CHAPTER 1

Unequal Opportunities, Unevenly Distributed

The Puzzle of Admission Results

Monday morning in late February, not quite 8:00 a.m. A clamorous throng of eighth-graders buzzed around Mr. Menck, the teacher who oversaw high school applications at Forrester. He held a thick and growing stack of letters in one hand. The other grasped a manila envelope with "Acceptance Letters" scrawled across the front. An occasional squeal of delight added to the commotion. Eighth-graders shouted out the names of high schools to each other. The boisterous crowd grew, and so did Mr. Menck's pile as he collected more high school acceptance letters from each new arrival. Over the weekend, these letters had shown up in students' home mailboxes throughout Chicago.

Each student had her own handful of letters, and each letter told a story about where her high school career would (or would not) begin in a few months. Amani sorted through her own feelings while simultaneously awash in the tumult of her classmates' wide-ranging emotions. Thompson, a selective enrollment (SE) high school that accepted only 4 percent of its applicants, did not admit her. Perry, another SE school with a higher acceptance rate (11 percent), did. She felt both disappointed and relieved. "There were people that were sad," she reflected. "Some didn't get what they wanted really badly but some people did. I was kind of happy that at least I got in [to Perry]. Because after seeing like people that didn't get into their choice I was like, 'I should be happy. I shouldn't be sad about that.'"

Davea definitely didn't feel happy that morning. No SE school to which she applied, including Perry, had admitted her. Nor had Condor's honors program, nor the Forsyth science program. She had made the waiting list for Jewell, a neighborhood school she described as a "second choice" school. Her "third or less choice," Rey's IB program, accepted her. "I wasn't really happy but at least it was an IB program," she

recalled. That Monday morning was hard for her. "Everybody was like, 'I got accepted here, I got accepted there.' I was happy for them but at the same time I was like, 'I wish I could do better like them.' Because I'm not accepted to really good high schools such as Thompson or Condor." When Jewell accepted her a few weeks later, she enrolled, but stayed disappointed. Davea recounted a conversation she had with family friends: "They asked me how did I feel about getting accepted to Jewell and how did I feel about not getting accepted to the school that I really wanted to go to. They was like, it's such a coincidence how I got accepted to every school except the one school that I really wanted to go to." Davea never even considered applying to any SE schools on the city's South or West sides, ambitious schools with slightly higher acceptance rates. She described them as "too far away." So she attended Jewell, a closer school for which she felt little enthusiasm.

Although Davea and Amani were rejected by their dream schools, their respective plan B schools, their actual destinations, differed dramatically. Perry, Amani's second choice, consistently ranked in the state's top ten, and it received national recognition by *U.S. News and World Report.* She could select from nearly sixty advanced placement (AP) courses there. Davea would pick from eleven AP courses at Jewell, a school she herself described in lukewarm terms: "Neighborhood kids, and some smart kids, go there." Sixty-six percent of Jewell graduates went on to college, compared to 81 percent at Perry. Still, these two schools fared better than other CPS high schools where college enrollment rates were far lower. Jewell and Perry were both in the top third of CPS high schools by this measure.[1]

Certainly, different admission outcomes for Davea and Amani are not the end of their stories. Rather, they give rise to a series of related questions. First, how did students who cared so much about where they would attend high school, who came from the same K–8 school, and who both would wind up at plan B schools, find themselves at high schools that differed so much? What made those high schools so different when they were part of the same district? What factors drew many students to see a small number of schools as dream schools and bypass other comparable, viable options? Finally, how did application and admissions decisions—by both students and schools—affect what students thought of themselves as learners and as citizens of Chicago and the United States? Later chapters pursue answers to these questions.

This chapter details the application process and shares admissions results, establishing why this book must ask such questions. It sets up the puzzle that the rest of the book attempts to solve.

This chapter details the application process and admission results of the thirty-six students who participated in this study. It traces participants' paths to their high schools by describing their K–8 schools, high school application choice sets, admission offers, and enrollment decisions. I analyze participant data by K–8 school; by SES, using free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) eligibility as a proxy for household income; by race; and by high school location. I then compare a set of CPS high schools themselves. These high schools differed substantially in terms of student socioeconomic and racial composition, and by measures of academic performance. Student reports—for example, about whether they feel safe at their schools and whether educators encourage them academically, and about their postsecondary plans—also varied widely from school to school. Participants' journeys to different CPS high schools, and the distinct qualities of the schools themselves, make it clear that high school options under competitive choice offer unequal educational opportunities, and that competitive choice policy distributes these unequal opportunities unevenly among students.

Tracing the Path to Admission Results: Participants' K–8 Schools

Study participants attended one of two CPS schools—Forrester or Vista—each of which serves students from preschool through eighth grade. Each enrolls a majority of its students from its surrounding neighborhoods on Chicago's North Side. Residents of these neighborhoods can easily reach multiple express buses and the same major elevated train line that runs nearly the length of the city (both operated by the Chicago Transit Authority). Accordingly, graduates of Forrester and Vista likely would have extensive public transportation access to a variety of Chicago's high schools. Moreover, both schools earned CPS's level 1 performance rating—the highest of three ranked levels—the year our research team selected and interviewed eighth-grade students.[2] These shared characteristics signify that Forrester and Vista students were ostensibly positioned geographically and academically to compete well for entrance to high schools of their choice across Chicago. Beyond

TABLE 1
Participating K-8 School and CPS Demographic Information, 2013–14 School Year

	Forrester	**Vista**	**CPS**
Free- or reduced-price lunch eligible	94%	22%	85%
Largest racial/ethnic groups	Asian (37%) Latinx (32%) Black (24%)	White (60%) Latinx (20%) Black (10%)	Latinx (45%) Black (40%) White (9%)
English-language learners	42%	10%	16%

Note: Data retrieved from Chicago Public Schools' Find-A-School and School webpages.

these commonalities, Forrester and Vista were different from one another in multiple ways (Table 1).

FORRESTER: TRADITIONAL EDUCATION MEETS GLOBAL DIVERSITY

Forrester operated as a traditional public K–8 school. Students of all grade levels walked in well-regulated lines through its well-buffed hallways. Students rarely questioned teacher authority, and the school exuded order. Forrester's designation as a technology school meant that it provided learning tools such as iPads to its students, but day-to-day instruction was far more standard, competently focusing on the basics. On a districtwide survey, Forrester's students and teachers rated the school as very strong in the categories of "ambitious instruction" and "supportive environment."[3] Students' annual academic growth ranked in the 99th percentile nationally. They scored at the 65th percentile for reading and the 80th percentile for math on state standardized tests.[4]

The school's student body matched the surrounding community's racial and ethnic diversity to an extent. Forrester drew from the Phillips and Riverview neighborhoods, both of which were densely populated by multiunit and high-rise apartment buildings, with about one third of residents born in other countries. Students at Forrester spoke thirty home languages including Spanish, Vietnamese, Urdu, and Yoruba, and CPS designated just under half as English-language learners. The Phillips and Riverview neighborhoods spanned all four socioeconomic

tiers that CPS used for high school admissions and had recently gentrified in patches. This mix was evident in the neighborhoods' businesses. One block, for example, included a café with sidewalk seating, a worn but busy laundromat, a cell phone retailer, a corner store that sold snacks, liquor, cigarettes, and lottery tickets, a small independent theater, and a number of poorly maintained, vacant retail spaces.

Although Forrester's enrollment was impressively diverse, it did not mirror the surrounding neighborhoods. Inconsistent with the neighborhoods' household income demographics, 94 percent of Forrester's students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Although most students came from the immediate neighborhood, children from more affluent, white families did not enroll typically at Forrester. A parent at one of my son's sports activities, herself a CPS teacher, told me that Forrester, their neighborhood school, was "not an option" for her children. They instead attended a magnet school in a predominantly white neighborhood. Moreover, Forrester appeared almost removed from its neighborhood. While rich with a variety of academic, athletic, and artistic opportunities for students inside its building, Forrester fostered hardly any connection to the surrounding community. Unwelcoming, windowless front doors were locked except during arrival and dismissal hours. Its bulletin board had few items on it aside from district announcements, such as a flyer about services for homeless students and the school year calendar. After school, few parents or children used the modern, well-equipped public playground across the street.

VISTA: ABUNDANT RESOURCES IN A DECREASINGLY DIVERSE COMMUNITY

Less than three miles away, Vista attracted families seeking an exceptionally well-resourced public education for their children. Located in a bustling, fully gentrified neighborhood, Vista was nestled among three-flat apartment buildings, single-family homes, clothing stores, restaurants, salons, theaters, cafés, and a gleaming branch of a for-profit health club. Families moved into Vista's neighborhood in order to get access to the school, which received far more out-of-attendance-area applications than it could accommodate. Its parent association gained citywide repute for six-figure annual fund-raising totals, which funded educator positions and facilities improvements at the school. Vista's historic building boasted extensive renovations and attractive

murals, developed by a combination of parent contributions and partnerships with local arts organizations. In addition to traditional K–8 subjects, Vista offered fine and performing arts instruction and an extensive after-school program. The school was considered top rate across Chicago, and its student attainment scores exceeded the 90th percentile for reading and the 80th percentile for math.[5] Perhaps surprising given the clamor for spots at Vista, its students and teachers rated the school as "strong" (not "very strong") in the areas of "ambitious instruction" and "supportive environment."[6]

Vista's student population had changed in response to gentrification. Twenty-two percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, down from 27 percent the year before, and far below the CPS overall rate of 85 percent for the same year. The school's upper grades were more racially diverse, in contrast with its predominantly white lower-grade population. One lower-income student participant referred to the typical Vista student as "someone with an iPhone and a college fund." The bulletin board near Vista's office advertised such items as private violin lessons, after-school sports opportunities, and even spacious condominiums for sale.

The socioeconomic and neighborhood contrasts between Vista and Forrester afforded the research team opportunities to speak with a wide range of students about their high school admissions experiences (a detailed methodology description appears in Appendix B). Randomly selected student study participants (balanced only by gender) embodied these schools' diverse student populations (Table 2). Students' academic performance varied as well. CPS used students' seventh-grade state standardized test scores to determine eligibility to take the SE high school entrance exam; some students at each K–8 school did not qualify to take the entrance exam. CPS sets the bar for exam eligibility low enough that almost all student participants in this study qualified.

Student High School Choices, Admissions Offers, and Enrollment Decisions

"The application deadline for this year is December 13," Ms. Richman, Vista's school counselor, announced to the library full of eighth-graders on an autumn day. "Ms. Richman's deadline is way different. The dead-

TABLE 2
Study Participants: Demographic and Academic Information (N = 36)

	Forrester	Vista
Free- or reduced-price lunch eligible	16	7
African-American and/or African	3	4
Asian/Pacific Islander	9	1
Latinx	3	2
Mixed race	1	4
White	2	7
Selective-enrollment high school entrance exam eligible	14	16

line for Vista eighth-graders is before Thanksgiving break. No one will be stressing out in December, including myself." Ms. Richman's early and insistent focus on high school application submissions reflects the importance of students' selection of schools. The application process activates the concrete school choice process because it requires students to identify the high schools they might ultimately attend. While Chicago youth have the option to attend their open-enrollment neighborhood school, the vast majority of CPS students select schools outside of their neighborhood, so high school choice is a process in which most CPS students engage.[7]

Three pieces of information are critical to the analysis of school choice processes and outcomes: students' school choice sets (where they submit applications), admission offers, and enrollment decisions. These data tell us three things: which CPS high schools students wanted to attend, which schools selected which applicants for admission, and where students ultimately decided to attend high school. Below, I disaggregate study participants' application, acceptance, and enrollment information by K–8 school, FRPL eligibility, and SE entrance exam eligibility.[8] While these data speak for a small number of students within CPS, they nonetheless tell a curious and unsettling story about students' differentiated access to Chicago high schools under competitive choice. First, more affluent students more often enrolled in high-performing schools. Second, students clustered in particular zones of the city.

CHOICE SETS: LIMITED VARIATION

Amani and Davea each applied to seven schools, just over participants' choice set average of 6.5 high schools per person. Davea felt motivated to apply to multiple schools after several schools earlier rejected her older brother. She had not forgotten his disappointment: "I started to look up a lot of schools because I didn't want to be crying to go to another school." In general, concern about rejection seemed to drive students' multiple applications. All but two study participants applied to multiple schools. Of those two, Timothy circumvented competitive choice and applied only to a private school to which he'd been assured admission. Aaron also disregarded the competitive process when he applied only to his open-enrollment neighborhood school after his father told him he could only attend that school. Thus, every participant who actively engaged with competitive choice applied to multiple schools. Anna applied to sixteen schools, including military, IB, selective enrollment, and private schools. She explained, "There's been a lot of situations my friends have been in where they didn't really have a backup and they did not get accepted, and then they didn't know what to do and they started panicking. I just want to save myself the trouble."

Variation in choice set size—compared across K–8 schools, FRPL eligibility, and race groups—was negligible (Table 3). Most choice sets excluded students' home neighborhood schools and schools on Chicago's South and West sides. Only ten of thirty-six students—more frequently students ineligible for the SE entrance exam, Vista students, and students of color—applied to their neighborhood high school. The relative infrequency of these neighborhood school applications could have stemmed from students' guaranteed access to their neighborhood school, because they could enroll at any time. Alternatively, eleven students applied to nonselective neighborhood schools in other neighborhoods. Meanwhile, students' choice sets centered almost exclusively on Chicago's North Side and downtown areas. All who did seek options on the South or West sides applied to either SE or private schools, and most were students of color. Seven applied to schools in these areas in total, and of those students, each applied to one apiece. CPS required that students rank their SE choices in order of preference. In all but one instance, students ranked the South or West side high school last among their choices. In sum, students' choice sets were expansive in number but limited geographically and by school type.

TABLE 3
Student Participant High School Application Choice Sets, by Student Subgroup

	School choice set size (average)	**Choice set included "home" neighborhood school**	**Choice set included schools on Chicago's South or West sides**
Forrester (n = 18)	6.3	3 (17%)	2 (11%)
Vista (n = 18)	6.8	7 (39%)	5 (28%)
Free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL)-eligible (n = 24)	5.8	7 (29%)	4 (17%)
Not FRPL-eligible (n = 12)	7.3	3 (25%)	3 (25%)
Students of color (n = 25)	7	8 (32%)	5 (20%)
White students (n = 11)	6.8	2 (18%)	2 (18%)
Selective-enrollment (SE) high school entrance exam-eligible (n = 30)	7.4	7 (23%)	7 (23%)
Not SE high school entrance exam-eligible (n = 6)	3.8	3 (50%)	0

ADMISSIONS OFFERS AND ENROLLMENT DECISIONS: GREATER DIVERGENCE BY SES AND RACE

While student choice set sizes had limited variation across student subgroups, more differences emerged in the types of schools that accepted and ultimately enrolled students (Table 4). The total number of admission offers held fairly constant across student subgroups, with predictable variation between SE exam–eligible and –ineligible students, since ineligible students applied to fewer schools. Modest differences were notable between Forrester and Vista students in the number of admissions offers made by highly selective schools and private school enrollment, with Vista exceeding Forrester in both cases. Variation was clear by student SES (as represented by FRPL eligibility), and to a lesser extent by student race and academic performance.

FRPL-eligible students were underrepresented among students admitted to and enrolling at highly selective schools, and overrepresented

TABLE 4
Student Participant Admissions Offer and Enrollment Data, by Student Subgroup

	Forrester (n = 18)	Vista (n = 18)	Low-income (n = 24)	Not low-income (n = 12)	Students of color (n = 25)	White students (n = 11)	Selective-enrollment (SE) high school entrance exam eligible (n = 30)	Not SE high school entrance exam eligible (n = 6)
Admissions offers								
Total (average)	2.3	2.6	2.8	2.4	2.7	2.5	7.4	3.8
By highly selective schools or programs	6 (33%)	9 (50%)	8 (33%)	7 (58%)	9 (36%)	6 (55%)	15 (50%)	0
Enrollment								
At highly selective schools or programs[1]	6 (33%)	6 (33%)	6 (25%)	6 (50%)	8 (32%)	4 (36%)	12 (40%)	0
At highly selective schools or programs on Chicago's South or West sides	0	2 (11%)	1 (6%)	1 (8%)	2 (8%)	0	2 (7%)	0
At moderately selective schools or programs	5 (31%)	4 (22%)	6 (25%)	3 (25%)	5 (20%)	4 (36%)	9 (30%)	0
At schools with non-selective, open enrollment	7 (44%)	4 (22%)	10 (56%)	1 (8%)	10 (40%)	1 (9%)	5 (17%)	6 (100%)
At private schools	0	4 (22%)	2 (8%)	2 (17%)	2 (8%)	2 (18%)	4 (14%)	0

1. "Highly selective schools or programs" includes selective-enrollment, highly selective International Baccalaureate programs, and highly selective auditions-based schools or programs.

among students who enrolled at moderately selective and nonselective schools.[9] Even though FRPL-eligible students outnumbered noneligible students two to one, the number of students from each subgroup admitted to and enrolling in highly selective schools was identical or nearly identical. Further, students of color outnumbered white students enrolling at nonselective schools ten to one. These patterns meant that lower-income students and students of color in this study more frequently enrolled in less selective schools than their affluent peers did.

Application, Admissions, and Enrollment Patterns Led Students to Unequal Schools

Thus far, this chapter's data tell us that different groups of students tended to land in different types of high schools. A brief review of those schools' qualities confirms that these schools presented students with unequal learning opportunities. I consider four schools: Thompson, Perry, Jewell, and Edmunds. Thompson, an SE school, consistently ranks as one of Illinois' top three high schools, and *U.S. News and World Report* ranked it in the nation's top five high schools the year participants began high school. Perry, another SE, was the school to which the most student participants (26 of 36) applied. Students who applied to neighborhood schools most frequently applied to Jewell (15 in total), the neighborhood high school for most Vista students. Edmunds was the neighborhood high school for most students at Forrester.

These four schools differed with regards to enrollment demographics, course offerings, organizational climate, and student outcomes (Table 5). Both SE schools enrolled FRPL-eligible, African American, and Latinx students at rates far below district averages. They also boasted graduation rates, ACT scores, and college enrollment rates that exceeded district rates. Jewell and Edmunds, with much higher populations of low-income, African American, and Latinx students, offered far fewer AP courses. Student reports of school safety, and of whether educators encouraged them to proceed to college, were notably lower at Jewell and Edmunds.

Setting aside these schools' demographic qualities for a moment, let's consider what these data suggest about school quality and educational opportunity. Using school performance and safety data as a guide, where would you want your child to go? Your star student? What

TABLE 5
Comparison of High School Acceptance Rates, Demographic Data, Academic Data, and Student Ratings, 2013–14, Sorted by School and School Type

	Selective-enrollment schools		Neighborhood schools		District
	THOMPSON	PERRY	JEWELL	EDMUNDS	
Acceptance rate[1]	4%	11%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Demographic data					
Free or reduced-price lunch eligible[2]	37%	59%	88%	89%	85%
African American and Latinx[2]	29%	56%	73%	77%	83%
Academic data					
Advanced Placement courses (total)[2]	44	58	11	8	N/A
Graduation rate[2]	98%	92%	81%	40%	69.4%
Average ACT score (of 36 points)[2]	30	24	19	17	18
College enrollment rate[2]	88%	81%	66%	51%	29%
Student ratings of school (of 100 points)					
School safety[3,4]	86	58	43	41	N/A
Faculty expectations for postsecondary enrollment[3]	99	84	48	65	N/A

1. Data provided by Chicago Public Schools, Office of Access and Enrollment.
2. Data accessed from *CPS High School Guide, 2013–2014*
3. Data accessed from Chicago Consortium for School Research, 5 Essentials School Reports, https://cps.5-essentials.org/2014/s/609730/essentials/environment/.
4. 2014 essentials data not available for Thompson due to low response, so the previous year's figure was used.

worries would you have about them at each of the schools? Where would you prefer to teach? Which school would impress you as a prospective employer?

Student participants showed clear preferences in their words and actions. They strongly preferred schools whose performance looked good on paper. Amani, whom we met earlier, described Thompson with ad-

miration. She ranked Thompson the highest on her application because she and her parents thought that "the standards are really high and we like how it's doing so well academically." Thompson did not admit her, and she ended up at Perry instead. Participants characterized Perry students using phrases like "really smart," "good grades," "well-rounded," and "school-spirit kind of people." Davea enrolled at Jewell after Perry turned her down. She opted not to apply to Edmunds, her neighborhood school, dismissing its students as "kids that really don't care, and some smart kids." Other participants' comments about Jewell and Edmunds consistently described a broad range of students and conveyed misgivings. "I know that there's an IB program and it's pretty good, so you'll still get some smart kids there," Paul said of Edmunds. "And it's also a neighborhood school so you'll have the kids who are not the standout students." Joseph more bluntly described Edmunds students as "not very smart."

In recounting students' preferences, though, it would be inaccurate and irresponsible to disregard school populations' race and SES. Students defined, pursued, and secured educational opportunity in ways that reflected existing systems of power and privilege in America. As noted above, student participants described Thompson and Perry students—who were much more likely to be white and to not qualify for FRPL than CPS's overall population—in glowing terms. To depict Jewell and Edmunds students, who were predominantly lower-income students and students of color, they used dull if not derogatory words. Thompson, a school that many students considered out of their league, still received five times as many applications from participants (n = 15) than Edmunds' neighborhood program did (n = 3). Schools that manifest privilege attracted more students than they could possibly accommodate, while schools that didn't had a much weaker draw.

Was This Really School Choice?

The undeniable racial and socioeconomic patterns underlying student preferences and enrollment decisions suggest that more was afoot than students simply picking and attending the school that suited them best, as school choice theory would have it. Was the process students followed school choice or not? By design, it was. In reality, it was not.

School choice advocates position choice as opposed to racial or

socioeconomic segregation. They characterize school choice as a means toward giving all students and their families expanded schooling options regardless of their physical or social address.[10] By this reasoning, school choice directs no student anywhere. Instead, a student and his family make the choices. Patterns of segregated, differentiated learning opportunities would accordingly not be the responsibility of governmental representatives such as educators or policy makers, because choice policy would take them out of the role of assigning students to schools or reinforcing attendance boundaries. If students ended up in segregated or academically floundering schools, this argument continues, it would be by their or their parents' own choice, as unlikely as that might seem. Even the word "choice" implies individual responsibility and control. The focus remains on individual choice rather than the patterns that thousands of choices create. Policy makers can then deflect blame for unwanted outcomes away from systemic factors and paltry resources.

Similarly, competitive school choice policy carries the assumption that students will opt into schools that suit them and that they want to attend. For example, students who want a rigorous, college-oriented high school education would both choose and be chosen by a school that provided one, while those headed for vocational careers would choose and be chosen by schools that emphasize career and technology education. As with the sorting hat in the Harry Potter stories, which placed each new Hogwarts student into the correct living quarters, everyone would end up in the school where they belong and would "win" the education that was best for them. Competition wouldn't matter much, even though everyone would have to gain admission by competitive means. There would be no problems. Unquestionably, "choice" is the operative word, and policy assumes that it will result in proper placement.

These visions of pure school choice do not match up with school choice in practice, particularly when choice is competitive. Visions of competitive school choice epitomize what organizational and education scholars call the ostensive aspect of an organizational routine,[11] a set of informal or formal procedures followed on a regular basis. A routine's ostensive aspect expresses its ideal: how it is intended to function. In this ideal realm, it would seem that school choice policy and segregated learning opportunities have nothing to do with one another, aside from school choice's capacity to reduce unwanted segregation.

However, organizational routines, such as those involving practice within schools and school districts, do not always unfold according to the ideal. The performative aspect of an organizational routine, which Amanda Lewis and John Diamond describe as "how the routine is *actually* performed in every day practice," often prevails over its ostensive aspect.[12]

Forrester and Vista students largely believed in ostensive competitive choice policy and thought that it worked as intended. For example, Eden, a lower-income student who gained acceptance to highly and moderately selective high schools, described students at each school almost as though they had been placed exactly where they belonged. She characterized Thompson students as "miniature geniuses in training," compared to Perry students, "who are going to be future politicians and who want something that has a lot of opportunities." Jewell, by contrast, enrolled "the type of kids I view as sort of the average or are just not overachiever-like." Eden saw more diversity among Edmunds' students, but she still had a negative opinion of those in its general education track. She identified students in Edmunds' IB program as smart and their art students as talented, but she added that "there's still that normal stereotype of what Edmunds is, with the typical neighborhood kids, not very bright, kind of violent-ish." It is not hard to extrapolate from Eden's comments her sense that CPS perfectly sorted students into schools that suited them.

This chapter troubles the credibility of ostensive competitive choice policy in CPS. If students truly ended up where they belonged, our data could lead us to conclude that white students were more often qualified for academically selective schools, that students of color and lower-income students were frequently better suited to nonselective neighborhood schools that offered fewer AP courses and a weaker emphasis on postsecondary education, and that students with weak academic performance histories preferred to attend less safe schools with limited resources. Such arguments pack a variety of biases. They also conflate students' academic performance history with how much they care about "choosing" a "good" school for themselves.

In spite of aspirations to the contrary, performative competitive school choice is associated with increased segregation. Multiple studies reveal that both white students and students of color have enrolled in magnet and charter schools that are more racially and socioeconomically

isolated than the schools they opted to leave.[13] In cities across the country, students of color and lower-income students are underrepresented in high-performing schools in districts that use both school choice policy and competitive admissions for at least some of their schools.[14] We know this is true, but we don't know how or why. We thus need a more complete, less potentially biased understanding of why students end up where they do under competitive choice policy.

Preliminary Answers, Even More Questions

This chapter's data provide some answers, but they stir up far more questions. One possible explanation for the performative realities of competitive choice policy might be gleaned from students' school choice sets, a rationale that appears in research on school choice admissions outcome discrepancies.[15] Participants' choice sets reveal that those ineligible to take the SE schools entrance exam tended to apply only to nonselective high schools. Further, as we've seen, few participants of any academic or demographic background applied to schools on Chicago's South or West side, or to specialty or vocational programs. But this line of reasoning still emphasizes student choice making, thereby hinting that students, rather than districts, limit the high school choice process. In other words, students are to blame, or praise, for the school choices they make. Our data leave unclear why students included particular schools in, and excluded other schools from, their choice sets in the first place. Yet participants' acceptance and enrollment data tell us that competitive high school choice policy in Chicago somehow funneled students with different academic and demographic backgrounds toward schools with divergent resources. For example, lower-SES participants disproportionately ended up in schools with comparatively poorer academic outcomes and lower safety ratings. Further, these data tell us that a large percentage of students applied to but were not admitted to the same small group of academically and geographically distinct schools: highly selective schools in Chicago's predominantly white neighborhoods.

Pieces of information like these often signal the end point of empirical studies on school choice. Here, instead, they provoke questions that demand richer answers than this chapter's data alone can provide. What explains the relationships between participants' identities, academic performance, high school choices, and those high schools' character-

istics, such as geographical location and academic performance? What led lower-SES students toward different schools in comparison to their more affluent peers? How did SE entrance exam-ineligible students end up at exclusively low-performing schools when non–academically selective schools were also available to them? Why did students avoid or prefer schools in particular locations? Specifically, why and how did student participants, who could hypothetically travel anywhere in the city, systematically avoid high schools on Chicago's predominantly Black South Side and West Side, including those neighborhoods' reputable, academically selective schools? What did students make of the competitive choice experience—as learners, as Chicagoans, as members of American society? How did they reckon with discrepant admissions outcomes and educational opportunities? Thinking back to this chapter's beginning, how did Davea interpret her near-universal rejection by schools of her choice? How did Amani's acceptance by Perry, a school that turned away most of her friends, shape her views of herself as a student or as a recipient of an educational opportunity denied to most young Chicagoans? The chapters that follow answer these questions.