from probation schools to high performing schools, there were still practical, transportation and

commute-time costs for families to consider.

By revisiting the enrollment patterns of students in the Chicago Public Schools—at a critical time point in the recent history of the school choice reform movement—my analysis with Jennifer Jennings yielded an important overall insight: urban inequality contextualizes how households access schools, irrespective of the information they have to make their choices. Open enrollment, an infusion of information about academic performance, and other market-oriented policies will have a limited effect on equalizing educational access, at least in the short term, if the broader context of segregation and poverty are left unaddressed.

This article is based on the paper, 'Choice, Information, and Constrained Options: School Transfers in a Stratified Educational System', in the American Sociological Review.

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