



Overcoming Racial Gaps in School Preferences: The Role of Peer Diversity in School Choice

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Summary

Large school districts often offer school choice as a pathway for students from more disadvantaged neighborhoods to access better educational opportunities. With access to more schools, students may benefit from higher-quality instruction and social interactions with more affluent peers, which can influence their learning and decision-making. However, in districts like New York City, students still tend to choose schools with peers of similar socioeconomic status and race, and Black and Hispanic students tend to select schools of lower academic quality* (Figure 1).

Why do students of different races choose different schools? A new paper

*How is school academic quality measured?

School academic quality is principally measured as a high school's contribution to student math achievement. Students who attend a high-academic-quality high school obtain higher math regents scores than one would predict based on their middle school test scores. Conversely, students who attend a low-academic-quality high school obtain lower math regents scores than one would predict from their middle school test scores. The findings in this study are consistent across different measures of academic quality, such as using math SAT score or total SAT score.

by **Clémence Idoux** (University of California San Diego) and **Viola Corradini** (MIT) studies racial disparities in high school choice and the role diverse middle schools play in alleviating these differences.



Source

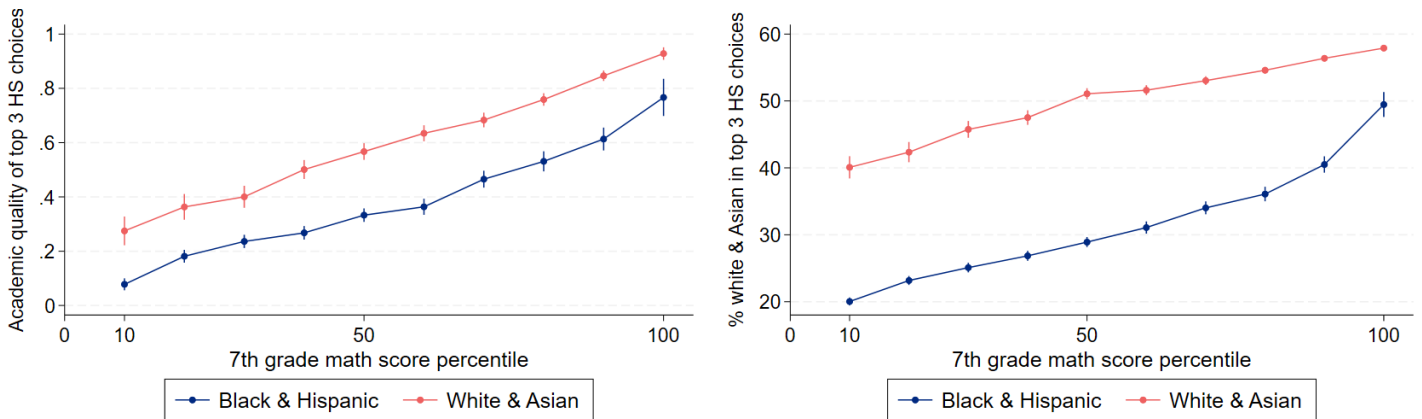
Corradini, V. and C. Idoux (2024): “Overcoming Racial Gaps in School Preferences: The Role of Peer Diversity in School Choice.” *Blueprint Labs Working Paper #2024.05*.

Using a survey of New York City family preferences, the study finds that differences in school choices across race are largely driven by 1) gaps in information about schools and 2) *homophily*—the tendency for people to surround themselves with similar peers. Black and Hispanic students have not heard of as many high-academic-quality

schools as their white and Asian peers, and white and Asian families tend to prefer schools with students of similar backgrounds to themselves.

Attending more diverse middle schools may lessen the drivers of school choice gaps. Black and Hispanic students who attend majority white and Asian schools are more likely to know about and choose high schools of higher academic quality. While constrained by small sample sizes, preliminary evidence also suggests that families’ preferences for homophily lessen when their students attend racially diverse middle schools.

Figure 1: Differences in Characteristics of Top 3 High School Choices
Black and Hispanic Respondents Compared to White and Asian Respondents



How to read this figure: These charts show the mean academic quality and the demographic composition of the top 3 high school choices for Black and Hispanic compared to white and Asian applicants with different middle school test scores in 2020, where academic quality is measured on a scale from -2 to 2, with 0 being the mean school quality. For example, Black and Hispanic respondents whose students scored at the 50th percentile of NYC middle school students chose high schools with an academic quality 0.4 points lower and with 20 percentage points fewer white and Asian students compared to the choices of white and Asian applicants with comparable test scores.

Background and Policy Relevance

In urban areas like New York City, school choice systems intend to break the connection between residential segregation and schooling by allowing students to attend schools outside their neighborhoods. If successful, school choice could benefit historically underserved students. However, recent research suggests that achievement gaps and segregation persist in certain school choice districts. Policymakers need to understand what barriers exist in school choice systems that prevent students from receiving their intended benefits and which policy responses can break down those barriers. This study shows that middle school diversity reduces information gaps in high school, suggesting that early policy interventions may lead to long-lasting improvements.

Setting and Methods

This study analyzes family preferences using administrative data from 2013–2023 shared by New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) and survey data. In partnership with NYCPS, Idoux & Corradini surveyed the families of students who applied to 9th grade in Spring 2023, examining their sources of information, preferences, and perceptions of the school choice process. Around 3,000 families responded to the survey. Compared to the overall population of New York City

high school applicants, this sample of respondents scored higher on tests and was less likely to be low-income and Black or Hispanic.

NYCPS assigns students to schools based on both student and school preferences, with a lottery system that randomly assigns seats among students with similar preferences and backgrounds. This study uses the randomization inherent to the lottery system to isolate the causal impact of attending diverse middle schools on family preferences, independent of other determinants of preferences like family background.

How does this study measure family preferences for different school characteristics?

This study measures family preferences using 1) the characteristics of families' chosen schools and 2) an experiment that assesses how much families value three school characteristics. In the survey, families ranked and rated their likelihood of applying to sets of hypothetical schools. These schools varied only by safety, academic performance, and racial composition. By randomly varying these limited factors, the experiment can evaluate how much families value each of them.

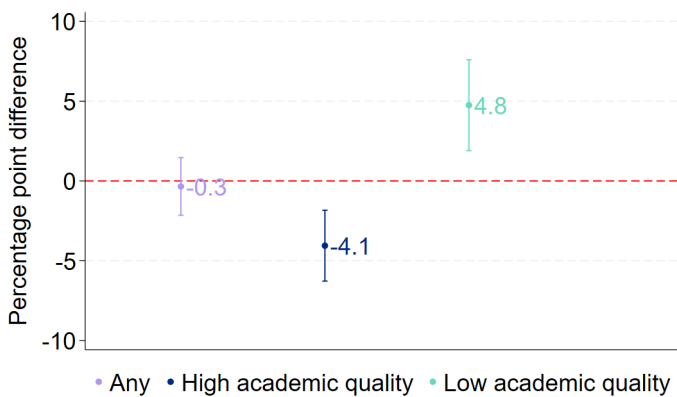
The experiment varied one additional factor. Some families received precise information about a school's academic performance—the graduation rate and college enrollment rate—while some families received an imprecise measure—the share of students who were on track for graduation in ninth grade. The study utilized this variation to test whether families who were uncertain about a school's academic performance tried to infer the school's quality based on the other two characteristics.

Key Findings

Key Finding #1: School choice gaps across race are partially driven by differences in information.

Regardless of race, families know about the same number of schools on average. However, Black and Hispanic families tend to know of fewer schools of high academic quality, fewer schools with high graduation and college enrollment rates, and fewer schools that are majority white and Asian, as shown in Figure 2. In contrast, white and Asian families are less likely to know of low-academic-quality schools.

Figure 2: Differences in the Percent of Schools Respondents Have Heard Of Black and Hispanic Respondents Compared to White and Asian Respondents



How to read this figure: This chart reports the differences in the percentage of schools that respondents indicated they had heard of by demographic group, comparing Black and Hispanic respondents to white and Asian respondents and controlling for district of residence and middle school test scores. For example, Black and Hispanic respondents had heard of 4.1 percentage points fewer high-academic-quality schools than white and Asian respondents from the same district with comparable test scores. If a bar crosses the dotted red line, there is no significant difference between demographic groups' knowledge of that type of school.

Key Finding #2: Families of different races have similar preferences for school characteristics, though white and Asian families tend to prefer majority white and Asian schools.

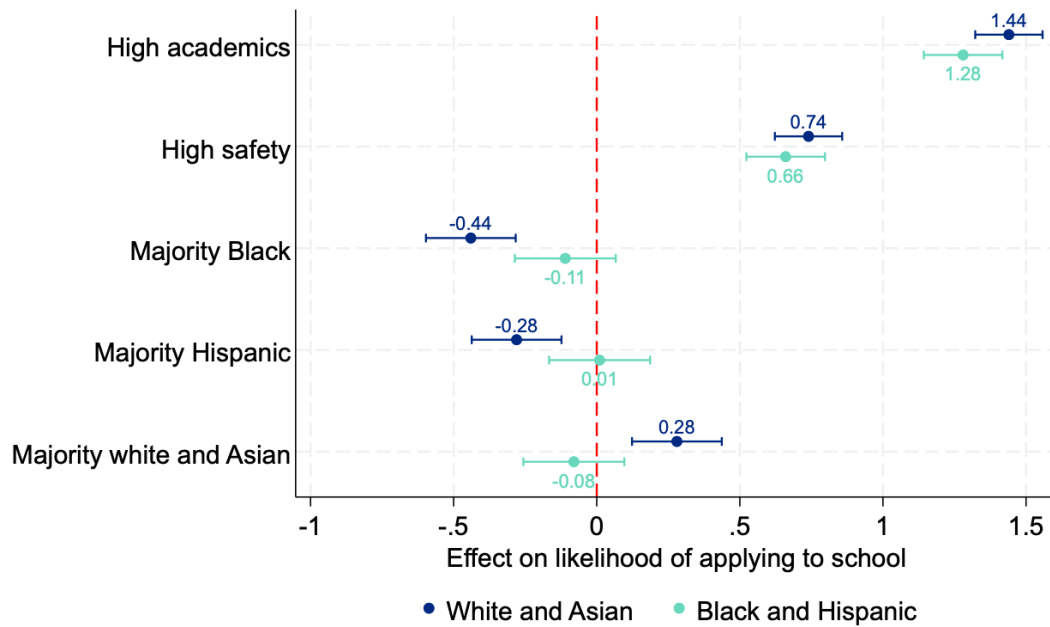
Survey respondents of all races value safety, academic quality, high graduation rates, and college enrollment. They also have comparable educational aspirations for their children. However, results from the experiment suggest that unlike Black and Hispanic families, whose preferences do not vary by a school's racial composition, white and Asian families prefer schools with higher proportions of white and Asian students, as shown in Figure 3.

This preference is partially driven by families inferring a school's academic performance based on its racial composition. When families received imprecise information about a school's academic success, their preference for majority white and Asian schools was stronger than when they received detailed information about a school's academic performance.

Key Finding #3: Diverse middle schools change families' information and preferences for diversity, reducing choice gaps in high school applications.

Diverse middle schools reduce school choice gaps across race. Black and Hispanic students who attend majority white and Asian middle schools choose

Figure 3: Effects of School Characteristics on Respondents' Likelihood of Applying



How to read this figure: This chart reports the effects of school characteristics on the average respondent's self-reported likelihood of applying to hypothetical schools, comparing white and Asian respondents with Black and Hispanic respondents. For example, white and Asian respondents, on average, reported that they were 1.44 points (on a scale of 1 to 6) more likely to list schools with high academic performance ratings on their application compared to schools with low-academic performance ratings. The chart reports effects for respondents who received precise information about the schools' academic performance. If the bar crosses the dotted red line, students are not significantly more likely to apply to a school with that characteristic than a racially-balanced, low-safety, low-performing school.

high schools with more comparable academic quality to the schools their white and Asian peers choose, closing about half of the gap in school academic quality across race. They also choose to attend schools with 6 percentage points more white and Asian students than their peers who attended majority Black and Hispanic middle schools.

high-academic-quality schools as their white and Asian peers. Attending a majority white and Asian middle school increases Black and Hispanic families' knowledge of high-quality schools by 25 percent, closing the racial information gap. While limited by small sample sizes, the study also finds some evidence that attending a diverse middle school reduces preferences for homophily.

The study provides evidence that these effects are partly driven by a change in families' information about schools. Black and Hispanic students who attended majority white and Asian middle schools are aware of as many