Parents Discuss their Challenges with Public School Choice in Chicago

Prepared in February 2017 by

The Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice

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Acknowledgements

Methodology:

In January 2017, New Schools for Chicago (NSC) and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) organized 10 parent focus groups. Neil Dorosin of The Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice (IIPSC) facilitated the conversations at all focus groups. NSC staff were present at all focus groups, videotaped seven of them for internal use, and parents who did not want to be included in the video footage will not appear in the final NSC footage. Neil Dorosin did not record any of the focus group proceedings, but took notes during the conversations to capture general commentary, sentiment and other ideas. These sentiments are reported faithfully here in this report, even when they contain inaccuracies or misinformation – parents' perception of the process is valuable because for them, it's real.

Executive Summary

Healthy school choice systems are customer friendly systems that make it easy for families to learn about and apply to schools, that support families in determining which schools are the right schools for their children, that facilitate the flow of information between parents, schools, and administrative bodies, and that make the most efficient use of the seats that are available. The parents we met with say that these things are not happening in Chicago. Parents in Chicago feel dissatisfied with the level of customer service they currently receive when participating in school choice. They are upset and frustrated with the current state. In this report we attempt to explain their frustration by grouping their comments in the following findings:

1) Chicago families say they are not getting the information they need about schools and programs, and therefore cannot participate in the process of selecting those schools and programs.

2) Families are largely left to their own devices in determining the subset of schools that represent *good* choices for their child.

3) The act of applying to schools and programs in Chicago is cumbersome and complicated.

4) Parents are uncomfortable with the way choice results are determined and communicated. They want better and more reliable communication, explanations for results, and more information on and a clear set of rules to follow regarding waitlists.

5) There is support among parents for a Universal Application and a single-best-offer process for allocating seats.

Based on these findings, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendations

1) Make it easy for families to get information. Build or buy tool(s) that offer access to unbiased information on school and program choices. Include standard school descriptions and eligibility criteria, open house dates, admissions calendars and paperwork needs, enrollment criteria, and more.

2) Create opportunities for parents to access unbiased guidance that supports them in navigating the application process and in determining the subset of schools and programs that are the best fit for their children. The opportunities should include technology tools and should also include opportunities for in-person guidance meetings. These could be

with a counselor, a trained person at a library or community center, at a school fair, or via some other opportunity.

3) Implement a single application that can be used for all public schools and programs, and that allows parents to list schools and programs of choice, in the order of their preference. Make this application available via a secure online portal. Work to ensure that all families have easy access to the portal by implementing mobile/handheld access as well as desktop access and ensuring that libraries, schools, and other community centers have computer terminals for families to use in the application process.

4) Centralize and streamline communications with families regarding school choice operations by implementing capability for families to use the secure online portal to receive application receipts, notifications, acceptances/rejections, waitlist movement, and all other enrollment-related communications from all schools.

5) Use a single-best-offer system of allocating seats at all public schools thereby vastly increasing efficiency in matching for families, and helping to stabilize registers at schools.

Background

Effective participation in public school choice is possible when all the following are readily available to all families:

1) Easy-to-understand information about all public school and program options, the policies and admissions criteria that help to determine enrollment opportunities at each school and program, and a published list of important admissions calendar dates. Non-English speakers must be properly considered, and all materials must be translated.

2) A series of citywide and regional school fairs and a published schedule of open houses at schools so families can interact with school staff, see buildings and campuses, and make informed selections.

3) Supports in identifying schools that best fit their children's needs, including an independently derived objective measurement of school quality, and access to an enrollment or guidance counselor.

4) A simple and user-friendly process for applying to programs and schools, and expressing preferences for programs and schools.

5) A notification system that offers families the assurance that their application(s) have been received and will be processed, and informs them promptly of results.

6) Public transportation systems that provide reasonable access to schools.

We conducted 10 focus groups and met with over 100 parents all over Chicago, and can confidently report that the current state is not meeting the needs of families regarding issues 1 – 5 above, and that there are questions regarding item 6.

The significance of this problem cannot be overstated. Although there are many types of public schools and programs in Chicago, the clear majority of parents we met with feel that they are not able to effectively participate in the school choice process, citing one or more of the above issues. It is worth remembering that the parents we met with are likely to be among the group of more informed and active parents – they opted to participate in a school choice focus group, receiving no compensation in the form of money, food, childcare, or of any type. If this group of parents feels that they are unable to participate effectively, the implications are alarming for the larger group of families in Chicago.

We will now provide parent feedback demonstrating the challenges they face with effective participation.

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Findings

1) Chicago families are not getting the information they need about schools and programs, and therefore cannot participate in the process of selecting those schools and programs.

It is labor intensive and time consuming work for families to make themselves aware of all the public school and program options. With the goal of providing information to families, CPS created a website and several printed booklets for use in selecting schools and programs. Parents say they appreciate these materials, but also say that they are not user-friendly, and that they are inadequate sources of the information they need to learn about their choices. This results in several basic problems:

  a) There is no way to guarantee families know about and can consider all their options before choosing a program or school for their child.

  b) There are opportunities for inefficiency, or missed opportunities to match families with schools they might prefer. When a parent is not aware of a school or program that she might prefer for her child, she cannot apply to that school, and this represents a missed opportunity. It is our hypothesis that this kind of missed opportunity is very common in Chicago.

  c) It is inherently unfair to place the bulk of the responsibility on individual parents for identifying schools and programs and assessing eligibility and process rules. This sort of system inadvertently perpetuates the disparate set of challenges faced by Chicago's most at-risk families and creates equity concerns for access.

  d) Relying too heavily on word-of-mouth creates the opportunity for the spread of misinformation. This is clearly happening in Chicago, as many of the things parents said about the process were labeled as "misinformed" by various CPS staff present at the focus groups.

When parents feel that they cannot easily get basic information about schools and the process of choosing and enrolling, they feel disenfranchised and resentful of the administrative entity running the process. They feel mistreated and sometimes helpless as customers. They can easily enroll their children in a school that turns out not to be what they want, and then will be likely to transfer their child during the school year. Information about schools, or the lack of it, turns out to have an important impact on register stability at schools.

Consider the following quotes from parents:

"They emphasize selective enrollment schools, they give information there. But the information on the neighborhood schools – they have IB and other programs in those schools too, and the information isn't getting out." – Gage Park focus group

"We want workshops for parents and for kids where different high schools come to share information about the schools – we need all the information at once. And we need help and guidance because at the fairs, every school says they're great." – Gage Park focus group

"The website needs to be more friendly. We need hyperlinks to each school where we can get all the information on programs." – Gage Park focus group

"I felt that I didn't know any choices other than the neighborhood school. Not much information on open houses. It wasn't until 8th grade when they sent information home that I could use for other schools, not only the neighborhood schools. It's needed – that information has to go home earlier, 6th grade for the high school process." – Corliss HS focus group

"The hardest things are getting information. It's tedious and hard to get. I don't know what's available, we have no exposure to the schools that are around you. We need information on schools, not only the big selective enrollment schools." – Corliss HS focus group

"I was still confused after using the website. It's not organized so that I have the information I need. What is IB? What is STEM? I want to get the information and need the site to break it down for me." – Corliss HS focus group

"I had no idea that Poe Elementary exists, but it's right near me. I heard late, from another parent. As a working mother, traveling, with little time I need easy access. Tell me how to use the website, make it easy." – Corliss HS focus group

"There's not enough information available about schools. We need visiting days at schools, and for students to come too. 6th grade should be the starting point for high school information. We need a manual that lists all 172 schools, their requirements, open houses, etc." – Back of the Yards Library focus group

"We need more communication, a checklist, a printout of everything I need in order to participate." – Dyett HS focus group

"There needs to be a deliberate emphasis on the transition to high school, over several weeks, keep it simple, for grades 6 and 7 make sure that information on the selective enrollment process goes out to all. Educate on the other programs too, not only selective enrollment programs. Schools have to sing their own songs, tell their story." – Dyett HS focus group

"They should send packets of information to parents in the 7th grade to prepare them for the transition. Time goes by so fast, we have to start earlier." – BUILD

"If you don't know anyone, if you don't have a connection to someone who can help you, you're lost – the information is not out there." – BUILD

"We need better communication with parents. We have single and working parents. The barrier comes when parents are not getting all the information. Guidance counselors need to be right on top of it by sending letters, making courtesy calls." – BUILD

"The process needs to be better explained to the middle schools. Teachers and administrators don't know enough about the process to explain it well to families." – BUILD

"No one told me about honors or IB programs. It was as though it is selective enrollment or bust." – Clemente HS focus group

"The Latino community needs special help – translated papers and a school finder in our language. Open houses are all in English and Spanish speakers, Polish speakers too, feel confused about why we are here. They don't translate. They should offer headphones, or something so that we also know what is going on." – Logandale MS focus group

2) Families are largely left to their own devices in determining the subset of schools that represent *good* choices for their child.

Choosing the right school for a child is a complex endeavor, and each family has its own set of needs and uses its own calculus when picking schools. Typically, this involves a consideration of many factors such as safety, distance from home, education quality and content, availability of services for language learners and/or students with disabilities, and more.

There are more than 170 public high schools in Chicago, many of which contain programs that function as independent entities for the admissions process. There are a lot of options to choose from. Guidance and tools are necessary to wisely and efficiently whittle down this list of more than 170 to a manageable list of schools and programs that are a good fit for an individual child. Parents are asking for supports to help them in this task: informed and unbiased guidance counselors to meet with, technology tools that allow them to view groups of schools based on their chosen criteria, and a more relaxed and accessible set of school fairs and open houses.

The impact of inaction here is straightforward and profound. There is a customer service issue – when families do not have the supports they need to choose schools that are right for their children, they are less likely to be happy with the process of choosing and with results of the choice process. There is also an efficiency issue – parents who are unhappy with the school their child attends are more likely to transfer out of that school, adding to the register instability issues that so many Chicago schools grapple with. Theoretically there is a "best fit" pairing of child and school that is unlikely to be achieved without proper guidance.

One thing that should be mentioned – there is, in fact, an objective measurement of school performance called the School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP) and it provides results and accountability status updates on all schools, district and charter. It can be found on the Chicago Public Schools website. Not one parent or other attendee at any of the focus groups mentioned this – it seems as though SQRP is not being used by parents as a tool to learn about school quality.

The guide to using SQRP is written in academic language that will not be useful to many Chicago families, and the tool itself is a large and intimidating spreadsheet that is not easy to use. This is all quite understandable – it is a serious task to quantify school progress, and requires much technical skill and data. Explaining the results to families, however, is a different kind of skill, and the SQRP does not attempt to do this – it simply presents data and only highly educated and literate people will be able to use the tool as presented.

In summary, families are left to their own devices to learn about which schools are right for their child, and there is a need for a simple set of tools and for access to human interactions to help guide them through this process. Consider the following quotes from parents:

"Within the district there are very different schools with different characters, kids excel in different things. We need information to make better choices to fit our kids." – Gage Park focus group

"Schools should have open house period of a month – we need a longer period of time to visit schools." – Gage Park focus group

"I am trying to transfer my boys out of school but the school won't help me do that – they want the kids to stay. I went to the library to get the CPS Options for Knowledge booklet. It gives me website information but how do I know what school I want for my boys? I used the level 1, 2 and so on rankings to help me choose." – Corliss HS focus group

"There is a language barrier. I need someone to articulate my needs for my kids, and to have someone in my language describe to me whether or not the school is the right fit. I will seek out someone at the school who speaks my language for information. It starts with me seeking someone out. Without major persistence many Spanish speakers just give up." – Corliss HS focus group

"We need a person at the library or somewhere where you can make an appointment with them to guide us through the process of choice. Make a person available to guide us. At fairs, at schools, make it open on Saturdays, make it so that parents can meet with someone and get help, someone who will explain everything about the complex rules." – Corliss HS focus group

"The guidance counselor already has a list of 25 schools that they tell parents to consider. How are the counselors choosing schools for this list? They're biased, they don't take parents opinions into consideration." – Back of the Yards Library focus group

"Enrollment should be like E-Harmony. Tell what you want, the type of student you have, and then an algorithm spits back the schools that could be right for your child." – Dyett HS focus group

"Lines of communication should be more open and accessible. I'll want to speak to an administrator at a school, it's hard to get in contact. Too often you get directed to the website. I'm trying to talk to a person after beginning with the website, and it's too hard." – Dyett HS focus group

"If there were a paradigm shift to get people to think about all of their options, charter and district – information on all schools can be available, not just one niche. A 3rd party that controls all of the e-harmony style matching with no interest in or allegiance to one type – all schools should be in the database. How to apply, and more. But not a stakeholder with money at stake in the results." – Dyett HS focus group

"We need more transparency with the schools – schools will magnify everything about their school. I want real information about the schools – if my child has to travel for an hour to school, I need to know that in advance." – BUILD

"The middle school wasn't as forthcoming as we wanted with information on the process." – CICS ChicagoQuest

"We need to know where we stand – what we are eligible for before we start shopping around." – CICS ChicagoQuest

"We knew nothing about high schools – my kids knew a little and wanted certain schools. We were accepted at our home school and also at a charter school. A teacher told us that the charter was better and so we did that but we had to pay for uniforms, books, and more, and the school fined us money if his shirt was not buttoned properly. We left that and went to our home school." – Logandale MS focus group

"Need more information about other schools we can apply to. And the people at the middle schools are telling us 'this school is bad, that school is bad, your child cannot get into that school it's too hard,' and that kind of thing. CPS needs to do more work with the guidance counselors - kids and parents rely 100% on the guidance counselors and if they aren't on top of things, it's a mess." – Logandale MS focus group

"It's too variable – some guidance counselors like Clemente or another school, some don't, and there is too much riding on what an individual counselor says." – Clemente

"I want a personalized matching of my child with a list of potential schools. Make it easier to schedule a visit, to be welcomed at the school. Fairs are great but I can't tell if a school is a good fit at a fair." – Ogden focus group

3) The act of applying to schools and programs in Chicago is cumbersome and complicated.

Separate applications must be completed in Chicago for selective enrollment schools, magnet schools, military schools, IB programs, neighborhood high schools (if living outside of the neighborhood), and for charter schools. Each of these application processes works on its own timeline and requires its own operations. In some cases, parents must appear in person as part of the application process. This is a labor-intensive process that requires a degree of organization and planning that can be confusing and unduly challenging for a large portion of the population.

Contrast this multi-application/multi-process system with the systems in place in Denver, New Orleans, Washington DC, and Newark, for example. Parents use a single universal application to list all the schools and programs they like and can list them in the order of

preference. With one piece of paper or one click of a button, parents can submit applications to all the public schools they want for their child.

When it is easy to participate, parents will participate in school choice. When it is too complicated or burdensome to apply to schools, parents will apply at lower rates. After meeting with parents in Chicago we are convinced that this is exactly what is happening – it's too complicated to apply to schools, and many parents are not participating.

There is a related issue that is worth mentioning here. Parents say that communication is inadequate once they do submit applications. They are not warned in time if elements of an application are missing, they do not receive confirmation that their documents have been received and are in process, and they are frustrated with the internal mechanisms of the CPS application website.

Consider the following quotes from parents:

"The application itself is very confusing because there is selective enrollment and different steps on different schools – it's hard to use. We have SE and magnet schools but if we don't know the rules and don't have the information, we can't use those schools." – Gage Park focus group

"We have to go to each school we might like, it's too difficult." – Gage Park focus group

"We don't have access to existing options. Also the existing magnets are very far from us – if our kids want to go to those schools they might have to travel an hour and 45 minutes each way." – Gage Park focus group

"There are multiple applications – selective enrollment, military. And others. It's complicated." – BUILD

"I have to go from work to run around and drop everything off, drop an essay off." – BUILD

"There were three separate applications I had to fill out. Some were paper applications, some were electronic. Even magnets have some paper – essays took me and my child a few days. The charter applications are relatively simple. Von Steuben takes longer because of the essay. If you want a special program at a school you have to figure out which process you have to follow up with. We got three offers – we accepted the selective enrollment offer, but it wasn't the school we wanted. We could have done principal discretion but it was much more work – another 8-10 pages!" – CICS ChicagoQuest

"We took the selective enrollment test. There are some IB programs within the schools and we had to go to open houses. There's a one month window of opportunity and no way to do everything you want to do. The Lane open house and other selective enrollment open houses are on the same day! There are other ways to get in to see a school – go to a game or a concert. But that's not an open house. We did some charter applications too, and had to go to a specific Noble open house to get the application. Intrinsic charter too – we had to go there." – CICS ChicagoQuest

"We missed having the teacher recommendation sent in through the website – we were disqualified, and we never got an email telling us that we missed the deadline until 15 minutes before the deadline! There should have been a red flag." – Logandale MS focus group

"We applied for military, to a CTE school, to IB, and it took way too long. None of the processes overlapped with each other on the CPS website. The name you enter for the military application online doesn't even transfer to your application for IB, for example." – Clemente HS focus group

"The CPS website needs an overhaul. ID numbers are missing if you're coming from a private school. It needs to be more user-friendly." – Clemente HS focus group

"I didn't know that if you want IB and CTE, you have to apply to both separately." – Clemente HS focus group

"It's a frustrating process. I felt like I was stalking people. I applied to a selective enrollment school and they lost my application. I stalked and was a crazy parent to make sure that didn't happen to my niece." – Ogden focus group

"There is no system for monitoring what documents you've submitted, and there are so many moving parts and so many individuals responsible for various activities. Some schools have an invitation, neighborhood schools have their own process, there are many different processes and no one stop shop for all schools." – Ogden focus group

4) Parents are uncomfortable with the way choice results are determined and communicated. They want explanations for results, and more information on and a clear set of rules to follow regarding waitlists.

Parents express confusion as to results – why did they get the results they got? How can results be verified? How should waitlists be approached to get the best results? Are there mechanisms to gain access to a school outside of the published admissions process?

These are reasonable questions given the relatively decentralized state of admissions in Chicago's public schools. Students can and regularly do receive offers to multiple schools, clogging up seats they cannot use while other parents must wait on longer-than-necessary waitlists for preferred seats to open for their children. This is an inefficient way to allocate seats. If parents are given ample time and information to use in making choices, they can indicate the schools and program they want in the order of preference, and receive an offer to the school or program that they want most that can also accommodate their child.

Most parents we spoke with talked about receiving multiple offers to several schools and programs, but were not happy about this. They felt confused about the results and annoyed about the long waitlists. Some parents report that they can get a seat at a preferred school even after initially being denied admission by negotiating directly with school administration – this can create widespread mistrust of the results of the choice processes.

Consider the following quotes from parents:

"There's so much red tape to go through, it's frustrating. We got into the school we wanted by just making our presence known – hanging around the school until they just let us in." – Corliss HS focus group

"That's not fair because if they're going to do it by the squeaky wheel, then I can be the squeaky wheel too." – Corliss HS focus group

"My mom works at CPS and she helped us navigate, got my child into a magnet school as a hook up because I was deploying." – Dyett HS focus group

"My child got waitlisted, I didn't know why, what number she was. It was very stressful. My youngest daughter wasn't allowed to the school directly across the street because the school 10 minutes away had low enrollment and they sent us there." – Dyett HS focus group

"I applied for 30 schools, I used the Options for knowledge booklet. I picked 25-30 schools, none were in my neighborhood. We were rejected by 90% of them, the acceptances were not the ones we wanted. I called in August and started asking if there was space. I had twins accepted at different schools. I called Newberry and the principal said 'we have space.' This was one of the 30 schools that originally rejected us." – Dyett HS focus group

"My oldest goes to a charter school via a lottery. Her next sibling got in. Then my youngest didn't get in – why? We weren't told why and the reasons we were given made

no sense. I want better information, better communication. The school says they sent an email, but who knows." – BUILD

"We got Von Steuben. We were also number 800 on the waitlist at a selective enrollment school, and we were also on the Noble waitlist but they didn't tell us the number. We asked his middle school counselor and she called and got the number for us – number 300. We weren't able to monitor the waitlist movement. You never got your test back with your answers, you have to trust CPS and they've miscalculated scores before. You have to be a psycho parent or go 5 levels deep within the website to find the new points calculator." – CICS ChicagoQuest

"There is a lack of understanding of how listing choices and matching to schools works." – CICS ChicagoQuest

"Neighborhood schools allow out-of-neighborhood kids in but there is a long wait. We waited til June on a waitlist. We applied to 30 high schools. CPS sent us a letter home telling us which selective enrollment schools we can apply for. I used the online system to check 30 high schools that we qualified for. I went to a parent meeting and learned how to do all this. We got 6 offers and my son was on the waitlist for Von Steuben, number 7. From March until May it took before hearing from them. Then Von Steuben called and left me a message, and they called me back after that telling me he got in. We had accepted Mather while waiting for Von Steuben." – Logandale MS focus group

"We didn't know how to apply for high school. We applied to 3 different schools plus a charter school and our neighborhood school – 5 schools in total. Four applications were online and one was paper. We were offered 4 schools and enrolled her in a charter but my daughter changed this – she wanted her neighborhood school." – Logandale MS focus group

"We went to the central office and did it all on paper. We got 10 wait list offers. We didn't want to wait so we took the one school we were offered so we didn't lose the spot." – Logandale MS focus group

"We got three offers and waited until August to decide which to accept." – Clemente HS focus group

"We were accepted to three schools and two waitlists, and we didn't know about the IB information session rule. We were told that we had high numbers on the waitlists but never heard from those schools. We know someone here and so got into the IB program." – Clemente HS focus group

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5) There is support among parents for a Universal Application and a single-best-offer process for allocating seats.

We asked parents about some of the proposed reforms, including a Universal Application and the single-best-offer allocation process, and found parents to be excited about the proposals, eager for change. The Universal Application was something that most everyone immediately understood and could see the benefit in. Single-best-offer required some explanation and discussion, but was almost universally met with optimism.

Parents will need assistance adjusting to a single-best-offer system – it is a whole new way of approaching the application process. Instead of applying to schools and then deciding from among those that admit their child, parents will now have to decide on the order in which they prefer schools at the time of submitting the application, before knowing the results. This will be successful only if parents get the information and guidance they need, and have more time to "shop" before applications are due.

Consider the following quotes from parents:

"A universal application would be better because I wouldn't have to go to all the schools just to apply." – Gage Park focus group

"The charter process is separate and different. Make them all in one place, and make the application easier. The district website is clearer now but it needs more clarity still." – Dyett HS focus group

"I would like an all-in-one application that I can use for magnets, IB, etc., so all the sub-processes are triggered when I am applying." – CICS ChicagoQuest

"We would need a few months of time in a single best offer / single application system so that it's not as stressful. We would need more windows for open houses." – CICS ChicagoQuest

<u>**Recommendations**</u>

1) Make it easy for families to get information. Build or buy tool(s) that offer access to unbiased information on school and program choices. Include standard school descriptions and eligibility criteria, open house dates, admissions calendars and paperwork needs, enrollment criteria, and more.

2) Create opportunities for parents to access unbiased guidance that supports them in navigating the application process and in determining the subset of schools and programs

that are the best fit for their children. The opportunities should include technology tools and should also include opportunities for in-person guidance meetings. These could be with a counselor, a trained person at a library or community center, at a school fair, or via some other opportunity.

3) Implement a single application that can be used for all public schools and programs, and that allows parents to list schools and programs of choice, in the order of their preference. Make this application available via a secure online portal, and work to ensure that all families have easy access to the portal by implementing mobile/handheld access as well as desktop access, and by ensuring that libraries, schools, and other community centers have computer terminals for families to use in the application process.

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5) Use a single-best-offer system of allocating seats at all public schools, thereby vastly increasing efficiency in matching for families, and helping to stabilize registers at schools.

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<u>Appendix: Summary of Existing Resources from Chicago Public Schools</u>

High School Bound: Comprehensive search engine designed to match students with schools based on school offerings such as academic interests, location, sports, and clubs. (www.hsbound.org). Launched December 2016 in partnership with UChicago Impact.

CPS Access and Enrollment Page: Hub for navigating the school application process including forms, deadlines, FAQ, and much more. (http://www.CPS.edu/oae)

Options for Knowledge Guide: Detailed list and instructions for choosing and applying to the schools best-suited to the needs of each individual student (http://cps.edu/AccessAndEnrollment/Pages/SchoolGuides.aspx).

CPS School Locator: The CPS School Locator, found on the CPS homepage, allows users to enter a school name, as well as a zip code or address to find nearby schools. Users can click on individual schools to learn more about schools, including their rating, grades served, number of students, program offerings, school progress reports, certifications and admissions information.