RESEARCH BRIEF

The First Years of Equitable Access in DC's Common Lottery

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The author is also grateful to My School DC, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, and 12 public charter schools that shared data to inform the series of D.C. Policy Center reports on equitable access that are summarized in this briefing.

The First Years of Equitable Access

In 2020, leaders in the District wanted to increase access to in-demand schools by including a priority for at-risk students in the common lottery used to enroll in public schools.[1] The change would make it easier for District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools to reduce socioeconomic segregation. To inform and shape this policy, the D.C. Policy Center collaborated with school leaders and education agencies and conducted two studies to understand how such a priority might work, especially in schools with lengthy waiting lists and a small number of at-risk students.

Later that year, the DC Council passed the Expanding Equitable Access to Great Schools law, allowing DCPS and public charter schools to prioritize students who are designated as at risk in the common lottery when they apply to those schools. Schools must opt in to this Equitable Access (EA) option, which either (1) offers applicants who are designated as at risk a space before other applicants, according to the school's preference order, or (2) reserves designated seats for students who are at risk that remain open through a longer window.[2] In the 2022–23 school year, the EA option was implemented in the common lottery for the first time at the systems level (two new DCPS schools had piloted the approach in earlier years).

This brief summarizes the D.C. Policy Center's research that showed the EA option could have a big impact on increasing access and diversity at certain schools, given patterns for how at-risk applicants apply to the common lottery, with a more limited system-wide effect. The brief also presents the results of the first year of implementation and a preview of the second and third years.

Background

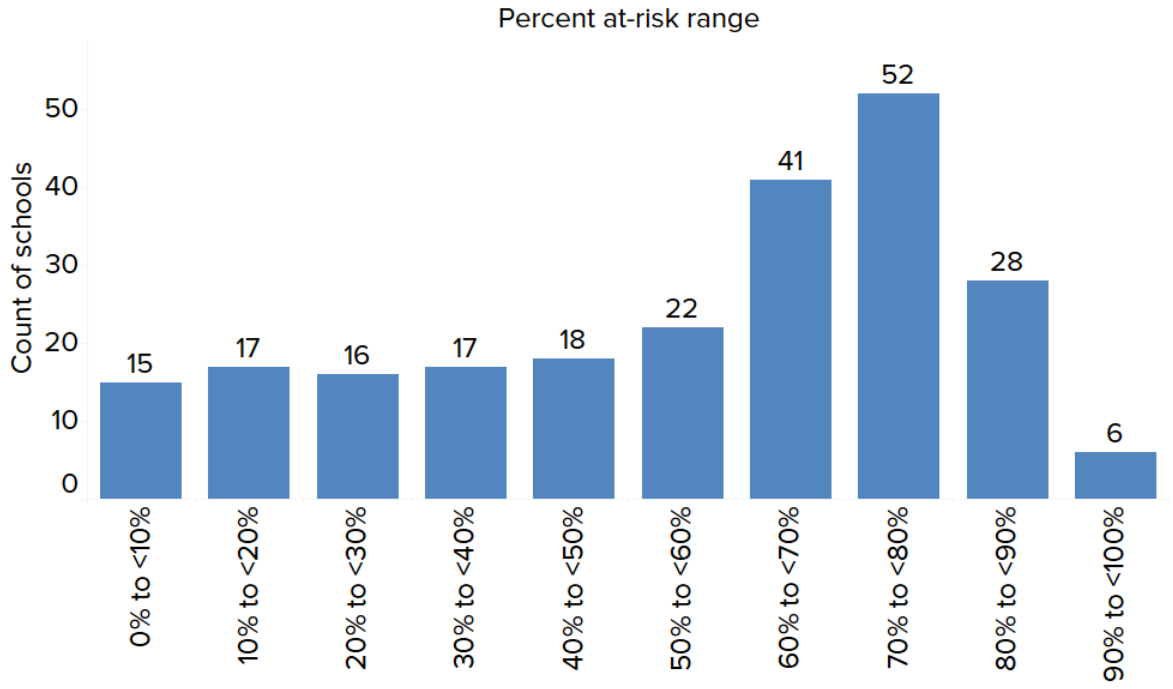
My School DC is Washington, DC's common application and public school lottery system and an important mechanism for matching students to public schools. All students must apply to a school in their first year of prekindergarten, as seats in these grades are not guaranteed. After prekindergarten, District students entering kindergarten through grade 12 submit applications to attend any school other than their DCPS in-boundary school, including any DCPS school outside a student's attendance boundary or feeder pattern, DCPS schools that serve the entire city, DCPS's selective high schools or programs, and public charter schools. Most students do so, with 26 percent attending their in-boundary

DCPS school and the remaining 74 percent using the common lottery to access another DCPS school or a public charter school.[3]

This high degree of public school choice could make schools less socioeconomically segregated than DC's neighborhoods, which have concentrations of low- and high-income households. For example, at least 60 percent of students living in Ward 7 and Ward 8 are designated as at risk, compared with 12 percent of students living in Ward 3, west of Rock Creek Park.[4] But 32 out of 232 PK–12 DCPS and public charter schools with data in 2022–23 enrolled a student body where no more than 20 percent of students were designated as at risk, even through 52 percent of all public school students are designated as at risk. These schools, with the lowest shares of at-risk students, tend to have the longest waiting lists in their entry grade, with an average of 207 applicants on a waiting list compared with an average of 27 applicants on a waiting list for other schools.[5]

FIGURE 1

Distribution of Public Schools in DC, by Share of Students Who Are At Risk, 2022–23



Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) school report card data. Retrieved from https://osse.dc.gov/

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How Common Lottery Application Patterns Can Create Barriers to Access for At-Risk Students

At-risk students have limited access to schools with low shares of at-risk students and long waiting lists for two main reasons. First, sibling preference and word of mouth (and, for DCPS in-boundary schools, in-boundary preference coupled with residential segregation) tend to reinforce existing demographics, and these schools' applicant pools have smaller shares of at-risk students.[6] For example, in 2017–18, data for students entering PK3 (prekindergarten for 3-year-olds) shared by 12 public charter schools with long waiting lists and low shares of at-risk students indicated that 56 percent of seats went to siblings of current students and the other seats were distributed among other applicants, of whom only 12 percent were at risk (compared with 47 percent of all public school students in that year) (Coffin 2020a). Second, at-risk applicants are historically more likely to apply during the postlottery period

than during the lottery's initial phase. Between 2017–18 and 2019–20, 33 percent of applicants during the initial lottery period were at risk, compared with 49 percent of applicants who were at risk during the postlottery period (Coffin 2020b). At schools with long waiting lists, this means all seats are filled during the initial lottery period when at-risk applicants are less likely to apply. These two barriers made it difficult for at-risk students to access many of the city's in-demand schools.

How the Equitable Access Option Was Intended to Shift Access and Diversity

The D.C. Policy Center report *At-Risk Priority in D.C.'s Common Lottery: Potential for Access and Diversity* (Coffin 2020a) presented four scenarios of how a priority for at-risk students would affect lottery results for a model elementary school based on characteristics of 12 public charter schools that serve low populations of at-risk students, had long waiting lists, and offered PK3 seats. The four scenarios were (1) no priority for at-risk students, (2) preference for at-risk students ranked before siblings of current students and children of staff members, (3) preference for at-risk applicants ranked after siblings of current students and children of staff members, and (4) reserving 30 percent of seats for at-risk applicants.

BOX 1

Matching Process in the Common Lottery

A student is "matched" when the lottery places them at any of the schools on the student's application. Students may select up to 12 schools, ranked starting with the student's first choice, and the lottery uses a combination of school preferences, randomness, and designated seats to attempt to match a student with a school as high on their list as possible. Once matched, students are not automatically enrolled—families may choose to accept the seat and enroll their student or can decline. In general, the likelihood that a student is matched to any school on their list increases if they include more schools and if they are entering the system at "traditional" entry points such as PK3 or sixth or eighth grades, where there are more seats available for new students. The match rate for all students in PK3 in 2020 was 88 percent, meaning 88 percent of the 5,678 individual lottery applicants that year were matched with a school on their list.

The analysis showed that prioritizing at-risk students in the common lottery can improve access through better chances to match at ranked schools and improve socioeconomic diversity at schools with low shares of at-risk students. Out of 100 at-risk applications to the model school, only 4 would match under scenario 1 (status quo). Under scenario 2, with an at-risk preference after sibling preference, 42 applicants would match there, and under scenario 3, with an at-risk preference before siblings, 71 would match. Finally, for a model school that reserves 30 percent of seats (scenario 4), 19 out of 100 would match.

An at-risk preference improves the match rate for individual at-risk students:

4% Status quo with no priority for at-risk applicants: 4% of at-risk students match

42% At-risk preference *after* siblings: 42% of at-risk students match

71% At-risk preference *before* siblings: 71% of at-risk students match

19% Reserve 30% of seats for at-risk students: 19% of at-risk students match

These scenarios have varying implications for the share of students who will be at risk within the incoming PK3 class at the model school, where 15 percent of current students are considered at risk. Under the status quo, 11 percent of the incoming PK3 class would be at risk, compared with a high of 100 percent of the incoming class if an at-risk preference is first. The other two scenarios fall in between. If an at-risk preference is after sibling and children-of-staff-member preference, 61 percent of the incoming PK3 class would be at risk, and if 30 percent of seats are reserved, 31 percent of the incoming class will be at-risk students.

An at-risk preference has the potential to increase socioeconomic diversity at schools that serve low percentages of at-risk students.

Status quo with no priority for at-risk applicants:
11% of pre-kindergarten students are at-risk

At-risk preference *after* siblings:
61% of pre-kindergarten students are at-risk

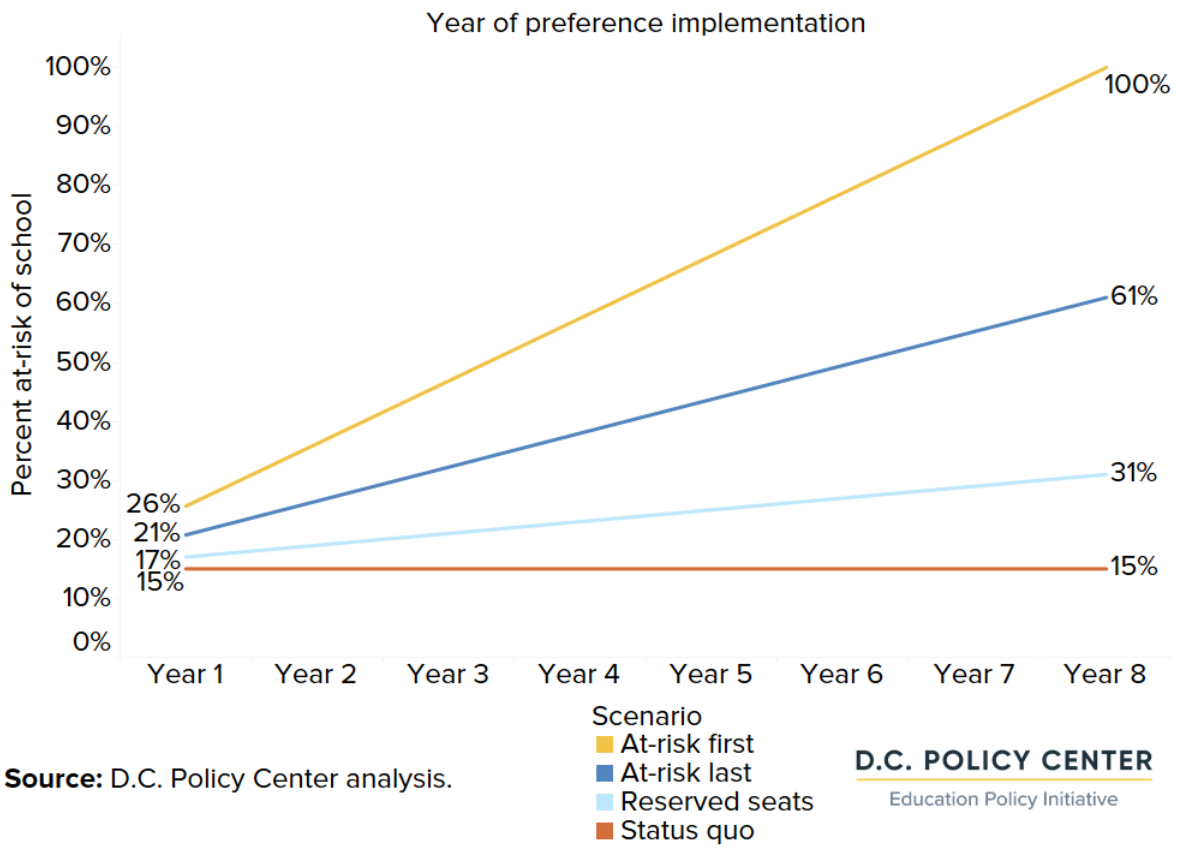
At-risk preference *before* siblings:
100% of pre-kindergarten students are at-risk

Reserve 30% of seats for at-risk students:
31% of pre-kindergarten students are at-risk

Over time, the at-risk priority could shift the demographics of an entire school. For example, in the scenario where the at-risk preference is after sibling preference, the percentage of at-risk students at the school would gradually shift from 15 percent to 61 percent over eight years (figure 2).[7]

FIGURE 2

Share of Students in All Grades in PK–5 Schools Who Are At Risk, by Scenario



Source: D.C. Policy Center analysis.

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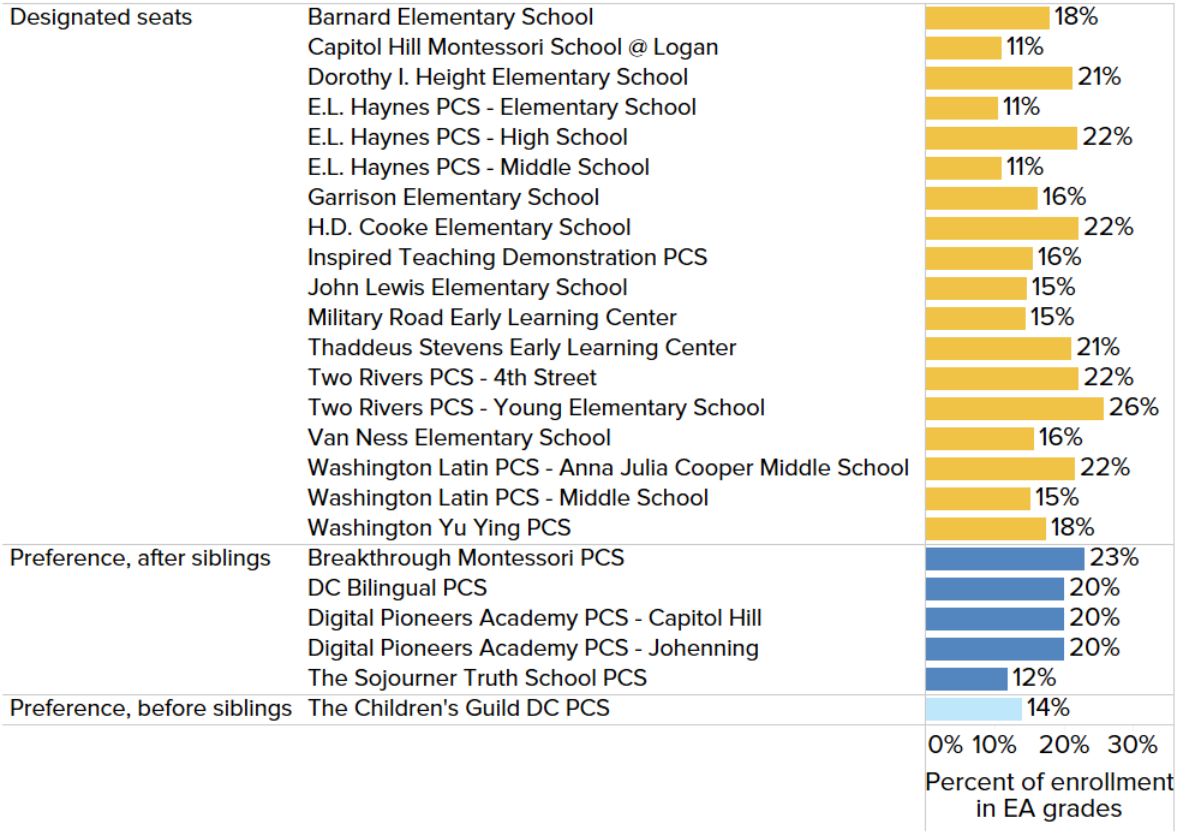
First Year of Equitable Access Implementation

The Equitable Access option was first implemented at the systems level by 25 out of 251 DCPS and public charter schools in 2022–23.[8] Of these, 6 charter schools implemented EA as a preference—5 of the 6 with a preference ranked EA after siblings, a commonly used preference, and 1 of the 6 ranked EA before siblings. At these 6 schools, 18 percent of lottery applicants who were matched to seats at that school were matched through the EA preference (figure 3). Meanwhile, 19 DCPS and public charter schools chose to designate seats for EA applicants, which amounted to 18 percent of the enrollment reserved for at-risk students in grades where schools offered the EA option. In total, 294 seats at these 19 schools were designated for at-risk students.

FIGURE 3

EA Schools and Seats Offered or Preference Matches as a Share of Enrollment in Grades with an EA Option, 2022–23



Source: D.C. Policy Center analysis of My School DC common lottery data and OSSE enrollment audit data.
Note: DC Wildflower PCS is not included in the chart as an outlier, offering 5 EA seats but enrolling only 3 students in the same grade.

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The 25 schools that opted in to the EA option differed from the typical PK–12 school in DC in six ways, before they offered the option (figure 4).

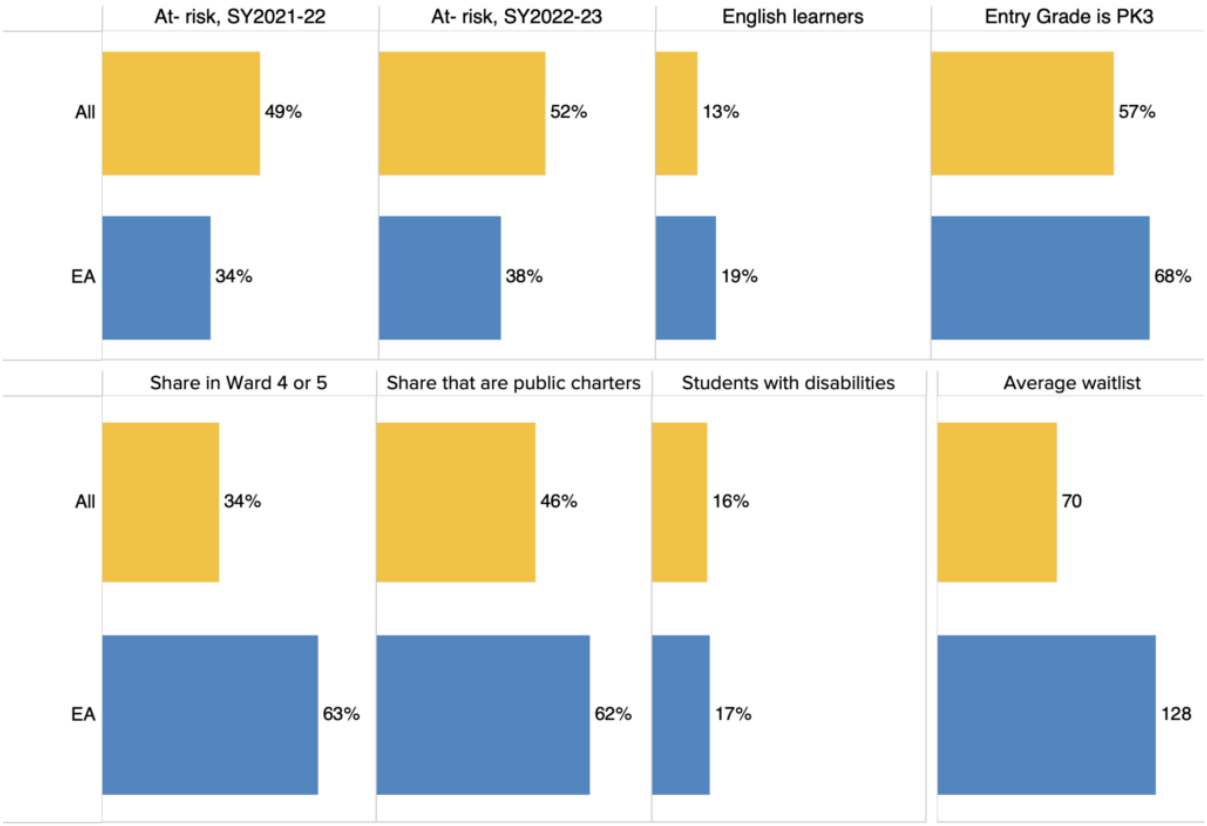
- EA schools tend to serve a smaller percentage of students designated as at risk compared with students at all schools (38 percent versus 52 percent).
- EA schools have a higher proportion of English learner students compared with all public schools (19 percent versus 13 percent).
- EA schools are more likely than all schools to be public charter schools (62 percent versus 46 percent).

- EA schools are notably concentrated in Wards 4 and 5 (areas of the city where students are less likely to attend their in-boundary school) (Coffin 2018). Sixth-three percent of EA schools are in these two wards compared with 34 percent of all schools.
- EA schools have longer waiting lists in their entry grades compared with all schools (averaging 128 applicants versus 70 applicants).
- EA schools are more likely to be elementary or early childhood schools with an entry grade of PK3 (68 percent of EA schools compared with 57 percent of all schools).

FIGURE 4

Profile of EA Schools Compared with All Schools

2022–23, unless otherwise noted



Source: D.C. Policy Center analyses of OSSE enrollment data, My School DC data, and DME's EdScape data.

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Lottery Outcomes

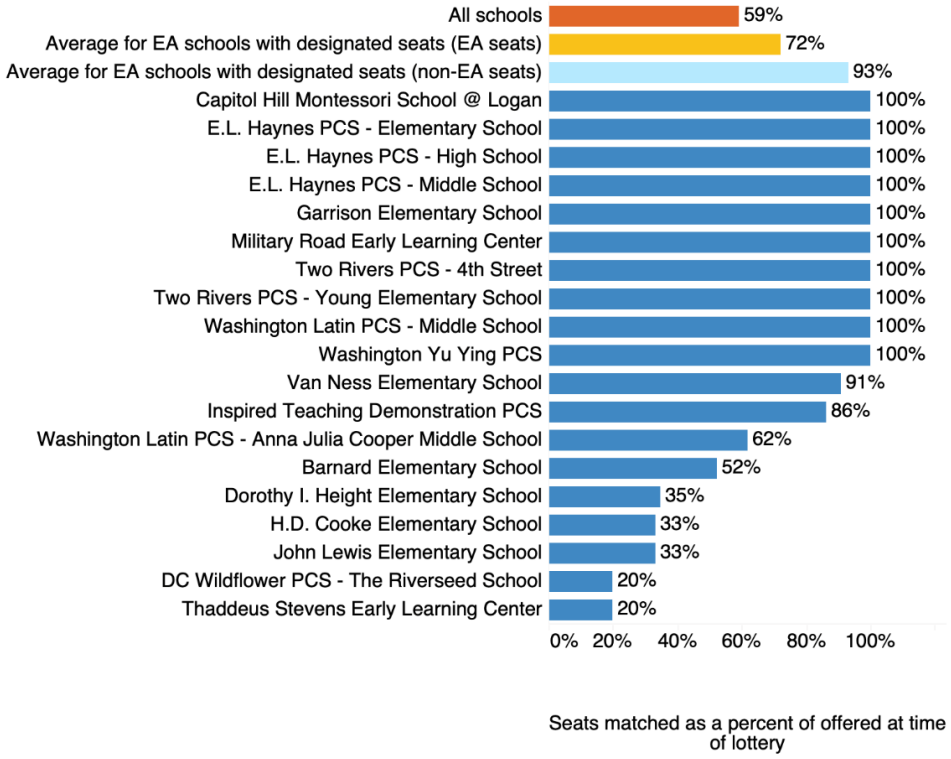
The implementation of the Equitable Access option in the District of Columbia's public school system during 2022–23 marked a pivotal shift in prioritizing students designated as at risk within the common lottery system.

At the time of the lottery, there were 400 matches through the EA option, which accounted for 2 percent of all 16,279 matches system-wide. Importantly, there was an increase in demand for EA schools among students designated as at risk.[9] Applications to EA schools from at-risk students more than doubled between 2021–22 and 2022–23, much more than the 8 percent increase in applications from at-risk applicants overall. In addition, schools were able to match most of these seats at the time of the initial lottery. By early April 2022, 72 percent of designated EA seats were filled, higher than the 59

percent rate for seats offered by all schools combined (figure 5). Finally, 59 percent of applicants who matched through the EA option enrolled in the school, which is higher than the overall matriculation rate of 55 percent across all applicants. The higher matriculation rate was driven by schools with designated seats: 67 percent of students who matched through designated EA seats ultimately enrolled in their match school compared with 50 percent at schools that adopted a preference.

FIGURE 5

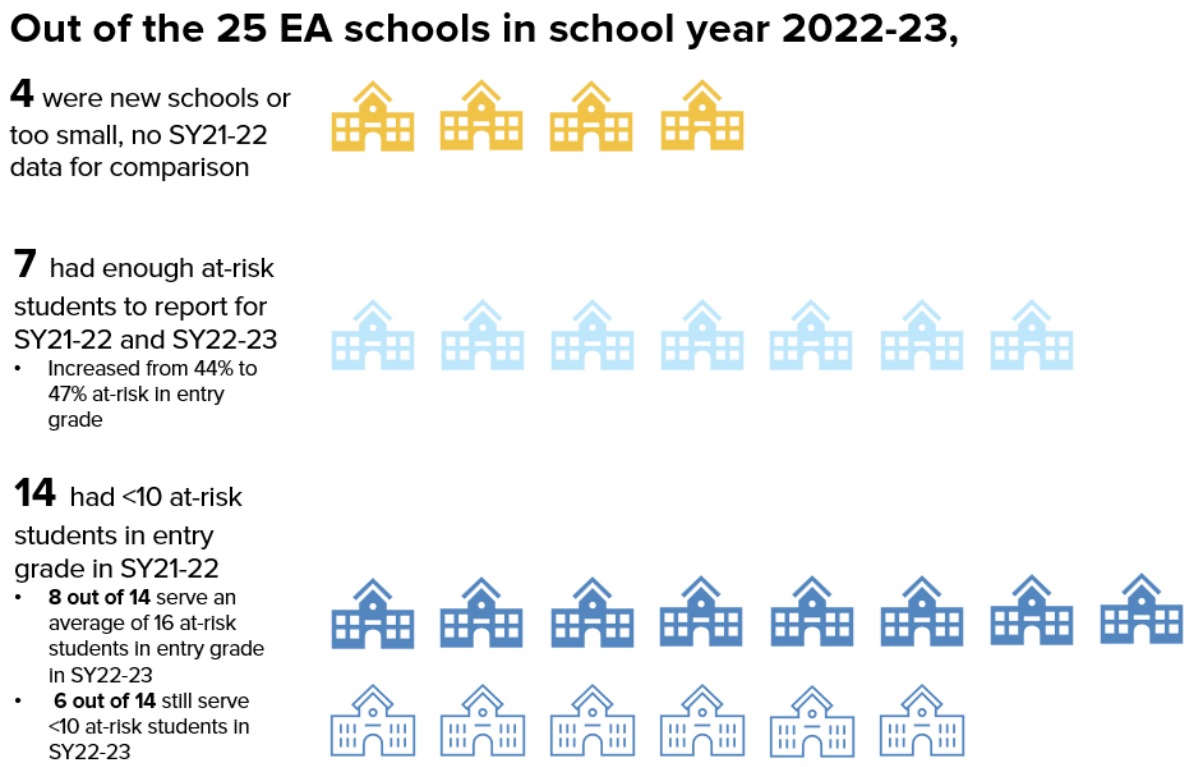
Seats Matched at the Time of the Lottery at EA Schools and Others, 2022–23



Source: D.C. Policy Center analysis of My School DC common lottery data.

The increased match and matriculation rates increased the shares of at-risk students at most participating schools. Specifically, 14 of the 25 EA schools had so few at-risk students (fewer than 10 in their entry grade) in the school year before EA that the Office of the State Superintendent of Education did not disclose the number of at-risk students. After adopting the EA option, 8 of these schools increased the share of at-risk students in their entry grade to an average of 29 percent (approximately 16 at-risk students). This increase is much larger than the 3 percentage-point increase in the share of students who are at risk across all schools. For the 7 schools that did have reported data before EA

adoption, the share of at-risk students increased from 44 percent to 47 percent in the schools' entry grades.



Preview of 2023–24 Lottery Results

An additional nine schools incorporated the EA option in 2023–24, all opting to implement as designated seats. Additional designated seats were made available in most grades, especially in PK3, PK4, and kindergarten (table 1).

TABLE 1

EA Seats Made Available in the Common Lottery

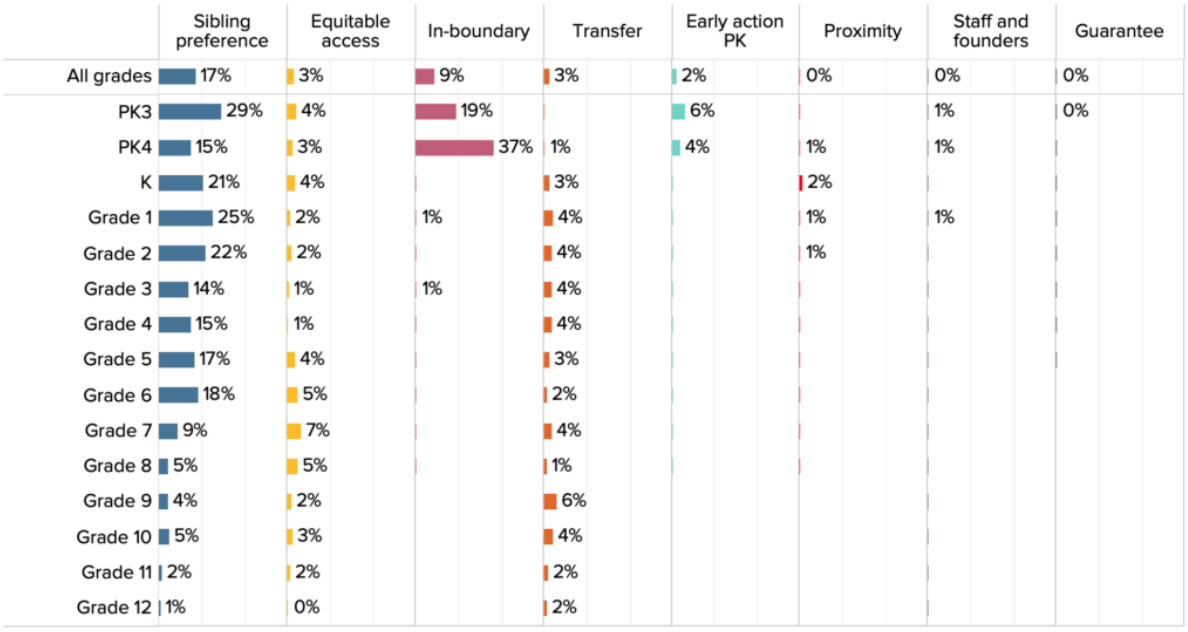
Grade	2022–23, designated EA seats	2023–24, designated EA seats	Change
PK3	154	218	64
PK4	40	78	38
K	8	44	36
1	0	14	14
2	0	12	12
3	0	3	3
4	0	3	3
5	27	45	18
6	34	25	-9
7	0	2	2
8	0	0	0
9	31	30	-1
10	0	2	2
11	0	0	0
12	0	0	0
Total	**294**	**476**	**182**

Source: My School DC waiting list and offers data.
Note: EA = Equitable Access.

There were 683 EA matches at the time of the 2023 lottery compared with 411 matches in the 2022 lottery, an 56 percent increase. This is the equivalent of 3 percent of all initial matches in the common lottery, slightly higher than EA representing 2 percent of all matches in the previous year. Similar to the first year of implementation, 72 percent of designated seats were matched at the time of the lottery.

FIGURE 6

Matches, by Preference Type and Grade, in DC's 2023 Common Lottery



Source: D.C. Policy Center analysis of My School DC Waitlist and Offers Data. For more information, visit https://www.myschooldc.org/resources/data

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Conclusion

An additional 18 schools are implementing the EA option in the common lottery for 2024–25.[10] Ten DCPS schools are doing so as a preference for prekindergarten students living in boundary only, and the other 8 schools are using designated seats. (In addition, 1 school that previously offered a preference switched to offering designated seats.)

There is the potential for further expansion, as the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education has included a recommendation in its boundary and student assignment process to have DCPS and public charter schools with less than the citywide average of at-risk students (52 percent in 2022–23) set aside existing lottery seats for students meeting the at-risk criteria. The intent of this recommendation is for those schools that are below the citywide average threshold to designate seats until they to become more socioeconomically integrated (DME 2024).

This brief looks at the lottery outcomes for the Equitable Access option, but matching to a seat is just the beginning of the story. It will be critical to follow up with a look at how at-risk students fare at

these schools in academic achievement, attendance, well-being, and reenrollment, in addition to how socioeconomic segregation decreases over time.

Notes

[1] Students are designated as at risk if they experience homelessness, are in the foster care system, qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, or are at least one year older than the expected age for their high school grade.

[2] "Lottery Preferences and Designated Seats," My School DC, accessed July 29, 2024, *https://www.myschooldc.org/node/49311*.

[3] "Trends in Enrollment by Sector," EdScape, accessed July 29, 2024, *https://edscape.dc.gov/page/trends-enrollment-sector*.

[4] "Where Students Identified as At Risk of Academic Failure Live," EdScape, accessed July 29, 2024, *https://edscape.dc.gov/page/pop-and-students-where-students-at-risk-live*.

[5] "Resources: Data," My School DC, accessed July 29, 2024, *https://www.myschooldc.org/resources/data*.

[6] In 2023, in-boundary preference accounted for 9 percent of all matches, and sibling preference accounted for 17 percent. For PK3, in-boundary preference accounted for 19 percent of matches, and sibling preference for 29 percent. For PK4, the shares were 15 percent and 37 percent. See Chelsea Coffin, "Chart of the Week: Roughly One Third of Students Who Match in the Common Lottery Do So through a Preference," D.C. Policy Center, April 21, 2023, *https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/preferences-common-lottery/*.

[7] This is a simplified example, assuming all students enroll and stay enrolled (or at-risk and not-at-risk students are equally likely to leave the school), no seats open up in higher grades, siblings are an equal percentage of the applicant pool, and all grades have equal enrollment.

[8] DCPS had two newly opened schools participating for two years before 2022–23.

[9] Applicants are identified as at risk if they are already enrolled in DC's public schools or if their information matches in other relevant government databases (especially important for those who are not currently enrolled in DC's public schools).

[10] "Resources: Data," My School DC.

References

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About the Author

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