

# At-risk priority in D.C.'s common lottery: Potential implications for access and diversity



**D.C. POLICY CENTER**  
Education Policy Initiative

## About this report

Approximately 73% of D.C. students have used the common lottery to apply for a seat at a school other than their in-boundary school. A priority for at-risk students in the common lottery would improve the chances that at-risk students match at a school they rank highly, especially at public charterschools that serve a low percentage of at-risk students and have high waitlists. This study examines three ways that an at-risk priority in the common lottery could be implemented, and how such measures might increase access and diversity.



## How do things look today?

**45%:** The share of the District's student population who are eligible for additional funding as at-risk students: those who receive TANF or SNAP, are experiencing homelessness, are involved in the foster care system, or are overage in high school.

**19:** The number of schools where 20% or less of students are at-risk. Sibling preference in the common lottery tends to preserve existing demographics. An at-risk priority would impact these 19 schools the most.

**24,996:** In 2018, there were 24,996 applicants to the common lottery. The common lottery allows families to rank up to 12 schools using one application, and matches families to these schools based on a randomly-assigned lottery number. However, sibling preference means that the lottery preserves existing school demographics, making the lottery a less effective means of securing a slot for students without siblings at schools particularly where waitlists are high.



## Methodology

We developed four scenarios to examine how a priority for at-risk students would affect lottery results for pre-kindergarten at a school that currently has a low share of at-risk students (15%) and a long waitlist with 287 names:

### /// Status quo with no priority for at-risk applicants

This scenario reflects the current common lottery preference order at most public charter schools where siblings and children of staff have preference and match in the common lottery to seats at a particular school before all other applicants.

### /// Preference for at-risk applicants, ranked before siblings of current students and children of staff

Under this scenario, at-risk students have the highest preference, and receive seats first, followed by siblings of current students and children of staff, and then all other applicants.

### /// Preference for at-risk applicants, ranked after siblings of current students and children of staff

Under this scenario, siblings of current students and children of staff have the highest ranked preference and match to seats first, followed by the next highest preference for at-risk applicants, and then all other applicants.

### /// Reserve 30% of seats for at-risk applicants.

Under this scenario, one lottery that includes only at-risk applicants matches 30 percent of seats exclusively to at-risk applicants. Then, another lottery matches the remaining 70 percent of seats first to siblings of current students, then staff, then those with no preference. (At-risk applicants who did not match in the other lottery are included in the no preference category).

Read the full report online at [dcpolicycenter.org/publications/at-risk-priority/](https://dcpolicycenter.org/publications/at-risk-priority/)

# What we found

**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



**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

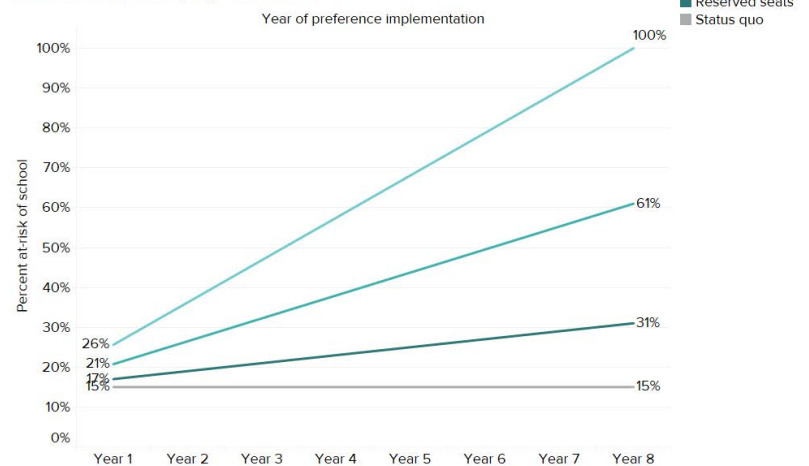
**71%** At-risk preference *before* siblings: 71% of at-risk students match

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

**Over time, such an at-risk priority could shift the demographics of an entire school:**

For example, in the scenario where the at-risk preference is last, the percentage of at-risk students would gradually shift from 15 percent to 61 percent over eight years. This is a simplified example, assuming all students stay enrolled (or at-risk and not at-risk students are equally likely to leave the school), no seats open up in upper grades, siblings are an equal percentage of the applicant pool, and all grades have equal enrollment.

Percent of students in all grades at PK-5 school who are at-risk over time, by scenario



Source: D.C. Policy Center analysis.

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