

At-risk application patterns in D.C.'s common lottery



D.C. POLICY CENTER
Education Policy Initiative

About this report

Giving a priority to at-risk students in D.C.'s common lottery could not only increase match rates for those students but also make some schools more socioeconomically integrated, especially at public charter schools where waitlists are long, and the share of at-risk students is low. But an at-risk priority policy, on its own, cannot achieve these results if at-risk students are not applying to these schools, or not applying in time to receive a match. This report uses common lottery application data to understand the kind of impact this policy will have.



What is an at-risk priority?

In the common lottery, preferences exist for certain student groups over others. For example, students whose sibling already goes to a particular school may be given extra priority for a seat at that school over students without a sibling currently in that school – called the **sibling preference**.

An **at-risk priority** would give the 48 percent of students who fall into the category of at-risk (defined as qualifying for TANF or SNAP, experiencing homelessness, being involved in the foster care system, or being over-age in high school) priority on being matched to schools ahead of students who are not considered at-risk.

An at-risk priority could be implemented as a preference, or schools could reserve a percentage of seats for at-risk students.

Why a lottery preference? Most students use the lottery.



Students use the lottery to secure a seat at a DCPS school as an out-of-boundary student, at a citywide DCPS school without boundaries, at a public charter school, or in pre-kindergarten.

70%

As of 2019-20, 70 percent of D.C. public school students had used the common lottery at some point in their education.

Who will an at-risk priority help, and how?

An at-risk priority has the **potential** to make a big difference in how many at-risk students secure a seat at some of the public charter schools with the highest waitlists, in turn helping these schools to be less socioeconomically segregated.



At-risk students: An at-risk priority could increase at-risk students' match rates at these schools from as **low as 4 percent**, to as **high as 42 percent** in the case of an at-risk preference after sibling preference.



Schools: These public charter schools with long waitlists are also relatively socioeconomically segregated, serving a lower percentage of at-risk students. An at-risk preference could increase the share of at-risk students in the incoming pre-kindergarten class from as **little as 11 percent** to as **much as 61 percent**, if the at-risk preference is ranked after sibling preference.

What will it take to make an at-risk priority work?

An at-risk priority can **only** make this difference in matching for at-risk students and socioeconomic integration at schools **if** at-risk students are applying in the common lottery, especially for seats at these schools by the lottery deadline. The data show that, as of now, **the way at-risk students apply to the lottery might limit its impact.**

Read the full report online at dcpolicycenter.org/publications/at-risk-applications/

What the data tell us

At-risk students are less likely than their peers who are not at-risk to apply in the common lottery.

They are especially less likely than their peers to apply during the lottery period – the time when most seats are matched at high-waitlist schools.

As time passes, more seats are taken and fewer are available to match.

Of every 10 students who apply in the **lottery period**, 3 are at-risk, 5 are not at-risk, and for 2 we are missing data.



Of every 10 students who apply in the **post-lottery period**, 5 are at-risk, 3 are not at-risk, and for 2 we are missing data.



Of every 10 students who are **enrolled** by October, 5 are at-risk and 5 are not at-risk.



In the early grades, fewer at-risk students apply to the lottery than their peers who are not considered at-risk.

This trend can determine enrollment options for all eight years of elementary school, or in some cases, a middle and high school trajectory.

In **pre-kindergarten (PK3)**, 29% of applicants* are at-risk, compared to 47% of enrollment.



In **kindergarten**, 32% of applicants* are at-risk, compared to 46% of enrollment.



In **grade 6**, 35% of applicants* are at-risk, compared to 46% of enrollment.



In **grade 9**, 39% of applicants* are at-risk, compared to 64% of enrollment.



*during the lottery period

At-risk students apply less frequently than their peers to schools that have high waitlists and serve low percentages of at-risk students.

They are especially less likely than their peers to apply during the lottery period – the time when most seats are matched at high-waitlist schools.



19 public charter schools were identified as those with the highest waitlists serving low percentages of at-risk students, mostly in Wards 4 and 5.



On average, 145 at-risk students apply to at least one of these schools, where there are, on average, a total of 88 open seats at each of the 19 schools.

Key Takeaways

For schools

Schools implementing the priority as a preference will need to **make sure at-risk applicants apply by the lottery deadline**. Schools implementing the priority by reserving seats will need to **keep those seats open beyond the lottery deadline**.

For at-risk students applying to the common lottery

Currently, 16 of the 19 schools with high waitlists serving low percentages of at-risk students are located in Wards 4 and 5. At-risk **students residing in Wards 7 and 8 (where most live) are less likely to benefit** from an at-risk preference – and if they do, they will **have to travel farther**.