

WILL A SINGLE APPLICATION FOR HIGH SCHOOLS HELP EXPAND EQUITY IN CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Generation All Issue Brief
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Chicago Public Schools recently announced that eighth graders in school year 2017-18 will be the first to utilize a single application for high school. A single application has the potential to streamline the high school application experience; however, it can also impact enrollment and resources at neighborhood public high schools, and the sorting of students based on race, income and academic ability. The specific design of the application process, the algorithm for matching, and the outreach to parents, students, teachers and counselors are all important factors.

Generation All supports efforts to engage parents, principals, students, teachers and others in meaningful ways to shape both the application process and algorithm that will match students to schools. Both will have an impact on neighborhood public high schools and the families they serve. We view the next year as an opportunity for the district to:

- 1) Create a **transparent and meaningful community engagement process** to inform the design of the application (how will students and families learn about the application and use it?) and to **shape, test, and understand the algorithm** used to match students to schools
- 2) Include **school community leaders from neighborhood high schools at the decision making** table in central office to ensure that the impact of the single application on neighborhood high schools and their students is explored
- 3) Explore **using the algorithm** to create student populations at each school that are **diverse** by abilities, socioeconomic background and other factors.

Chicago should heed lessons learned from other cities and design its single application to ensure all students regardless of their backgrounds will receive a high quality learning experience. Research from single application systems in Denver, New York City, and New Orleans shows that simplifying the high school selection process does not solve the twofold problem of

- 1) a lack of seats in high quality schools, and*
- 2) a lack of high quality schools that are equally distributed across the city.*

Additionally, families in other cities with single application systems need more and better information about all schools and their programs and support around how best to utilize the application. Relying only on students' preferences can also lead to continued racial segregation and sorting based on academic ability.

What is a single application?

A **single application** (also known as a **universal application** or **common enrollment**) is a centralized process for matching students to schools. By creating one portal and process for applying to many different schools, parents and students no longer have to worry about following different timelines and procedures at multiple schools. The single application is also viewed as a tool for matching students to the best school for them and perceived by some as a way to expand equity of access to better quality schools.

Many single application systems in other cities use some form of a **“two-sided deferred acceptance matching algorithm”** that was created for matching medical students to residency programs. Students rank order a select number of high schools, schools can see who has applied, and then schools rank those students up to the number of seats they have available. The algorithm then matches students to their highest ranked school that also chose them back.

What will the single application look like in Chicago?

Chicago Public Schools has announced that eighth graders in school year 2017-18 will be the first to utilize a single application for high school. **Students will rank 20 schools through a website after which they will be matched with one school.** If unsatisfied with their first match, students would need to participate in another round of matching. It is yet unclear what algorithm the school district will use although Chief Education Officer Janice Jackson has told reporters that principals will be able to access the list of students who have ranked their school. It is also unclear if students will rank order entire schools or individual programs within schools such as IB, CTE, or magnet fine arts programs.

Students interested in **selective enrollment schools will still need to apply through a separate process** and not all charter schools have yet agreed to participate in the single application, so students and parents will likely continue utilizing more than one application to select a high school.

Chicago Public Schools has also stated that there will be **opportunities for community engagement** around the new process but has yet to share a detailed plan.

Here is what we know about these types of applications in other cities:

- 1) **A single application does not “fix” inequity when there continues to be a higher demand for seats in high quality schools than supply AND if those seats in high quality schools are not equally distributed across the city.**
 - a. If there aren't enough seats in high quality schools, parents perceive the application system as a “false purveyor of hope” as they did in Denver and New Orleans.
 - b. Parents put a high premium on school proximity – if high quality schools are not equally distributed across the city, the single application will still leave most disadvantaged students in the lowest performing schools.
 - i. A study of Denver's application process found that White families applied to schools with higher student achievement ratings than Black and Hispanic families due to the concentration of high-performing

schools in areas that were farther away from Black and Hispanic families. A study of NYC's enrollment system found similar results.

- 2) **A single application does not negate the need for parents and community organizations to be well-informed about the process and the offerings at various schools.**
 - a. Denver's school district generates comprehensive print and online guides to the city's schools in English and Spanish, hosts parent resource centers and school fairs around the city, and recommends using an interactive online search tool that lists schools based on parents' preferences.
 - i. Yet Denver parents still wanted more information: "what happens in schools and how a child responds to a school in terms of the culture and relationships—factors impossible to provide in a school guide—mattered to them at least as much as the performance rating listed in the parent guide."
 - b. Parents also need to understand the mechanisms around the application and tips on how to maximize the probability of a match.
 - i. Community outreach in New Orleans relies on an outside non-profit group that came out of the Urban League. Even with that outside support and a mandatory requirement for all families to fill out an application, over 50% of families fail to complete it— one explanation is that the due date for applications is in February, and parents may not be ready to think about the next school year at that time.
 - ii. Parents only list 1-2 choices thinking that it will increase their chances of getting into those schools, but in actuality it decreases their chance of matching.
 - c. The algorithm used for matching makes parents feel disconnected from the process and feel like they have even less agency than before.

- 3) **A single application does not inherently lead to more diverse student populations**
 - a. New York City, which has used a single application for over 13 years, still experiences socioeconomic stratification in high schools because students prefer schools that have students similar to them.
 - i. "This means that lower income, lower achieving minority students compared to their more advantaged peers are more likely to have as their first choice a lower performing high minority school... Whatever the reason, **the self-sorting of students through choice into schools that differ in performance undermines the equity goals of choice.**"
 - b. A different analysis of NYC's single application system found that precisely because the single application relies on student preferences, some higher performing students who could have attended higher performing high schools instead attend lower performing high schools because they ranked those schools first.
 - i. The converse is also true, where lower performing students from higher performing middle schools applied to higher performing high schools than similarly lower performing students from lower performing middle schools. The study concludes that "changing the algorithmic part of the application process will not succeed in eliminating such correlations."

What questions should we be asking?

- In what ways can the district use the single application to improved educational experiences for all students? For example – should it be used to promote racial and socioeconomic integration? To promote diversity of academic ability at all schools?
- Will students rank order 20 different programs or 20 different schools? If programs, how will students know which programs are of high quality if all data currently available is reported at only the school level?
- Will the single application use a single-match or a double-match mechanism?
- What efforts will take place to ensure that self-sorting doesn't lead to students in lower achieving grammar schools "under-matching" at lower achieving high schools?
- What efforts will take place to share holistic information about a school's performance, culture, and extracurricular offerings, especially for parents who are not technologically savvy?
- How can school open fairs and visits be coordinated so parents and students will have ample opportunities to experience their neighborhood high school as well as other options?
- What will the public engagement process entail?

Do you have additional questions or concerns that should be considered? Tweet them to [@Generation All](https://twitter.com/GenerationAll) or email mschexnider@cct.org.

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