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# 'If You Don't Score High Enough, Then That's Your Fault': Student Civic Dispositions in the Context of Competitive School Choice

Kate L. Phillippo

*Loyola University Chicago*, [kphillippo@luc.edu](mailto:kphillippo@luc.edu)

Briellen Griffin

*Loyola University Chicago*

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**“If you don’t score high enough, then that’s your fault”:  
Student civic dispositions in the context of competitive school choice policy**

**Kate Phillippo**

Loyola University Chicago, Illinois, USA

**Briellen Griffin**

Loyola University Chicago, Illinois, USA

**Abstract**

*When school choice policies position young people to compete with one another to access public educational resources, students stand to experience these policies in not only academic, but also civic dimensions. Young people’s very encounters with competitive school choice policy through their day-to-day schooling constitute a civic experience. This article, then, explores how students who encounter competitive school choice policies come to understand themselves and other youth as citizens. We pursue this line of inquiry through a critically-oriented, qualitative case study conducted with a racially, ethnically, linguistically and socioeconomically diverse group of 36 students undergoing Chicago’s competitive high school admissions process. Our findings strongly suggest that competitive school choice policies position youth to see their fellow citizens (and themselves) as individuals with unequal degrees of civic entitlement and capacity, who must earn their rights, and who have limited civic obligations to others. This article concludes with a discussion of implications for school choice policy equity, civic learning, and the role of youth as powerful policy actors.*

**Keywords:** *school choice, civic learning, civic dispositions, neoliberal education policy, adolescents*

School choice policy, introduced in many U.S. cities at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has received mixed reviews. Choice proponents have contended that policies that allow parents and children to choose from a range of schools would benefit all students, with strong schools attracting students and in turn thriving, while underperforming schools would lose enrollment and associated funding, ultimately closing down (Betts and Loveless, 2005; Friedman, 1955; Hill, 2005). Market ideology shapes this vision, which

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positions parents and students as school consumers, and school districts as providers, evaluators and cultivators of a portfolio of schooling options (Bulkley, 2010). While school choice policy proponents frame choice as a rational matter of school selection and survival, others have raised questions about school choice policies’ impact upon the communities that enact them. Brighthouse and Schouten (2012, p. 519) expressed concern about schools of choice further concentrating educational disadvantage for students in “regular nonchoice schools.” Citizens and policymakers have challenged choice policies, claiming that they weaken neighborhood schools by allowing them to wither as a result of de-selection (Forbinger, 2015; Grossman, 2016).

Concerns have also arisen regarding school choice policies that incorporate competition—usually in the form of schools’ use of academic performance as admission criteria—into students’ school selection process. While competition to access academically selective public schools has occurred since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Labaree, 1992), it has emerged as a prominent component in urban districts that use school choice policy, with troublesome civic implications. In New York City, for example, Roda and Wells (2013) found that affluent parents pursued gifted and talented placements for their children, even though they acknowledged that these placements would contribute to racial and socioeconomic segregation. Legal and civic conflicts erupted in San Francisco over different racial and ethnic groups’ access to the city’s most competitive public high schools (Robles, 2006). African-American parents in Chicago felt politically disenfranchised when their children were denied admission to schools of their choice (Pattillo, 2015). Evidence of civic frustrations, conflicts and dilemmas, however, centers on adults rather than youth, the individuals who most directly live out competitive school choice policy, who ostensibly benefit from school choice policy via broadened access to schools.

When considering competitive school choice policy’s civic implications for students, this article’s focus, we acknowledge the power of students’ daily encounters with education policy through their schooling. Rubin (2007, p. 451) described these encounters as “daily civic experiences,” which she contended “shape their understanding of what it means to be American citizens and participants in the civic life of democracy.” By this definition, students’ navigation of school choice policy is arguably not only an academic process, but also a daily civic experience, in which they come to understand their place in their society’s educational system. As students compete against one another for spots at preferred high schools, and encounter schools that are sorted by student socioeconomic status and race under competitive choice policy (Chapman and Colangelo, 2016; Gold et

al., 2010; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014), their civic encounters stand to shape their thinking about what kind of education they and their civic peers deserve, and why they deserve it. This study investigates the relationship between competitive choice and students' civic dispositions—which the 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress exam defined as pertaining to “the rights and responsibilities of individuals in society” (National Assessment Governing Board, 2014, p. xi).

While literature to date has not detailed students' civic responses to competitive school choice policy, ideas about the social uses of schooling in America suggest possibilities that merit further exploration. Giroux (1998) suggests that individuals who interact with neoliberal education policy may find themselves understanding democracy as an arrangement that preserves their individual freedoms rather than as one that requires collective undertaking and compromise. Self-oriented actions with regards to the acquisition of public schooling would represent what Allen (2004) described as unrestrained self-interest, which she anticipated would pit citizens against one another rather than promote political bonds among citizens. While U.S. schooling has always aimed to shape citizens, unrestrained self interest would stand to shape them in ways that would drastically depart from early American common schooling advocates' ideals (expressed by individuals such as Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann) of public schools serving to promote social harmony, strengthen bonds among citizens, and spread prosperity across society (Cremin, 1957; Ravitch, 2001). Yet without empirical investigation, these possibilities would remain only speculative.

How do students who encounter competitive school choice policies come to understand themselves and other youth as citizens, with rights and responsibilities regarding public goods such as public education? We pursue this question with a critically-oriented case study of youth civic experiences and understandings of competitive school choice policy.

In this paper, we use a policy enactment framework, discussed immediately below, to guide our exploration of how students seeking admission to public high schools in Chicago interpreted and acted upon competitive school choice policy. We then detail the research methods used to learn about a racially and socioeconomically diverse group of 36 Chicago eighth-grade students' civic experiences of public high school admissions, along with their civic dispositions. We found that, even though participants' admissions outcomes diverged along lines of social privilege, they expressed a highly uniform merit-based perspective towards their own and others' educational opportunities. They also viewed young people's civic obligations and entitlements regarding public education as

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highly individualized. After we elaborate upon these findings, we discuss their implications for educational equity, for educational policy as a form of civic education and for fuller consideration of youth as relevant, informative policy actors.

### **Policy enactment theory: Seeing students as actors in context**

We approach youth civic experiences with competitive school choice policy as an occasion of what Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) call policy enactment. They describe the enactment process as one in which policy actors first interpret policy, reading a policy’s literal meanings, and then translate it into practice through talk, plans and action. Ball and colleagues critique the dematerialization of policies’ contexts, in which all educational environments are presumed to provide an identical, clean field for policy implementation. Instead, they suggest that contexts—which include physical spaces, people and resources—influence how policy is carried out.

While Ball and colleagues’ framework was developed for scholars to consider educators’ policy enactment, we extend it here to students, whose engagement with policy goes beyond serving as its “subjects.” As individuals who live out the policy and use it as a basis for action, students possess the potential to define and redefine the policy itself, and to shape their own and others’ educational experiences, particularly with the case of school choice, where youth compete against one another. Urban youth making the transition to high school find themselves in the potent context of the 21st century neoliberal city—in which social and educational policies emphasize unencumbered markets and individual responsibility and accountability, and de-emphasize a direct service role for governmental organizations (Hackworth, 2007; Harvey, 2007; Lipman, 2011).

### **The social context of competitive high school choice**

As we consider the impact of competitive school choice policy on the students it targets, specifically students making the transition to high school, we first consider those students in social context. This is particularly important given the question of student civic disposition formation in the process of interpreting and responding to policy.

U.S. youth find themselves immersed in a cultural and political environment that has historically sent mixed messages about the civic purposes of school, and in which educational competition has escalated in recent years. A tension has long endured regarding Americans’ expectations of public schools. Labaree (2010) names this tension

as one in which we ask U.S. schools to serve as both a *public good* that prepares dutiful citizens and productive employees and as a *private good* that stands to enrich and advance individual students. As neoliberal policies usher in school privatization, market models for funding schools and evaluating performance, and a reduction in the state's role as an educational provider, public education's function as a private good is magnified. From this perspective, parents and students engage with public schooling as consumers rather than as democratic citizens (Lipman, 2011).

The tension between the ideal of the U.S. public school as a civic hub and the use of it as a tool for personal advancement has intensified along with competition to access high quality schooling. Educational attainment substantially shapes differences in wages earned, with individuals' earning power increasingly shaped by their educational attainment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014). As such, educational credentials have gained potency as tools in the labor marketplace. The contest to access educational resources has manifest in the P-12 and university systems, as indicated by competition to enter elite preschools, lottery-based K-12 schools, academically selective public high schools, and elite public and private universities (Bahr, 2014; Hopper, 2014; Urist, 2014; Wong, 2014). These phenomena suggest that education has come to serve as a "competitively positional good" (Brighouse and Swift, 2006), where those who receive more or better education than their peers stand to gain an advantage over them.

Youth entering high school, then, are likely to encounter an environment that demands, promotes and legitimizes competition. Given evidence that social environments inform the nature of young people's civic engagement (Wilkenfeld et al., 2010; Wray-Lake and Syversten, 2010), we anticipated their encounters with competitive school choice policy and the broader societal milieu as described above would shape their civic dispositions. This perspective informs our research question, which is: How do students who encounter competitive school choice policies come to understand themselves and other youth as citizens with rights and responsibilities regarding public goods such as public education?

### **Study design, methodology and evidence**

To answer this question, we carried out a critically-oriented qualitative case study (Cannella and Lincoln, 2004) of students' encounters with the competitive high school

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choice process. Critical policy scholars present approaches to policy analysis that de-normalize neoliberal perspectives and envision possibilities for education that exist outside of an education reform agenda (Edmonson and D’Urso, 2007). As a methodology, critical policy analysis amplifies the voices of the marginalized rather than recycling the often-heard voices of policymakers who represent existing power structures (Tuhiwai Smith, 2001). We therefore turned to youth, whose perspectives on education policy are often misrepresented or go unheard altogether. Our chosen methodology led us to conduct a longitudinal study of students as they encountered the competitive high school admissions process in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), a district in which all students entering high school encountered multiple schooling options including academically selective schools. Additional information on the high school admissions process follows below on page 7.

Our research team, comprised of one faculty member, three graduate research assistants and one undergraduate research assistant (one African American male, one Middle Eastern female, one Latina, one multiracial female and one white female; four of whom attended academically selective public high schools themselves), collected and analyzed this case study’s data. We recruited student interview participants at two K-8th grade schools (“Vista” & “Forrester,” pseudonyms as are all school and student names) serving all children within a designated catchment area, with contrasting percentages of students’ free and reduced price lunch eligibility (94% and 22%, respectively). We randomly selected (balanced only by gender) 18 participants per school from pools of students who volunteered to participate in exchange for a \$50 gift card. We interviewed participants three times: fall 2013 (during the application process), spring 2014 (after admissions decisions) and winter 2015 (midway through participants’ first year of high school). Semi-structured interviews focused on participants’ experiences with applications and admissions, their understanding of concepts such as equity, competition and fairness, the family and school resources that informed their application and admissions experiences, and their understanding of students at various high schools.

**Table 1:** Study participants: Demographic 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
Latino	3	2
White	2	7
Mixed	1	4

Research team members also observed 8th grade classrooms, group and individual high school admissions guidance sessions and high school open house events. 8th grade teacher focus groups and individual school counselor interviews took place twice at each school. Regular research team meetings, where members discussed themes emerging from interviews and observations, guided data analysis. We also made use of emergent themes (e.g., individualistic orientation, self-protectiveness, opinions of students at different schools) by incorporating them into interview and observation protocols for the later rounds of data collection. Research team discussions informed a series of analytic memos (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011) and the development of a qualitative code list that combined structural codes derived from the study's framing (e.g., civic dispositions, educational rights and empowerment) and emergent codes (e.g., individual orientation, self-protectiveness, sociopolitical awareness) (Saldaña, 2013). Our longitudinal design made it possible for us to discuss emergent findings with student and educator participants, which helped us to understand and refine our understanding. Once we had collected all of our study's data, we summarized our coded data and compared findings across participant groupings by K-8 school, socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and admissions outcomes.

### **Policy background: Competitive high school choice in Chicago**

CPS offered incoming high school students 130 high school options during the period of our study. "Because students have different interests, abilities, and needs," read the 163-page high school guide distributed by the district to all 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, "CPS offers a wide variety of schools and programs to ensure that you are able to find the right fit." While all students had the option to attend an open enrollment high school in or near their home neighborhood, most students applied to a range of high schools including military, magnet, charter, International Baccalaureate, career and technical, performing arts and selective enrollment high schools (SEHS).

Students encountered multiple application requirements, which varied across school types. SEHS admissions procedures emerged as the most specified and elaborate. CPS used student 7<sup>th</sup> grade academic performance to determine student eligibility to apply to SEHS. Eligible applicants were then required to submit a portfolio of grades, standardized test scores, and entrance exam scores which the district used for admissions decisions. 30% of available spots in SEHS were assigned to students with the highest portfolio score, and the remaining spots were evenly divided by socioeconomic tier, as defined by U.S. census data for each census tract in Chicago. This system replaced CPS's



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use of race and student academic performance as criteria for admissions after court supervision of its desegregation efforts ended in 2009. Competition to access SEHS is high, with acceptance rates at many falling below 10%, and as low as 2% in the year of this study’s data collection. Other school types had admissions criteria, such as open house attendance, auditions, interviews, essays and short entrance exams. These requirements were far less elaborate, however, and this group of schools’ admissions rates were higher.

CPS provided hard copy and online information about high school options, and many high schools held open houses on weekends or evenings. Students had the option of applying online or using a paper application. CPS did not require students to consult with school or district employees before submitting their applications.

### **Findings: Immersed in neoliberal policy, framing students as individuals**

Student participants enacted competitive school choice policy in a way that reflected their shared civic experience of immersion in neoliberal education policy. Regardless of whether they were admitted to the schools of their choice or how clearly they understood the policies that affected them, participants saw themselves and their peers across the city through a lens of personal (not district) accountability and responsibility for their educational outcomes. “If you don’t score high enough then that’s your fault; don’t blame it on the school,” Timothy told his interviewer, reflecting this emphasis on students’ personal responsibility for school admissions (and rejections). This perspective—highly consistent across participants—grounded their understanding of who deserved access to the best educational resources the city had to offer, their views of students at different types of schools as possessing different levels of intelligence and motivation, and of their own civic entitlements and obligations regarding educational goods.

After discussing participants’ shared experiences of immersion in neoliberal educational policy, we review how this experience shaped participants’ interpretation and enactment of school choice policy. Participants’ experiences appeared to lead them to picture themselves as figurative lone wolves, solely responsible for acquiring the best education they could get while minimally concerned about how others fared.

### **Pervasive experiences of individual accountability**

Participants’ experiences with a culture of accountability did not begin with competitive high school choice, but in many ways crescendoed with it. Born in 1999 and 2000, our

participants' entire primary education took place after the enactment of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2001), which stressed teachers' and students' accountability for academic performance, and ushered in an era of expansive high-stakes testing, narrowed curricula, the public release of schools' and teachers' student test scores, and sanctions against teachers and schools whose students did not meet stated expectations (Au, 2007; Moses and Nanna, 2007). Chicago led the nation in accountability-driven measures. In 1996, CPS made national news for retaining thousands of students who performed below grade level on standardized tests (Nagaoka and Roderick, 2004). The year this study's participants completed eighth grade (2013-2014) saw CPS's reduction of the total number of standardized tests required across all grades from a high of 25 each year to 10 (CPS, 2013). Tensions over teacher accountability for student performance bubbled over during the 2012 teacher strike, which centered on issues of teacher evaluation, tenure and pay, and lasted 9 days. CPS also gained national attention with multiple waves of school closure from 2002 to 2013 (the year CPS closed 48 schools, the largest mass closure in U.S. history).

This milieu of accountability enveloped study participants. Ime came to Forrester from a nearby school that ultimately closed due to under enrollment and consistently poor student performance. Participants missed school during the strike over what they described as tensions between their teachers and the district (or, in their words, "the mayor"). Madeleine described her experience: "The school board didn't pay the teachers and then the teachers started to strike. He (the mayor) caused something for us. We have to make up so many days when so many schools in the suburbs and private schools are out (for the summer)." During one observation, Vista 8th graders' language arts teacher introduced an in-class activity as relevant to upcoming state standardized tests.

Beyond learning experiences framed by district policy, participants' day-to-day experiences also revealed an emphasis on individual performance and accountability. These included frequent evaluation of their teachers by in-class observers (including school administrators), the posting of 8th grade honor roll lists on each classroom door (at Forrester), and academic tracking in the upper grades at both schools. When asked to describe fairness at her school, Davea said that it did not feel fair to her "how they split us up in groups and make us feel like others are smarter." Others (both students and teachers) spoke of the high or low math groups, which at both schools met in separate rooms with separate teachers for an entire class period, as an unexceptional matter of course. Accountability immersion also appeared to inform participants' views of themselves and others as students. When asked, most participants described themselves

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in comparison to other students (“valedictorian,” “middle of my class,” “kind of low in reading”). They also used grades (“straight A’s,” “middle grades”) to answer this question. Others contrasted their grades with their test taking, such as Raphael, who described himself “not the best test taker” even though he felt his grades were high.

Competitive school choice encounters began early for many Vista and Forrester students. In a multi-age study skills class, a Vista sixth-grader elaborately told the first author about SEHS early admissions programs (which began in seventh grade). “You can earn up to 16 credits so that you have more flexibility your senior year with extracurriculars,” she explained, adding the names of the schools where she thought she might be admitted.

Many students (including 5 of this study’s 18 participants from Vista) attended a fee-based, after-school course that prepared them for the 7th grade standardized test that would inform 1/3 of their admissions portfolio, suggesting that they and their parents were aware in 7th grade of admissions requirements and felt a need to act early to improve their chances. Additionally, several “Hopes and Dreams” posters that Forrester 8th-graders made and hung in the school hallway for back-to-school night concerned high school admissions. Students created acrostic poems using the first letters of the words hopes and dreams:

**H**ello, as we get  
**O**lder. We as  
**P**eople, need to look for the  
**E**ssentials of getting into a good high  
**S**chool. That’s why I plan to get straight  
**A**’s so I can get into  
**N**orman or Roy high school.  
**D**etermination will get me there.  
**D**reams can be  
**R**eached. All you need to do is try to  
**E**xcel at whatever you do. Remember to  
**A**lways do your best. But I definitely want  
**M**astery over whatever I choose. And  
**S**uccess at what I do.

Another poster's acrostic poem began, "**H**ope to get into a good high school; **O**utstanding ISAT<sup>1</sup>score." Not only did this message reach 8th-graders' classmates, but others in the upper grades who shared this floor of Forrester. Getting into a "good" high school was a pressing matter of hopefulness and responsibility for participants, reflecting participants' sense of individual rather than district accountability for their admissions outcomes.

### Individualized competitive school choice enactment during the application process

Participants used diverse forms of information to learn about their schooling options, but the majority of their learning was individual rather than school initiated. Both Forrester and Vista held high school information sessions for the parents of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and offered individual and group guidance to 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students about the application process. Forrester students had the option of attending before-school admissions guidance with one of the 8<sup>th</sup>-grade teachers, which about 1/3 of the study participants did. Using home computers and smart phones, participants also consulted the website of CPS' Office of Access and Enrollment, which provided information about the application process and various school options, and schools' own websites. Most participants (92%) also attended optional high school open houses outside of school hours.

Additionally, participants obtained information from social networks, both personal and virtual. Many schools had a presence on social media sites like Instagram and Facebook, from which five participants learned about schools via images and descriptions, and also interacted with other students. One student researched schools on the GreatSchools website. Finally, student and parent social networks also served as a source of information about the application process and high schools themselves (Phillippo & Griffin, 2015). Information sources were rich, but most were used outside of the school milieu, and were left to the discretion of students and parents to obtain and act upon. Even if students collaborated to learn about their high school options, this activity required their individual initiative rather than formal CPS support.

### Despite divergent admissions outcomes, a pervasive ethic of individual accountability

Participating students' admissions outcomes diverged by K-8 school and socioeconomic status (SES)<sup>2</sup>. Yet, their understanding and enactment of competitive high school choice policy was strikingly consistent throughout the group, and emphasized individual responsibility for admissions outcomes. Lower-SES students were half as likely to attend a highly selective school, either the city's most highly-demanded SEHS or schools that

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required an audition, and no lower-SES students at either school gained admissions to audition-based schools (see table 2). Lower-SES students were 4.5 times more likely to attend a non-selective high school, and twice as likely to receive no admissions offers. Lower-SES Vista participants fared slightly better in terms of school selectivity, with more lower-SES Vista participants enrolling in private school, and none uniformly rejected in their first admissions bids.

**Table 2: Study participants’ high school admissions outcomes, sorted by Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) eligibility and K-8 school.**

	FRPL-eligible		Not FRPL-eligible	
	Forrester	Vista	Forrester	Vista
Total participants	16	7	2	11
Highly academically selective SEHS	2	0	1	2
Audition-based school (e.g., performing arts)	0	0	1	3
School with moderately selective admissions <sup>2</sup>	7	1	0	2
School with lottery-based or nonselective admissions	5	4	0	2
Private school	0	2	0	2
Rejected by all schools on first application round, enrolled in nonselective high school	2	0	0	0

<sup>1</sup>High-demand, academically selective SEHS” are 5 selective enrollment high schools that received upwards of 8,000 applications (and as many as 13,000) and had acceptance rates at or below 10%.

<sup>2</sup>“Moderately selective admissions” schools use some criteria for admission, e.g. a required essay or interview, but receive less applications and reject a smaller rate of applicants than high-demand schools.

While one might imagine participants criticizing systematic differences in admissions outcomes, instead, they accepted these outcomes and interpreted them as cues about their, and others’, academic capacity. “I don’t want to get too self centered, but I’d say I’m intelligent. I did get into Thompson (a SEHS) and Raleigh (a highly selective private school),” Paul answered when asked what kind of student he was. Gerardo encountered others’ judgment about the schools that admitted him. “I’m smarter than you because I got accepted into this high school,” he recounted his peers saying (Gerardo described himself in the same interview as “in the middle, not smart or low.”). Rafeeq, whom no SEHS admitted, described SEHS as for students who were more advanced, more motivated, and harder working; other participants similarly described “smart people” in the third person. Beyond the matter of self-assessment, most participants’ understanding of themselves and others as learners—driven by notions of individual accountability, comparison to peers, and metrics of individual performance—proved a basis for

understanding how students accessed (and, in their opinions, deserved to access) high schools through the competitive choice process.

Participants’ descriptions of their own and others’ academic competency also anchored statements about whom they felt deserved to attend different types of high schools. Most participants—regardless of which K-8 or high school they attended, their race, ethnicity or their socioeconomic status—questioned the logic of the tier system, which attempted to evenly distribute SEHS seats across socioeconomic groups. Their critique was based in a preference for admissions policies that was based on merit alone.

This preference came through in participants’ descriptions of what they considered fair and unfair admissions decisions. We asked all participants (after they’d received high school admissions notices) to rank, in order of fairness, five hypothetical scenarios in which two students (identified only by their admissions portfolio scores and the socioeconomic tier in which they lived) competed for admission to a highly ranked SEHS (see table 3 below).

**Table 3:** Hypothetical high school admissions scenarios that participants ranked in order of fairness, used in combination with admissions cutoff scores from Whitney Young High School (table 4)

Scenario	Tier 2 student <sup>1</sup>	Tier 4 student	Admissions result
1	Has a score of 889 (out of a possible 900), in top 30% of all students applying.	Has a score of 892, in top 30% of all students applying.	Both students are admitted.
2	Has a score of 872	Has a score of 872	Tier 2 student is admitted, but tier 4 student is not.
3	Has a score of 825	Has a score of 885	Tier 2 student is not admitted, but tier 4 student is admitted.
4	Has a score of 825	Has a score of 885, took private test prep courses after school in 7 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> grade (costing their family approximately \$800) to get as high of an ISAT score and high school entrance exam score as possible.	Tier 2 student is not admitted, but tier 4 student is admitted.
5	Has a score of 885	Has a score of 875	Tier 2 student is admitted, but tier 4 student is not admitted.

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<sup>1</sup>Tier 2 represents the second-lowest of the four socioeconomic tier into which CPS divided students (by the census tract in which they resided); tier 4 is the highest.

**Table 4:** Admissions cutoff scores, out of 900 possible points, for 2014-2015 school year for Whitney Young High School<sup>3</sup>, used in conjunction with hypothetical admissions scenario exercise (table 3).

Selection method	Student Socioeconomic tier	Minimum score of students admitted	Maximum score of students admitted
Rank <sup>1</sup>	N/A	886	900
Socioeconomic tier	1	806	884
Socioeconomic tier	2	827	886
Socioeconomic tier	3	857	886
Socioeconomic tier	4	877	886

<sup>1</sup>The “rank” selection method identifies applicants for each school with the highest 30% of scores, and admits them on the basis of those scores.

Overwhelmingly, participants ranked scenario 1, in which both students were admitted due to very high test scores, as most fair. They found less fair the scenarios in which redistributive, equity-oriented policies (e.g., scenarios 2) or outside resources (scenario 4) leveraged admission. For example, in response to scenario 2, participants (including lower-income participants) described the “advantage” that a lower tier student might have as unfair, such as Lee did about her friend, who lived in a lower tier than she did:

Me and my friend we live not even a block away from each other, and she has an advantage because even if she has lower test scores she’d still be able to get in which I don’t think is an equal opportunity at all.

A few participants reflected on the possibility that more affluent students might have had more resources that could leverage access to SEHS or other selective schools. Eden, a lower-income, white student with college-educated parents, recognized the educational disadvantages that lower-income students might encounter as potentially detrimental to admissions:

The kids who are in the poor situation and have the really high grades are able to go to the good high schools, and yet the kids who are in a high tier with a good income and not so good grades are still even able to get into those high schools, even though the lower-income kids with the lower scores might not be able to get out of their situation.

However, even participants (like Eden) who demonstrated greater awareness of inequity in Chicago ultimately located the basis for access to high schools in individual student effort, favoring open competition over redistributive policies. Racial or socioeconomic equity rarely factored into participants' discussions of high school access, even when they recognized disparities in the quality of applicants' K-8 schools, neighborhood conditions or family financial resources. Amadi expressed a belief that most participants held: "To me it doesn't really matter what neighborhood you live in; it just matters what you do in school." Participants believed that students alone determined their own educational trajectories through their actions, and should be allowed to do so by district choice policies.

### Ascribing academic and civic qualities to students because of their schools

Related to their views of individual effort and merit as central to students' entitlement to learning opportunities, participants ascribed academic and civic qualities to students who attended schools with different levels of exclusivity. These attributions in turn served as a basis for participants' sense of whether students deserved subsequent opportunities, further reflecting participants' civic dispositions. Open-enrollment, non-selective schools reflected poorly on students who attended them. Participants often characterized students at Edmunds and Jewell, the neighborhood high schools for most of Forrester and Vista's students, as unmotivated, not caring about school, or average. Aatirah, a participant who was eligible to apply to SEHS but was not admitted to any, described students at her neighborhood high school as less than desirable: "I wouldn't say the kids are dumb, but the history isn't good."

Conversely, participants insisted that the hardest working and smartest students attended Chicago's most exclusive high schools. "The smarter people pretty much go to the top schools like selective enrollment schools," Lee (admitted to a top-ranked SEHS) explained. She equated intelligence with high school placement, a consistent theme across participants. Students at Thompson, a prestigious SEHS, were routinely described by a range of participants as "brainiacs," "mini-geniuses," "high-achieving" and "smart in every subject." Joseph concisely captured the contrast depicted above: "Thompson (SEHS) is the bright kids, all the kids that are gonna be successful and then there's Jewell which is where all the dumpster kids go who didn't get accepted."



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A few participants challenged prevailing ideas about school types, students and the admissions process. For example, Ina, new to Chicago in her 8<sup>th</sup>-grade year, questioned her peers’ negative representations of Jewell, her neighborhood school after she visited it.

There’s been a lot of controversy about Jewell and how it’s not a good school. But I think that’s just because it’s people’s neighborhood school. They don’t really want to get stuck going there. But that’s helped me not try to like discriminate or stereotype Jewell, just to actually see it for myself. . . I’d love to go there.

Still, however, Ina chose not to attend Jewell in favor of a higher-ranked school. Also, for participants eligible to apply to but ultimately rejected by SEHS, their own experiences provided possible counter-narratives suggesting that “good” students may go to “bad” schools, but remained consistent in emphasis on personal responsibility for their admissions outcomes.

As a further reflection of their views of civic benefits as earned by individual initiative and responsibility, participants also cited merit as their preferred basis for awarding scholarship and leadership opportunities in different academic and civic contexts (e.g., camp counselor position, neighborhood clean-up group leader, student advocacy group leader, state university scholarship recipient). We asked them to consider the qualifications of two hypothetical students, one from a neighborhood school and one from an elite SEHS, both of whom we described only as “straight-A students.” A substantial number of participants declined to choose either, citing insufficient information. However, participants who did choose consistently identified the SEHS student as more fit for each opportunity (in 68% of the responses). In particular, participants more often selected the SEHS student to receive a university scholarship, viewing that student as smarter, more accomplished and more desirable to colleges. Some participants expressed remorse as they repeatedly chose the SEHS student over her neighborhood school counterpart. An exchange between Cal, a student admitted to an elite SEHS, and his interviewer stands as an example.

(Cal chooses the SEHS student.)

Interviewer: You look so miserable as you continue...

Cal: I don’t like saying that.

Interviewer: I’m sorry to ask.

Cal: It just, it’s really unfair. I don’t like thinking like that.

When participants did select the neighborhood school student, it tended to be for the leadership of neighborhood activities, such as a playground or library clean-up, rather

than for activities related to academics. Those who chose the neighborhood student to lead the group advocating for equal technology funding in CPS schools did so because they thought his school would have less funding already. In short, participants inferred their real and imagined peers' educational and civic capacities and entitlements based on the high schools they attended.

### Individualized entitlement, individualized obligations

Participants' characterizations of students' entitlement to educational resources, along with their academic and civic capacities, are less surprising when we consider how participants understood their rights and obligations regarding public education. Students' rights and obligations regarding public education, by participants' reckoning, were limited and connected to individual effort. "You can't just demand things and expect to get them," Adriana explained to her interviewer.

Participants saw their educational rights as either altogether limited, or something to be earned. When we asked them what rights they felt they had with regard to their education, some were stumped and said that they did not know. 23 participants (64%) gave answers, 12 of which focused on their right to receive a public education. A few stressed their right to receive the same education as others. Other rights included freedom of expression (4) and the right to apply to (but not attend) any school (4). Ten participants felt that they had limited rights or power over their own education. These participants viewed CPS, rather than students themselves, as the powerful agent that decided which students attended which schools. "They shove it in your face. . . here's where you're going to go," exclaimed Joseph. Zhuang, a recent immigrant to the U.S. who was not eligible to apply to most types of high schools due to his low standardized test scores, felt unable to fully explore his school options due to his limited English language skills. Surprisingly, Cal, the only Vista student admitted to Osborne (a top-ranked SEHS), also felt that his rights were limited, credited this feeling to his school choice experience, which he described as "disguised as having a choice" but in truth determined by test scores and place of residence.

However, most participants—whether or not they were eligible to apply to SEHS, and whether or not the schools of their choice admitted them—felt that they did have power with regard to their education. When asked what gave them power, most referred to their ability to work hard to earn themselves opportunities. Hard work and good grades created this group's sense of power over their education. "I have all the power because, I'm the

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one who’s going to school, I’m the one who’s doing the work.” Akin explained, illustrating this group’s point of view. Even Samuél, whom no schools admitted on his first attempt, placed responsibility on himself for his predicament. “You can’t just get what you want, you have to deserve it,” he explained. He viewed himself as a hard worker, but concluded that others must have worked harder than he did. Seeing a good education as a right, Eden said she would advocate to get what she needed: “I would annoy the hell out of those teachers until they give me the education I deserve. I am in control.” A “good” education, this group argued, was earned by one’s own effort or advocacy rather than designated as a universal right.

Just as educational rights and empowerment seemed left to the individual student to acquire, participants also took a narrow view of civic obligations regarding public education. Only one participant, Aurora, expressed openness to the possibility of a student ceding their spot at an SEHS to a student who had had less advantages, explaining:

If someone lives in a bad neighborhood and not everyone in their family graduated from high school, if they’re really smart, they should have a better chance of getting in (to an SEHS) because they need that opportunity more than someone whose family has enough money to send them to a private school.

Still, Aurora said that she would not give up her own seat and felt that students should not have to give anything up so that those with greater needs could benefit. As discussed above, our study’s participants found troublesome the notion of dividing SEHS seats by four socioeconomic tiers, and felt far more comfortable with open competition for those seats. They voiced very little concern that one student’s advantage could translate into another’s disadvantage. Instead, they jockeyed to gain advantage where they could. Sasha found it unfair that students could pay to take private high school admissions test preparation courses, but then referred to herself as a “hypocrite” because she herself had taken such a course and was admitted to one of her preferred SEHS.

Participants’ broader sense of their civic obligations was also limited. While most said they would vote in student council elections, few said they would run for office themselves. Their interests in service responsibilities—such as a hypothetical group that campaigned for equal technology funding across CPS schools and a neighborhood clean-up group—were mixed, with students choosing activities that personally appealed to them. Four students felt enough pressure to perform well and advance that they described service and recreational activities as something in which they could not engage, or would do so only to strengthen their college applications. “This year I just wanted to

focus on getting my GPA high,” Gerardo explained when asked if he joined any clubs or teams. Nor did participants see others as obligated to support their education except for instrumental reasons. “They just want us to get jobs and help. It seems that’s all they care about. I mean if they do care about school it’s to get a good education to get a good job,” Anna explained, echoing other participants’ emphasis on their value to society due to their capacity to pay taxes. Miles felt that his disappointing rejection from Van Ruden (an SEHS) didn’t matter to other Chicagoans: “I could run up to somebody and be like, ‘I’m not getting into Van Ruden and they’d just say, ‘I don’t care. Leave me alone.’”

When asked whether they felt that CPS leaders cared about their education, most participants said yes (frequently, “It’s their job”), but the no’s were disturbing: “High school is high school, let’s just throw some kids here, throw some kids there,” Aatirah explained. Madeleine, rejected by every one of her preferred high schools, saw CPS administrators visiting the neighborhood school she ended up attending. “I wouldn’t really say it, (but) I just wanted to say ‘I really hate you! You basically ruined my high school experience! I go to a school I can’t get out of!’”

Just under half of the participants felt either uncertain whether Chicago’s mayor cared about their education, or felt that he did not. Forrester participants liked that the mayor had visited their school, and many appreciated that he had lengthened their school day. Participants at both schools saw the mayor’s investment in schools as reflective of his desire for good workers and a positive reputation for the city. “I feel like he (mayor) cares about all the statistics and all these tests and flaunting that out,” Sasha said, adding, “I think he should care about the kind of education the kids are getting.” Others criticized the mayor over the 2012 teacher strike and school closings. Isaac was suspicious of a costly improvement being made to Van Ruden, a downtown SEHS, adding “Other schools who don’t have things like computers, nice computers like Van Ruden, say Jewell (Isaac’s neighborhood school) for example, that money could be going into their education instead.” Mixed feelings about Chicagoans’, the school districts and the mayor’s investment in their education sat side by side with participants’ sense of limited civic obligation when it came to public education.

### Going it alone

Participants’ accumulated civic experiences of schooling in an era of accountability and neoliberal education policy appeared to inform their understanding of public education as

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instrumental and relevant only to the matter of individual advancement. Their sense of going it alone pervaded our data throughout the admissions process.

Participants perceived and generally accepted that not all students (or even all eligible students) would be able to access appealing schools, and that students had to compete against one another for admission. Udai, a technology enthusiast who diligently researched SEHS but was not admitted to any of those that he preferred, expressed a resigned acceptance of CPS policies, and felt that he was the one who needed to adapt. He described the admissions decisions that impacted him as unfair, as only test scores and grades informed those decisions. Yet, when asked what he would advise a younger student applying to high school, he said,

Keep your dreams aside for a moment and focus on math, reading, science and social studies. . . even if you don’t care about them, care about them for awhile because later you’re gonna realize how much it’s important- not to you but for others, those other people (who) run the system.

Udai, like most of his peers, saw the policies that set up his high school opportunities as limiting but necessary, and saw it as his responsibility to cope with them rather than the district’s responsibility to adjust high school admission criteria or high school offerings. Participants’ encounters with competitive high school admissions also appeared to influence their civic dispositions regarding the role of education in American society. When asked about the purpose of public education, all but one participant referred to its instrumental, individual purposes. Even the participants who stressed public education’s civic importance (often alongside its instrumental importance) stressed that society would “get back” from educated citizens. Participants described the following civic-instrumental benefits of public education: productive workers, a positive reputation (for cities or states), greater tax revenue, and better judgment among voters. Descriptions of public education’s “give and take” focused substantially on what individuals and cities could take from it.

A concern for individual advancement and protection also surfaced in participants’ often-competitive behavior against one another. Some actions involved students praising or criticizing their peers based on their admissions outcomes. When Forrester students presented research on the high school that they’d attend the following year, Isabelle’s admission to Van Ruden (a top-rated SEHS) was greeted with exclamations (“Ooooh, dang, Van Ruden!”), while students openly mocked Quinn Academy (a nearby nonselective charter school that a few of their peers planned to attend). Other students’

actions were more directly competitive against peers. “Lots of people just only go for themselves; they don’t help anybody if they’re trying to get into that school. But they’ll still act nice enough,” Jennifer explained after auditioning for a public arts school. Paul, whose family planned for months to move out of Chicago so that he could attend private school, did not relinquish his spot at Thompson, the top-ranked SEHS that admitted him, until after school started and he was sure he liked his new school (thereby keeping another student from taking the Thompson spot as the school year began). Together, these examples paint a picture of students fending for themselves with limited concern about their actions’ impact on others.

We close this section with a description of Joseph’s responses to his immersion in an educational culture of individual student accountability and responsibility. When consoling a friend who had a difficult time on the high school admissions test, Joseph told us, he also sought information for his own benefit.

I took a lot of, like, secretive advice from them because I didn’t want to hurt their feelings by saying “Can you tell me why you failed at doing that?” I secretly was like, “So what did you put? What else did you do?”

While worried about hurting his friend’s feelings, Joseph still mined the conversation for useful information that could give him an advantage. He was not ultimately admitted to any SEHS, and reported feeling disempowered as a result. When asked what he would say to CPS about high school admissions, he responded “You suck,” and added that he felt no one would listen to him because he was “a stupid little kid.” As he reflected upon his own future goals, he conveyed a sense that his schooling was for him and his family alone: “Honestly I have no interest in doing certain things that would fundamentally help our community or society. But school gives me a boost for my own interests.” Feeling left on his own, Joseph looked out only for himself.

## **Discussion and implications**

A pervasive sense of individual accountability and responsibility emerged as key themes in our study of how competitive school choice policy influenced the civic dispositions of 36 Chicago Public Schools students. While the policies that structured their high school admissions experience ostensibly concerned only the assignment of students to schools of their choice, they also instantiated ideas that are at the core of neoliberal social and economic policy: an emphasis on individual responsibility for well-being and advancement, reliance on accountability measures to indicate schools’ and individuals’

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value, a more limited governmental role in service delivery, the framing of individuals as consumers rather than citizens, and the use of market mechanisms as a means for distributing public goods. These findings held across participant subgroups (by primary school, race, socioeconomic status, admissions eligibility status and admissions outcomes), suggesting that the experiences reported to us were not unique to specific groups of participants but rather shared across them.

Our findings hold implications for equity, for our understanding of education policy as civic education, and for the consideration of youth as policy actors with much to teach the rest of us. First, we note that competitive school choice policy’s civic outcomes provide an example of how neoliberal education policy can legitimize inequity. Khan (2011, p. 195) asserted that Americans’ emphasis on individualism and meritocracy “has allowed the justification of inequalities that should embarrass our nation.” Our findings—that an academically, socioeconomically and racially diverse group of students accepted and even defended policies that stressed individual effort and merit as the best determinants of who deserved to attend Chicago’s top-ranked public schools—resonate with Khan’s statement. Among the youth who participated in this study, competitive school choice policy brought to life ideals of individuals’ responsibility to earn their civic rights and entitlements. As youth participants stressed over their grades and test scores, completed school applications, sat for the SEHS entrance exam, opened their admissions letters and ultimately enrolled at a high school, they not only selected a school, they reinforced the value and rightness of competitive school choice policy.

As such, youth participants learned telling lessons about their own rights to a public education. Some emerged from this process satisfied with their admissions results, some landed in schools they saw as inferior, some wanted to scream at CPS administrators. All concluded that they got what they deserved from their city and their public school system, even though a multitude of factors other than merit and effort determined how they fared. They have been, in Davies and Bansel’s (2007) words, “responsibilized,” having accepted the assignment of sole responsibility for the unequal educational opportunities they received. In this way, competitive school choice policy not only exacerbates existing inequities that evidence on school choice outcomes has demonstrated (e.g., Chapman and Colangelo, 2016; Gold et al., 2010), but justifies them.

Second, this study lends support to those who extend the idea of civic learning to include youth experiences embedded in day-to-day schooling. As evolving citizens, participants demonstrated how competitive choice policy positioned them to act towards themselves

and their civic peers. For those among us who may find disturbing Joseph's blunt statements about his self-interested actions, we invite consideration of his broader circumstances. In a society that financially rewards the accumulation of educational credentials, uses measured outcomes to judge educators' and students' value, and promotes competition for educational resources among both schools and students, and in a city that rations public educational resources to a population clamoring for them, and gives an larger share of resources to the strongest competitors, Joseph's disturbing actions appear perhaps adaptive. He did what he felt he needed to for his own educational survival.

The matter of schools preparing students for participation in society is nothing new; the preparation of citizens was one of the explicit purposes of early public schooling in the U.S. What is new is the set of particular lessons that education policy appears to be teaching students. While policymakers and scholars invest energy in figuring out how teachers and curricula can provide (and evaluate the outcomes of) citizenship education, we encourage them to take a step back and consider the citizenship education that educational policy provides each day (Rubin, 2007; Levinson, 2012). The immersion of students in competitive choice policy appears to have taught them that the best available public education is a scarce good for which individuals compete (scrupulously or not), win away from others, and hoard. Students also appear to have learned that the best education our society has to offer is reserved for those who are smart and who work hard (with little critical consideration of who in our society is considered "smart" or "hard working") and that those who do not receive such a benefit do not merit it. If U.S. voters and policymakers do not want their future educators, judges, voters, neighbors, parents and elected officials acting out of self-interest with limited regard for how their actions impact other people, competitive school choice policy may prove itself counterproductive. Policy has lessons to teach students; it behooves our society's voters and policymakers to ensure that it teaches students what we want them to learn and to do.

Finally, our findings reveal young people's potency as policy actors. They studied competitive school choice policy, interpreted it, took a range of actions in response to it in their own best interests, and in so doing, acted in ways that shaped their own and others' educational trajectories. This finding challenges neoliberal conceptualizations of students as policy targets, as educational consumers (who simply seek and complete units of education in exchange for credentials), and as indicators of their teachers' and policies' outcomes. Our research answers researchers' calls for youth to have a greater voice in informing, forming and evaluating education policy (Conner and Zaino, 2014; Kirshner



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and Jefferson, 2015). Our findings therefore lend support to the extension of policy enactment theory (Ballet al., 2012) beyond educators to a broader range of individuals with a stake in public education. Its consideration of context also paves the way to consider political, social and developmental variables that can enable or impair policy implementation. Adolescents’ weighing of the importance of individual rights vs. the public good, set in a context of individual-oriented policy and a credential-crazed society, was bound to shape how they interpreted and lived out competitive choice policy.

As a critically-oriented case study with an intentionally limited number of participants, this study’s design results in limitations to its generalizability and the extent to which we can draw causal inferences. First, while we carefully selected schools and student participants to represent a diverse variety of urban high school students impacted by competitive school choice policy, our student participants do reflect their unique situation in Chicago. Their racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, as well as their connection to specific educational and social policies, are not universal but specific to Chicago’s unique demographic, geographic, political and economic contexts. Chicago Public Schools’ enactment of competitive choice policy is a powerful illustrative case due to the extent and variety of its high school offerings and the pervasiveness of neoliberal education policy there, but has idiosyncratic features (such as the use of socioeconomic tiers to distribute SEHS seats) that limit its generalizability. Further, the small size of this sample, necessary for the depth to which we explored participants’ policy encounters, rendered us unable generalizations about particular groups of students’ experiences. We offer this case as one that we hope will inspire additional research on competitive school choice policy’s impact across cities, societies and populations.

A second limitation involves our ability to draw causal inferences from our conversations and observations. Does competitive school choice policy *make* students see and interpret the world and their civic peers through lenses of individual accountability and responsibility? We do not see the answer to this question as a simple yes or no, but rather consider what our study design enables us to know about the relationship between education policy, social and cultural context, and student civic dispositions. In keeping with Maxwell’s (2012) depiction of qualitative research as particularly able to identify processes that lead to outcomes, we saw a consistent pairing of individually-oriented student civic dispositions with a relatively uniform policy context that promoted and legitimized competition. This steady association, which spanned participants’ schools, admissions outcomes and socio-demographic identities, led us to conclude that the powerful relationship between the two was not accidental, but rather a result of young

people's policy enactment in context. The rigor with which we approached our study's design, data collection and data analysis reinforces our confidence in naming this relationship.

## Conclusion

As Chicago and other cities continue down a path of educational privatization and stratification, the everyday civic lessons that students learn from their encounters with educational policy become increasingly salient. Through their interactions with competitive school choice policy, young people are making decisions that require them to weigh, and often prioritize, their use of public schooling as a private good over ideals of universal public education as a public good. As we ask our schools to create citizens, we must also ask—and answer—what kind of citizens our educational policies help to create.

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## Author's Notes

Kate Phillippo is an Associate Professor of Cultural and Educational Policy Studies at Loyola University Chicago. Her research interests are organizational, professional, socio-cultural, political and demographic influences on policy and practice enactment, and student, teacher and parent experiences of education policy.

Briellen Griffin is a Graduate Research Assistant, doctoral student and instructor at Loyola University Chicago. Her research focuses on the social, historical and political contexts of racism and inequality in American education.

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<sup>1</sup>Students' ISAT, or Illinois Standards Achievement Test, scores were part of their high school admissions portfolio.

<sup>2</sup> This study's small sample size ( $N=36$ ) made it difficult to draw conclusions about correlations between race and high school admissions outcomes, largely due to the racial diversity among participating students (including multi-racial students) and the range of school types to which they applied. Comparisons of admissions outcomes across free or reduced-price lunch eligibility, with two categories (eligible or not eligible), yielded more meaningful data.

<sup>3</sup> Since individual schools' cutoff scores are public data, the school's name (rather than a pseudonym) is used here.

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