



SELECTIVE SCHOOL ADMISSIONS: OPTIONS FOR DIVERSITY

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Why do we have selective public schools?

- Academically selective schools are a form of tracking, where the tracking is between schools rather than within them.
- Grouping academically advanced students permits specialization: providing a challenging, narrowly targeted curriculum, and courses that might not be possible in an open enrollment school.
- Some selective admissions schools also select on *interest* (e.g., STEM, arts)

Other commonly-heard rationales

- Selective schools are a reward for past *merit*.
- Selective public schools are a way to promote upward mobility for less-advantaged, academically talented students.
- Elite schools attract and retain upper middle-class families.
- Tradition!

Who should selective schools admit?

- Working from the assumption that selective public schools are desirable, how should they admit students?
- What criteria should be used, and how should spaces be allocated when there are more qualified students than seats?

General principles

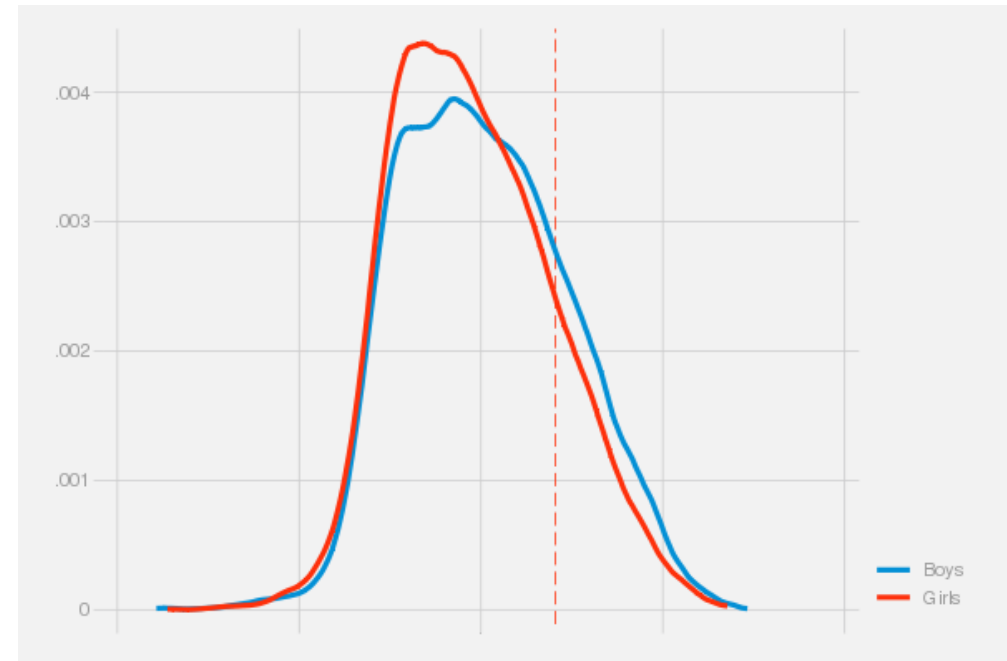
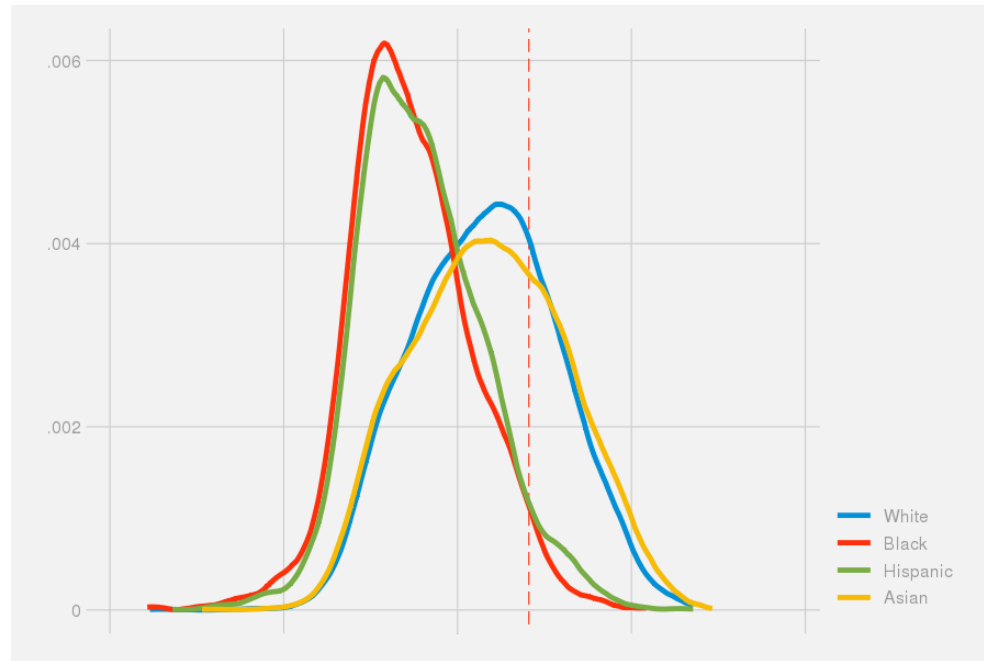
- Academic “fit” – goals/interests should align with the school, and applicants should be adequately prepared for the curriculum.
- “Return on investment” – some students may benefit *more* from the school than others (e.g., less advantaged students).
- Diversity and representation – admitted students should reflect the diversity of the community served by the school.
- Transparency – the evaluative criteria should be transparent to applicants and should strive to be as objective as possible.

Diversity as an educational goal

- Diversity is (or should be) an explicit goal of public schools.
 - Facilitating interactions between students from diverse backgrounds (racial, ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic) is one of the goals of public education.
 - Learning with diverse populations has civic, social, and private returns (Wells et al, 2016)
 - Racially isolated schools are not commonly viewed as providing an “equal” education.

Diversity as an educational goal

- Given the distribution of achievement measures commonly used in admissions (e.g., exam scores), selective schools face a trade-off between measures of academic “fit” and diversity



Admissions criteria

- Admissions criteria operationalize these principles.
 - What measure(s) will be used to determine whether a student is a good academic “fit” for the school, and is likely to succeed?
 - How will “ties” be broken if there are more qualified applicants than seats?
 - How will diversity be achieved?
 - What trade-offs is the school willing to make on traditional measures of achievement to meet its diversity goals?

Types of admissions criteria

	<u>Examples</u>	
Academic	Admissions test	Holistic/portfolio evaluation
	State test scores	Audition/artistic work
	Grades/class rank	Essay
Non-academic	Attendance	Behavior
	“Demonstrated interest”	Extracurricular activities/service

These criteria have been used by selective schools to assess academic “fit” and preparedness for the curriculum. A scoring rubric may be used to calculate a *composite score*, with weights on different components.

Types of admissions priorities

	<u>Examples</u>	
Tie-breakers	Lottery	Geographic priorities
Socio-economic indicators	Family background (e.g., eligibility for FRPL, parental education, STH) Concentrated poverty at school	Neighborhood socio-economic conditions (e.g., zip code, Census tract)

Priorities are used to break ties and to promote other admissions goals, including diversity. These can be operationalized as strict priorities (e.g., Group 1 always admitted before Group 2), as *set-aside seats*, or using “bonus” points added to a composite score (Ellison & Pathak, 2021).

Note: priorities for socio-economic indicators serve multiple purposes: to promote diversity, to identify students more likely to benefit from admission, and to recognize unequal circumstances.

Screened schools in NYC

- Many know the elite specialized high schools in NYC, especially the “Big 3” (Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Tech, Bronx Science)
- Yet in 2020-21, **27%** of other NYC high schools used academic screens; **31%** if you include auditions, and **84%** if you include “Ed Opt” programs, in which $\frac{1}{2}$ of students are screened.
 - A similar percentage of *middle* schools use screens.
- Historically, each school has set its own criteria and priorities.
 - There are **420** high schools in NYC

Admissions criteria and diversity

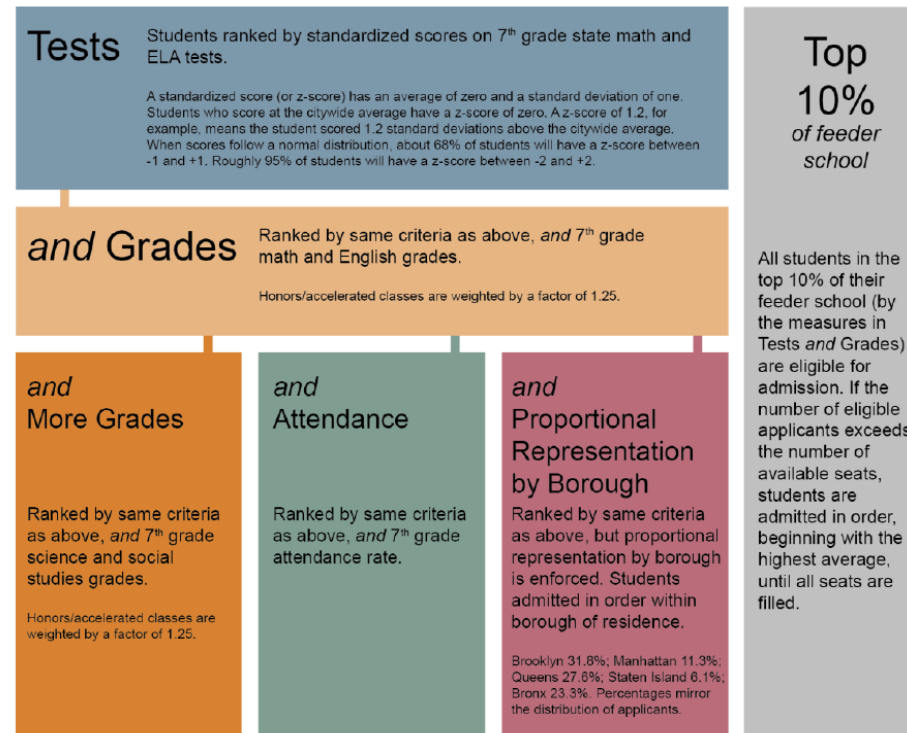
- How does the choice of admissions criteria relate to diversity and representation?
- Note this is *context-dependent* – depends on the distribution of admissions criteria, as well as neighborhood/school segregation
- Some examples from research:
 - Corcoran and Baker-Smith (2018) on NYC
 - Rucinski and Goodman (2018) on Boston
 - Ellison and Pathak (2021), Sartain and Barrow (2020) on Chicago

NYC specialized high schools

- 8 specialized high schools admit students entirely on the basis of an admissions test (SHSAT)
- In 2018, ~56% of offers went to Asian students, 31% to white students, 6% to Hispanic students, and 3% to Black students
 - 42% to girls
 - Compare to 8th grade: 17% Asian, 15% white, 40% Hispanic, 25% Black
- SHSAT has the nice feature of being transparent, objective; but it is obviously not the only measure of academic “fit”

NYC specialized high schools

- Corcoran and Baker-Smith (2018) simulated other admissions criteria



from Corcoran and Baker-Smith (2015) policy brief

Average Characteristics of Students Offered Seats in Alternative Admissions Rule Simulations

	2009 Offers	Changes from Actual Offers in Simulations					
		Tests	Test and Grades	Tests and More Grades	Tests, Grades, and Attendance	Tests, Grades, and Proportional Representation by Borough	Top 10%
ELA standardized score ^a	1.413	+0.298	+0.080	-0.056	+0.076	+0.053	-0.027
Math standardized score ^a	1.696	+0.230	+0.046	-0.112	+0.049	-0.024	-0.122
Math grade (0-100)	93.1	+0.1	+1.0	+0.5	+1.1	+0.4	+0.3
English grade (0-100)	91.3	+0.8	+2.0	+1.7	+2.1	+1.2	+0.8
Attendance rate	97.7	-0.2	-0.1	-0.2	+0.3	-0.2	-0.5
Female	46.1	+9.3	+11.3	+10.8	+11.5	+12.8	+14.1
Asian	53.6	-8.9	-6.5	-6.0	-4.4	-12.7	-15.9
Black	7.6	+2.1	-0.5	-1.2	-0.6	+3.5	+12.8
Latino	9.4	+4.3	+3.5	+4.1	+3.0	+10.7	+12.4
White	29.2	+2.4	+3.5	+3.1	+2.0	-1.7	-9.4
Free lunch eligible	30.6	-0.3	0	+0.7	+0.5	+4.6	+12.0
Received an offer in 2009	100.0	-37.8	-43.8	-49.0	-42.9	-47.2	-57.7
Received a "Big 3" offer in 2009 ^a	75.7	-26.5	-31.4	-36.2	-30.6	-33.8	-43.3
Number of middle schools representing 50% of offers	23	+4.0	-5.0	-7.0	-5.0	-1.0	+34.0
Number of middle schools representing 85% of offers	81	+13.0	-27.0	-38.0	-26.0	+1.0	+36.0

Source: Research Alliance calculations using data provided by the NYC DOE

Notes: This brief includes six of the seven "rules" included in the full working paper. See the full working paper for simulated results for a rule based on tests and unweighted grades. ^a See note to "Tests" on previous page. ^a The "big 3" are Stuyvesant High School, the Bronx High School of Science, and Brooklyn Technical High School.

from Corcoran and Baker-Smith (2015) policy brief

Boston

- Boston has used a composite score with equally weighted GPA and standardized test score.
- Rucinski and Goodman (forthcoming) do a similar analysis as the one in NYC:
 - Larger racial/ethnic gaps in test-taking in Boston than NYC
 - Simulated admissions methods that increase diversity the most include automatic admission based on MCAS, and top x% by middle school

Chicago

- There are **11** selective enrollment HS in Chicago
- From 1980-2009, Chicago used a race-conscious admissions system to ensure racial diversity. In 2010 moved to a race-neutral system targeting socio-economic integration (Quick, 2016).
- Applicants take admissions test and rank up to 6 schools.
- Each applicant is given a **composite score** based on entrance exam score, 7th grade score on state tests, 7th grade GPA (equally weighted)



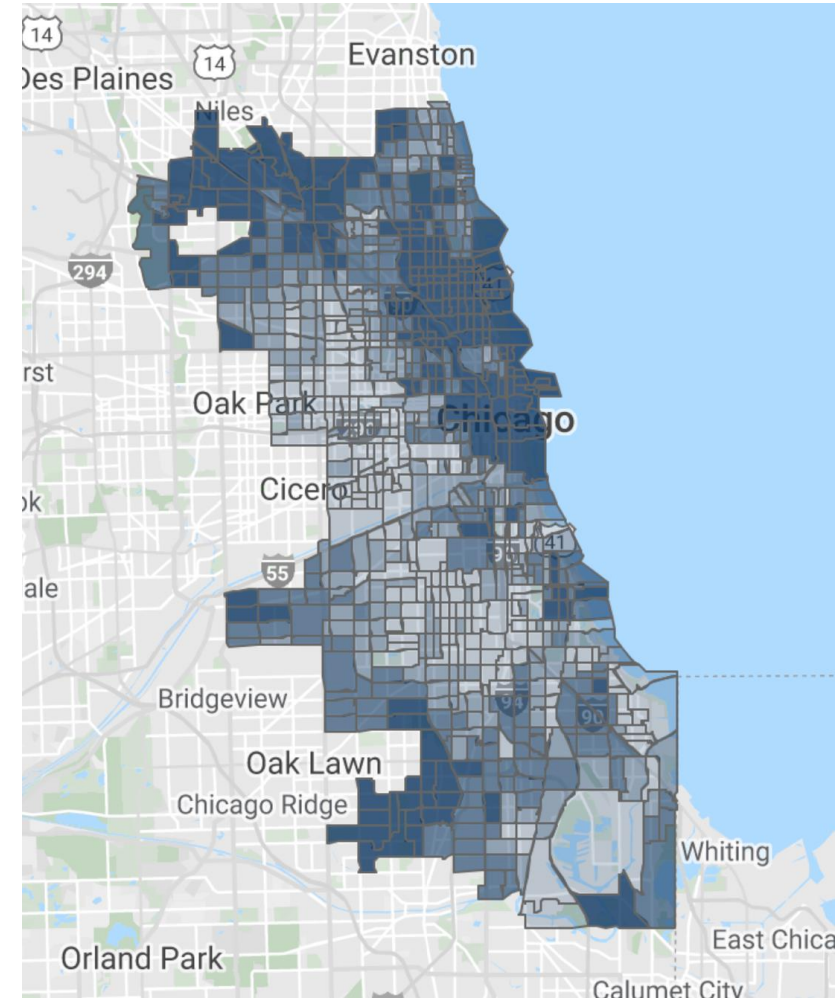
Chicago

- At each school, available seats are split into five equally-sized bins:
 - **Merit seats** – reserved for top-scoring students
 - **Tier 1 – Tier 4 seats** – reserved for students living in Census tracts classified as Tier 1 (lowest SES), 2, 3, or 4 (highest SES)
- Tiers contain an equal number of CPS students and are determined using median family income, % of single parent households, percent of households where English is not the first language, % owner-occupied homes, adult educational attainment, average state test scores for schools in attendance area

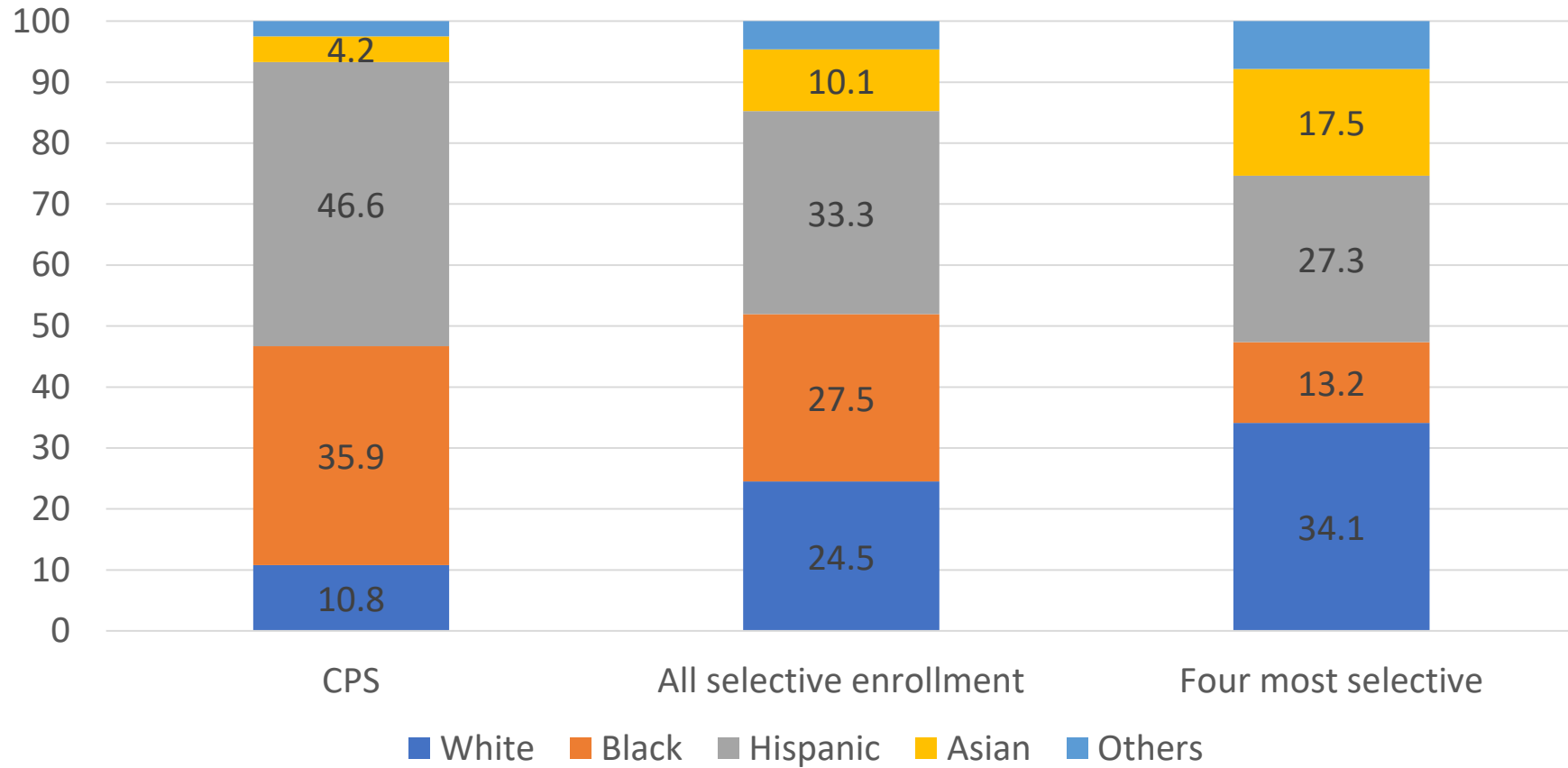
Sources: [GoCPS](#) and Ellison and Pathak (2021)

SES Tiers in Chicago

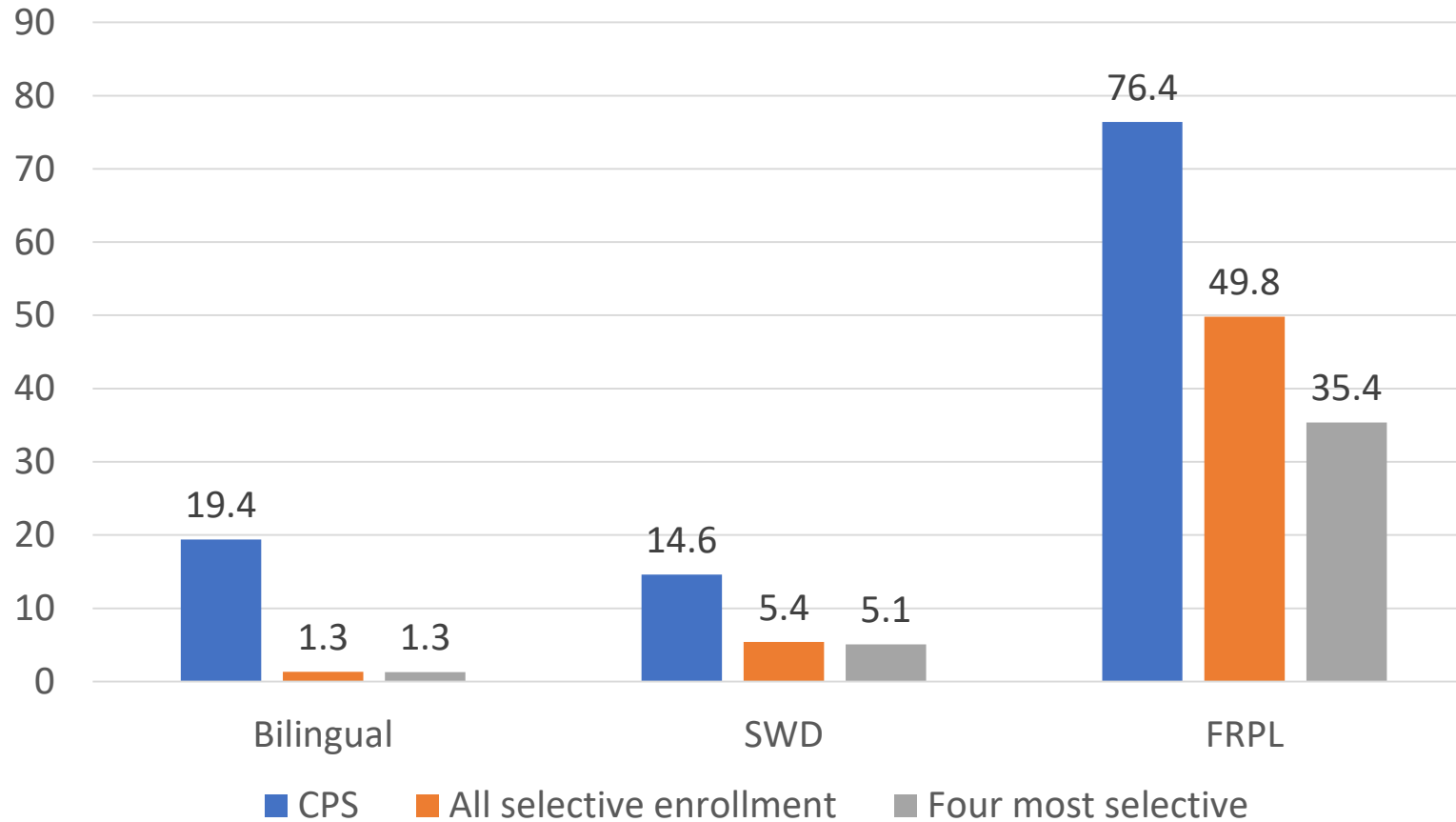
- [CPS School Locator](#)
- Lighter blue = less advantaged
- Darker blue = more advantaged



Enrollment by race/ethnicity, 2019-20



Other student characteristics, 2019-20



Lessons from Chicago

- Ellison and Pathak (2021): SES Tiers are an imperfect proxy for student background. CPS could further increase diversity without reducing selectivity; or, could increase selectivity – and reduce variability in student preparedness – without sacrificing diversity.
- Barrow, Sartain, and de la Torre (2020): exam schools do not increase test scores overall, and there is some evidence of a negative impact for students from low SES neighborhoods (on grades and the probability of attending a selective college).
 - In Chicago, high-achieving students in low SES neighborhoods are very likely to go to a Noble charter school (Angrist et al., 2020)

Admissions criteria and diversity

Academic	Admissions test	Large racial/socio-economic disparities
	State test scores	Moderate to large racial/socio-economic disparities
	Grades/class rank	Fewer racial/socio-economic disparities, but more difficult to compare across schools
	Holistic/portfolio, audition, essay	Greater opportunity to minimize racial/socio-economic disparities, but subjective and may privilege families with more resources
Non-academic	Attendance	Often minimal variation among high-achieving students. Schools value this indicator, but again may privilege families with more resources.

Admissions criteria and diversity

Tie-breakers	Lottery	Can be used in combination with a minimum threshold for academic “fit”. Potential to promote diversity but depends on the threshold.
	Geographic and sibling priorities	Geographic priorities can promote diversity to the extent they increase enrollment of under-represented students. They can also do the opposite (see former District 2 priority in NYC).

Admissions criteria and diversity

Socio-economic indicators	Family background	Priorities or set-aside seats for applicants from under-represented backgrounds are very effective in promoting diversity. Desired data may be unavailable or unreliable, however (e.g., parent education, FRPL).
	Neighborhood socio-economic conditions	Priorities or set-aside seats for applicants from under-represented <i>neighborhoods</i> can be effective in promoting diversity. Useful when individual data is unavailable or incomplete. Neighborhoods are an imperfect proxy for individual circumstances, however.
	Concentrated poverty at school	Priorities or set-aside seats for applicants from higher-poverty <i>schools</i> can be effective in promoting diversity.

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