

Forced to Choose:

An Overview of Lessons Learned from Families of Students within Special Education

by Jennifer R. Cowhy, Molly F. Gordon & Marisa de la Torre

Research has shown that students with individualized education programs (IEPs) and their families are less likely to engage in school choice, but we know little about why and about how a child's disability factors into families' decisions. If school choice is to work for students with IEPs, as proponents argue, **policymakers and school leaders need to know how families of students with IEPs navigate their process and decisions**, including:

1. The factors they desire and need in schools,
2. How they prioritize school and program qualities, and
3. What barriers they face in enrolling their children within desired schools.

This study specifically looked at school choice for 29 families after Chicago Public Schools (CPS) closed 49 elementary schools in 2013,¹ and asked:

1. How did parents of students with IEPs navigate the forced school choice that came with school closings?
2. What were their reasons for choosing schools, and what barriers did they face?

Findings

1. **All parents in our sample had visions for what an ideal learning environment would look like for their child:** a school that was safe and supportive, with a strong academic environment which provided their children with the supports and services they needed within an inclusive climate.
2. **Yet many parents of students with IEPs did not have viable options to engage in school choice.**

This was partly because:

- a. Many parents perceived the short list of school options they received from school- or district-based officials (including their designated "welcoming" school) as the only schools available for their child to enroll.
- b. Parents struggled to find information on how, if at all, their child's IEP would be implemented in potential new schools.
 - A school's (in)ability to implement their child's IEP was the first factor in parents' enrollment decisions, and a lack of clarity or confidence in a school's ability limited parents' opportunities to choose schools based on characteristics other than ability to implement the IEP.
- c. Parents' choices were constrained by fears for their child's safety and a lack of transportation. While parents of students without IEPs often shared similar concerns, many parents we interviewed noted particular safety and transportation concerns that were intricately linked to their child's disability.

Policy & practice takeaways

- District leaders could better partner with families to ensure that students with IEPs can be educated in schools that better match families' conceptions of ideal learning environments.
 - Policymakers and district leaders could provide clear and accessible information that would allow families to better understand how their child would be served in particular environments and compare their options.
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Data & methods

We focused on the families of students with IEPs as they engaged in a forced choice embedded within the Chicago mass school closures of 2013, which disproportionately impacted students with IEPs and students of color. We define parents to be a biological parent, grandparent, or any other caregiver who cared for a child with an IEP during this time and assumed responsibility over re-enrollment. We drew on interview data from 29 parents of students with IEPs about their school choice and re-enrollment experiences after their children's schools closed in June and July 2014; 15 of the parents sent their child to the designated welcoming school; 14 to another CPS school.

There are some limitations to the generalization from these findings. The study is based on only 29 families and based on a forced school choice due to school closures. Many of these parents only engaged in school choice at that time because of the closures. This is in contrast with most other research to date that has focused on families who elect into a choice process after dissatisfaction with their current school.

Study details

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About the authors

Jennifer R. Cowhy is a doctoral candidate at the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. Her research examines the implementation of special education in an effort to disrupt injustices within the law's implementation and help students from all backgrounds receive quality services, supports, and educational opportunities. Prior to beginning her doctoral training, Jen was a Research Analyst at the UChicago Consortium.

Molly Gordon is a Senior Research Scientist at NORC. She has content area expertise in education leadership, policy, organizational improvement, and family and community engagement. Prior to joining NORC, Molly was a Research Scientist at the UChicago Consortium.

Marisa de la Torre is a Senior Research Associate and Managing Director at the UChicago Consortium. Her research interests include urban school reform, school choice, early indicators of school success, and English Learners. Before joining the UChicago Consortium, Marisa worked for the Chicago Public Schools in the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability.

¹ de la Torre, M., Gordon, M.F., Moore, P., Cowhy, J.R., Jagesic, S., & Nuynh, M.H. (2015). *School closings in Chicago: Understanding families' choices and constraints for new school enrollment*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.