

PARENTS TALK GoCPS

93% of CPS 8th graders participated in the new GoCPS single application process this school year. This participation rate is record breaking compared to other urban districts nationally. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has made significant improvements when it comes to making sure families understand and have easy access to the educational options available and this new simpler application process is a symbol of their commitment to fair access for all public-school students.

In the past, finding a school for your child was incredibly difficult for families. Hundreds of schools and programs – with their own distinct application processes – meant options were really only accessible to the families with the savvy and the time to sort through them. Ironically, this created additional inequities in a system trying to remedy inequities that already existed.

With the implementation of GoCPS the enrollment process has improved dramatically—and parents agree! However, we recognize that even in a success story, there are lessons for improvement that can make the system and process even better moving forward.

In order to understand how parents experienced the new GoCPS application process, Kids First Chicago in partnership with CPS' Office of Access and Enrollment, conducted nine focus groups with 65 parents of CPS 8th graders across the city. Our objective was to better understand:

- What works really well in the new system
- What needs to be improved
- What worked really well in the implementation process
- How we can all better support families in using GoCPS

The focus groups began in September 2017 before the application opened on October 10, 2017, and were conducted on a rolling basis through April 2018, when families made decisions on Round 1 offers. Importantly, CPS actively listened to parent feedback throughout year one, and made changes to their communications, the system itself, and the supports available based on what they heard. Change at the scale of a district the size of Chicago Public Schools can be incredibly difficult, but district leadership in Chicago ensured success by actively engaging with parents at every step of process.

While overwhelmingly well received and easily navigated, parents pointed to several key opportunities to make the application process and website even better.



NOTE | Parent comments included reflect their individual perceptions and experiences with the process and may not be an accurate representation of actions taken by the district. Recommendations made by parents may have already been taken by the district, but parents may be unaware of these actions or adjustments.

WORLD-CLASS SCHOOLS. WORLD-CLASS CITY.

SIGNIFICANTLY SIMPLER PROCESS

OVERALL THE APPLICATION PROCESS IS BETTER

Parents with past experience applying to high school in Chicago felt the new application process was a significant improvement compared to previous years. They felt that the old process made it difficult to understand the options available and that having to apply to individual schools on paper was cumbersome.

When asked to describe the new process during the Activation and Apply periods, parents said:

"It is a step by step process that I was able to understand."

"I can do it from home, it's more accessible."

"My son told me because he started to apply already and said it was super easy & fast", "you can pick 10 schools but just one application", "don't have to wait until the counselor has time for our kids."

"It's convenient, everything is in one place [I.E. information on the schools and application] I can see all my options without going to the counselor for them to tell me."

"Logging onto the website to get my offer letter was pretty easy, no big problems with seeing what the offer was."

Awareness of the new high school enrollment process in October was strong among most of the families interviewed. Elementary schools promoted the new process through various platforms and, as the 93% participation rate indicates, school counselors and other school staff did a good job of engaging families with the application. Schools were often mentioned as the first point of contact for parents, before calling the GoCPS hot-line. Parents first reach out to principals, school counselors, or school staff with their questions.

MORE INFORMATION
EASY

UNDERSTANDABLE

**“It’s convenient,
everything is in one
place I can see all my
options without going
to the counselor for
them to tell me.”**

FAST

USEFUL

INFORMATIVE
CLEAR CONVENIENT
ORGANIZED
ACCESSIBLE
STREAMLINED

**THE GoCPS WEBSITE IS AN
INFORMATION SUPER-HUB FOR FAMILIES**

The GoCPS website informs parents and students about their options, provides the appropriate level of information on individual schools and describes the necessary next steps in a way that is easy for parents to access and navigate.

Parents pointed to several key features as being particularly useful. They stated that having a personalized list of schools matching application criteria to their own student’s eligibility cut down on confusion and saved time in their search process.

They appreciated that additional details about each school were available within the GoCPS system, and that they didn’t have to access many other resources to find more information on schools they were interested in. Specifically, parents liked that open house schedules were included in the system.

Finally, parents liked the ability to save favorites and come back to their list at a later time. This allowed them the flexibility to search for schools on their own time, without losing any progress along the way.

‘I can look at each school I am interested in, statistics, rating, location, when you can drop kids off, and it was easier because it had a lot of information.’

‘I like that it greys out and puts at the bottom the schools my child is not eligible for, makes it easy.’

‘Everything is clearly laid out. There aren’t too many words. The design is nice and it’s easy to find what you want.’

— MAKING THE PROCESS EVEN BETTER

PARENTS & STUDENTS SHOULD ENGAGE SOONER

The biggest piece of advice parents would give to other parents of middle school students is that earlier engagement with the process is critical as it allows more time to research options and prepare to rank schools effectively. Parents believe that it would have been helpful to start learning about applying to high schools as early as 6th grade so that students and parents are prepared to excel in 7th grade given the grades and test scores from that year will determine high school eligibility.

Parents also had different experiences depending on their elementary school. Some parents received a letter from their elementary school explaining the new application process at the end of 7th grade while others didn't receive any information until the beginning of the 8th grade.

“Would have been easiest for me to research schools with my child over the summer when we had more time vs. during the school year when they have to start applying.”

“Wish I had known before the 8th grade that it's the 7th grade grades that are most important. I would have explained that to my son because, by the 8th grade, it's too late.”

“I would have wanted more information during the beginning of the year open house.”

MORE TIME

Parents asked for offers earlier than March and *more than two weeks* to make a decision once the offers are made. They point to scheduling conflicts like school trips, standardized testing, prom and graduation crowding the calendar when they would like to use the time to research the schools that have made their students offers.

CONTINUE TO COMMUNICATE ACROSS MULTIPLE CHANNELS

Although schools are using a variety of vehicles (e.g. letters, emails, phone calls, flyers, events) to reach parents, several parents recommended a multi-channel approach.

This would indicate that families would like more outreach and not everyone is getting the message the same way. Parents told us that they received the most helpful information on the new process at events like back-to-school nights, open houses and school fairs. Spanish-speaking parents also were less likely to be aware of the availability of information in Spanish and those that had visited the website commented that translation could be improved.

“I participated in a meeting with the school counselor and my child at the beginning of the year where she explained everything to us.”

MESSAGES THAT PARENTS WANT REINFORCED

“I think that CPS could have made it clearer that there was a chance my daughter might not be matched.”

“I received a letter from one of the schools that accepted my son and that was helpful.”

There was some confusion among parents on key components of the new application process, highlighting a need to continue to deepen awareness and understanding of parts of the process for parents and school staff.

OFFERS

Several parents, and even some CPS staff, erroneously believed that they would receive at least one offer in addition to their zoned high school. The matching process is unclear to some parents and when their student wasn't offered a place at one of their preferred schools, they were disappointed with the system.

Some parents received additional information from schools, in the form of letters or events such as information nights, after receiving offers and found the outreach beneficial.

“I received a letter from one of the schools that accepted my son and that was helpful.”

RANKINGS

Parents expressed that they would have included more schools on the application and ranked them differently if they understood that they might not receive an offer from their 'top' schools.

“If I had known, I would have applied to more schools.”

Despite the availability of information explaining the matching process, parents interviewed did not understand how students were matched to schools.

“I don't know how they matched up schools with kids. I think it is rigged.”

*“If I had it to do over, I would not include schools close to my house because I think that is why I got the school closer to my house and not a higher ranked school.”**

ROUND 2

In focus groups conducted before offers were made, not many parents were aware of the Round 2 option and how it works. Specifically, parents didn't understand that they relinquish Round 1 offers when they receive a Round 2 offer and wanted to know how you can tell if there are still seats available at certain schools before making the decision to participate in the second round. They suggested that offer letters include information on Round 2 in case they were unhappy with their Round 1 offer.

CPS incorporated this feedback into their communications regarding offers, however, challenges remain with ensuring all families understand the details.

“No information, I didn't understand anything until after I declined everything on the first round pick.”

Another need parents voiced was help exploring other options because they were not happy with the school they were matched with and selective enrollment principal discretion opportunities.

*Note: This is quote contains misinformation about the matching process.

PARENT ACCESS IS KEY

PROMOTE PARENTAL INPUT

Although the new website greatly simplifies the application process, it is still very complex. Further, parents with technology and language barriers indicated that their children made decisions about where to attend high school with minimal parental input.

Parents highlighted factors like neighborhood safety and transportation to a potential school as critical in their decision-making process; not necessarily things their 8th grader would prioritize. Parents from all backgrounds mentioned leaving the important decisions of ranking and school acceptance to their kids, but it was more widespread among Spanish-speaking parents undoubtedly due to a language barriers.

Promoting more parental engagement in the process might be addressed by requiring parent sign-off on rankings and acceptances.

“A number of our parents signed the proxy forms because they were overwhelmed with the computer stuff.”

“I wanted my son to understand that there are opportunities outside of N. Lawndale. My son decided.”

“I want to know in advance what [kind of information] I will have to input [into the application].”

GREATER AWARENESS OF RESOURCES NEEDED IN ADVANCE

While the informational material shared through schools was very helpful, access to a sample application would improve understanding of what families should expect.

“I want to know in advance what [kind of information] I will have to input [into the application].”

A step-by-step user guide was provided by CPS during the application window, but parent awareness of this resource was not high among focus group participants.

Also recommended by school staff was administrative access so that staff could log in and help families having issues with PINs and getting into their accounts. Parents often reached out to school staff for help first before contacting CPS' Office of Access and Enrollment highlighting the critical role elementary schools play in supporting families in applying to high school.

INCREASE APPLICATION WEBSITE FUNCTIONALITY

While an impressive tool already, parents had suggestions for increased functionality moving forward.

YEAR 1 FEEDBACK IMPLEMENTED BY CPS

School-specific visit calendars with information on open houses, sporting events, school shadowing and tours that would allow families to get to know the schools and staff.

A **mapping tool** so families can determine public transportation options from their home to school.

“How many buses is my child going to need to take to get from home to these schools?”

Test scheduling functionality to allow for selective enrollment test date reservation or auditions through the GoCPS website.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR YEAR 2

Career- and IEP-focus filters so parents can screen schools by their offerings for students with particular interests or needs.

“I want to more easily understand what schools can accommodate my child with an IEP.”

Including the **likelihood of admission** to a particular school based on student’s grades, test scores, tier level and competing applications for the available seats.

Create a **“Live chat”** option for instant help, especially in the days leading up to the application deadlines.

“How many buses is my child going to need to take to get from home to these schools?”

CLOSING WORDS

Parents agree that CPS has taken a huge step forward in ensuring equitable understanding and access to high-quality school options with the new high-school application process and the GoCPS portal.

The focus group parents representing the ethnic, geographic and economic diversity of Chicago agreed; on the whole, the new process is easier, more convenient and much better.

In Year 2, incorporating recommendations from the parents, or making parents aware if their recommendation already exists, can ensure continued success with the new process and tools and promote universal participation.

The changes that CPS has made redefine “options” in the minds of parents. No longer just a choice between highly competitive selective enrollment schools or the school on the corner, parents are now empowered to think about what kind of school will support their student to be successful.

“Make sure that your child is a good fit for the school because if they are a good fit for the school, I guarantee you they will excel.”

TIME LINE

2017

KEY APPLICATION DATES

FOCUS GROUPS

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>AUGUST- SEPTEMBER Activate accounts</p> | <p>9/25 CICS WEST BELDEN CHARTER SCHOOL BELMONT-CRAGIN NEIGHBORHOOD</p> |
| <p>OCTOBER High school application period opens</p> | <p>10/2 PLATO LEARNING ACADEMY CONTRACT SCHOOL AUSTIN NEIGHBORHOOD</p> |
| <p>NOVEMBER Research and open houses</p> | <p>10/16 COLUMBIA EXPLORERS TRADITIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL BRIGHTON PARK NEIGHBORHOOD</p> |
| <p>DECEMBER December 15-High school application period ends</p> | <p>10/23 HAROLD WASHINGTON ELEMENTARY TRADITIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL BURNSIDE NEIGHBORHOOD</p> |
| <p>JANUARY-FEBRUARY School/program-specific testing and auditions</p> | <p>12/15 CESAR CHAVEZ ELEMENTARY TRADITIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL NEW CITY/BACK OF THE YARDS NEIGHBORHOOD</p> |
| <p>MARCH 30 High school Round 1 offers extended</p> | <p>2/23 CICS WEST BELDEN CHARTER SCHOOL BELMONT-CRAGIN NEIGHBORHOOD</p> |
| <p>APRIL April 13-Deadline to accept high school offers April 30- Round 2 opens for high school</p> | <p>2/23 ARTHUR DIXON ELEMENTARY TRADITIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL CHATHAM NEIGHBORHOOD</p> |
| <p>MAY May 7- High school Round 2 application deadline</p> | <p>4/23 JOSEPH KELLMAN ELEMENTARY TRADITIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL EAST GARFIELD PARK NEIGHBORHOOD</p> |
| <p>JUNE June 1- Round 2 offers extended June 8-Deadline for Round 2 offer acceptance</p> | <p>4/30 NAMASTE CHARTER ELEMENTARY CHARTER SCHOOL MCKINLEY PARK NEIGHBORHOOD</p> |

2018



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