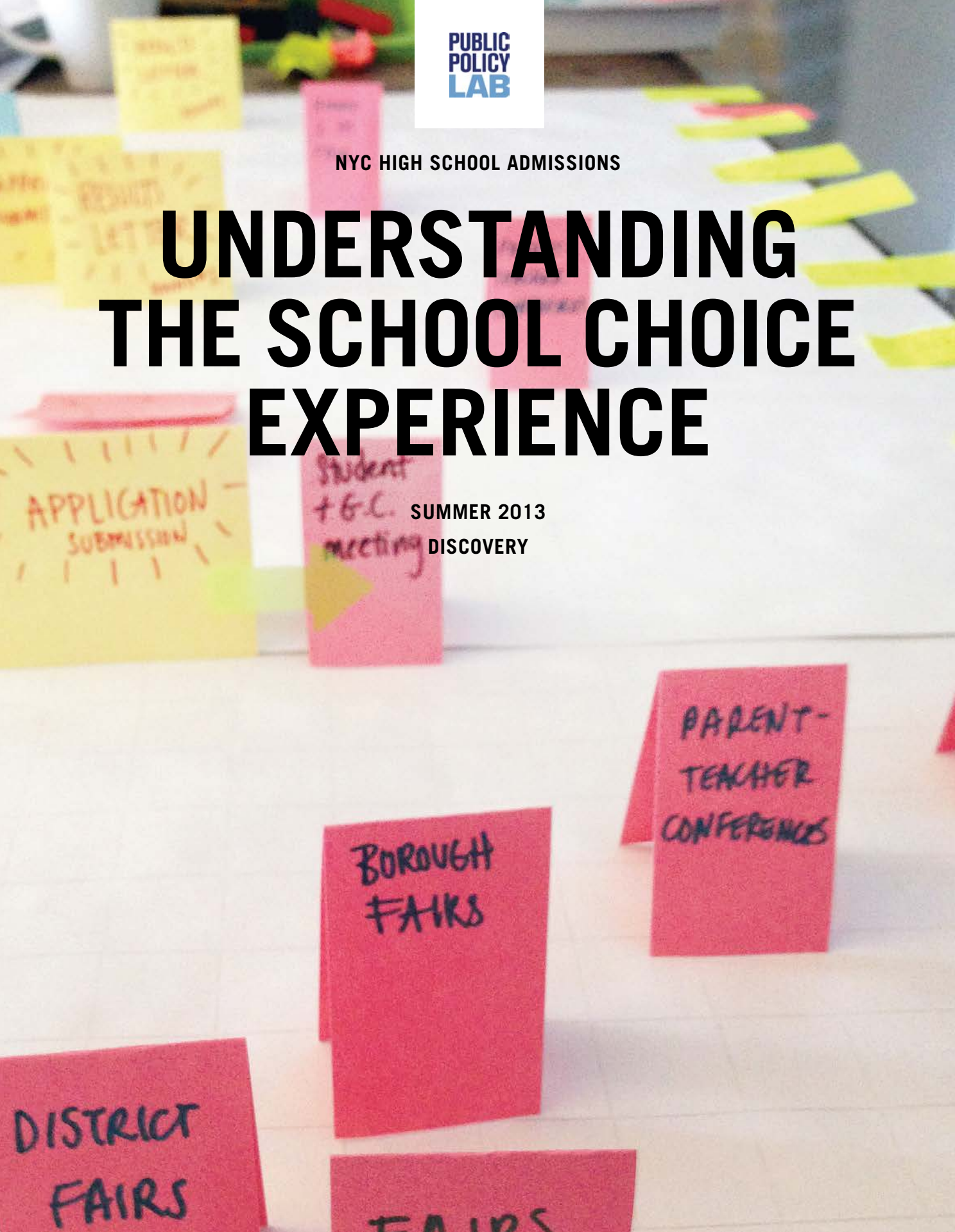


NYC HIGH SCHOOL ADMISSIONS

UNDERSTANDING THE SCHOOL CHOICE EXPERIENCE

SUMMER 2013

DISCOVERY



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**PUBLIC
POLICY
LAB**

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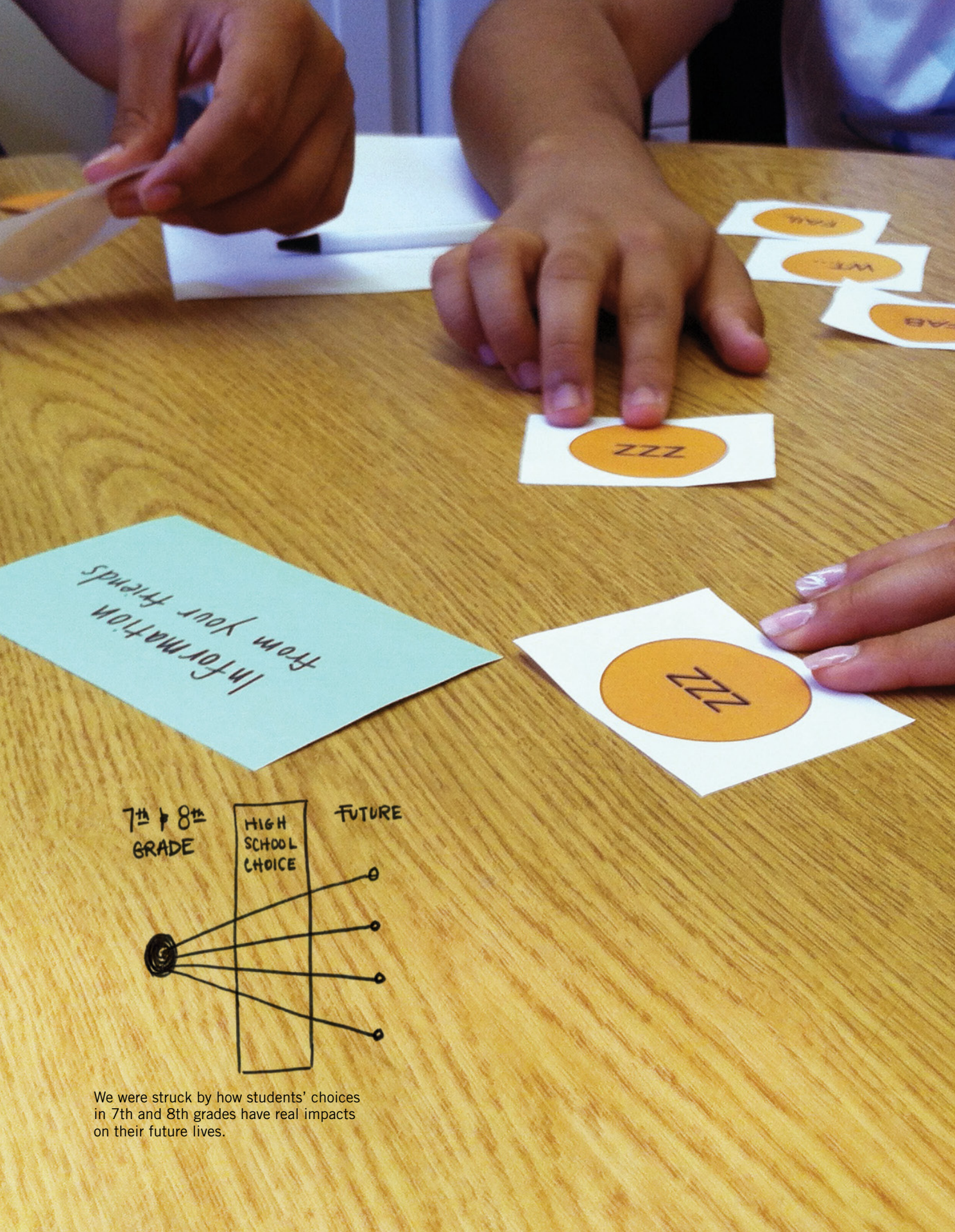
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Information
from your friends

7th & 8th
GRADE

HIGH
SCHOOL
CHOICE

FUTURE

We were struck by how students' choices
in 7th and 8th grades have real impacts
on their future lives.

WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT ABOUT?

The New York City Department of Education is the largest school district in the United States, with more than 1.1 million students and 1,800 schools. Each year over 75,000 students participate in a school-selection and application process to gain admission to the city's public high schools.

The [Public Policy Lab](#) formed a partnership with the [New York City Department of Education's Office of Innovation](#) and the [Office of Student Enrollment](#) to explore opportunities for improving the high school admissions experience. During the summer of 2013, we explored high school admissions through the insights of students, families, administrative staff, and policymakers.

Ultimately, we hope that the discovery process outlined in this document will inform the design of supports that assist students — particularly those from low-income and non-English-speaking families — in making more informed and confident decisions when applying to high school.

“The high school admissions process and choice. The student-driven process of choosing 12 programs in your order of preference. When you apply for each application, you should consider each Admissions Priority. Admissions Priorities are used to consider applicants for each admissions method. Examples of methods include: Priority (in which students receive priority information session) and Screened school based on their seventh grade grade. Admissions Priorities list the order in which students are considered for any given program. Examples of priorities include: Priority information session attendance, from over 400 public high schools on your preferences, interests, and a list of types of high schools and programs to

is centered on two principles: equity
cess enables students to rank up to
nce. When filling out the high school
ch program's Admissions Method and
Methods are the processes schools
n program. There are eight different
methods include Limited Unscreened
y based on their attendance at an
(in which students are ranked by a
grades, test scores, attendance, etc.).
n which applicants are considered for
orities include a student's residence
. You have the opportunity to choose
offering nearly 700 programs. Based
cademic needs, you can apply to the
that suit you best.”

– NYC DOE HIGH SCHOOL ENROLLMENT OVERVIEW

EACH YEAR, NEARLY

80,000

8TH GRADERS EVALUATE PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL OPTIONS.

74,000

ARE MATCHED TO PROGRAMS. [~6,000 OPT OUT BEFORE THE MATCH.]

67,000

ARE SEATED IN SCHOOLS.* [~7,000 DON'T ENROLL IN A NYC PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL.]

* See "High School Choice in New York City: A Report on the School Choices and Placements of Low-Achieving Students," The Research Alliance for New York City Schools, April 2013, p.20.

MOVING THROUGH THE PROCESS

The choice model of admissions allows students to apply to a range of schools, rather than attending their nearest or zoned school. This model is intended to provide students with more educational options, incentivize schools to improve their offerings, and improve the school system at large.

The establishment of school choice in New York City under the Bloomberg administration has been the cornerstone of what many researchers describe as **a decade of significant advancement in student achievement**.^{*} Prior to 2004, there was little to no choice citywide; with few exceptions, the entire scholastic experience of New York City students was determined based on where they lived. That began to change when, starting in 2004, all 8th graders were required to choose a high school. This shift occurred simultaneous to the City's efforts to develop hundreds of new high school options that offered diverse themes and opportunities.

The NYC Department of Education has made significant efforts to provide students and parents with training and information resources to help them evaluate school options. Each student may submit up to 12 school choices, then a data-driven algorithm maximizes the match between students' preferences and their school placements. Today, over half of students receive their top-ranked school choice and three quarters receive one of their three top picks.

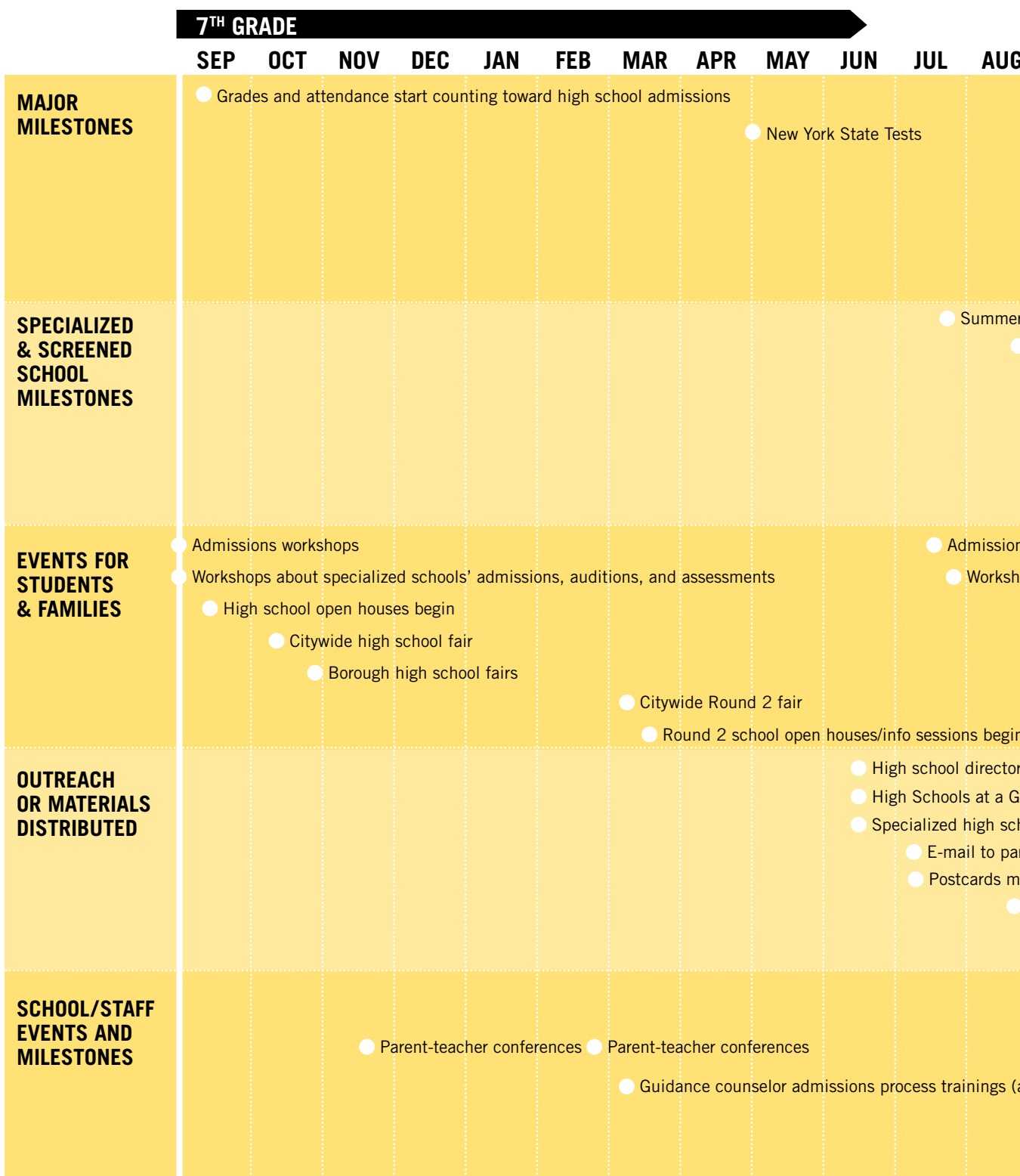
Given these high match percentages, the DOE believes that many families are satisfied with the outcomes of the high school admissions process. The agency also knows, however, that the choice experience can vary depending on students' life contexts. Further, **the value of students receiving a preferred choice depends on the assumption that students are making truly informed decisions about school selection.**^{**}

Variability in the choice experience and of the components necessary for making informed choices are topics that our design team returned to repeatedly during our fieldwork, synthesis, and recommendations stages.

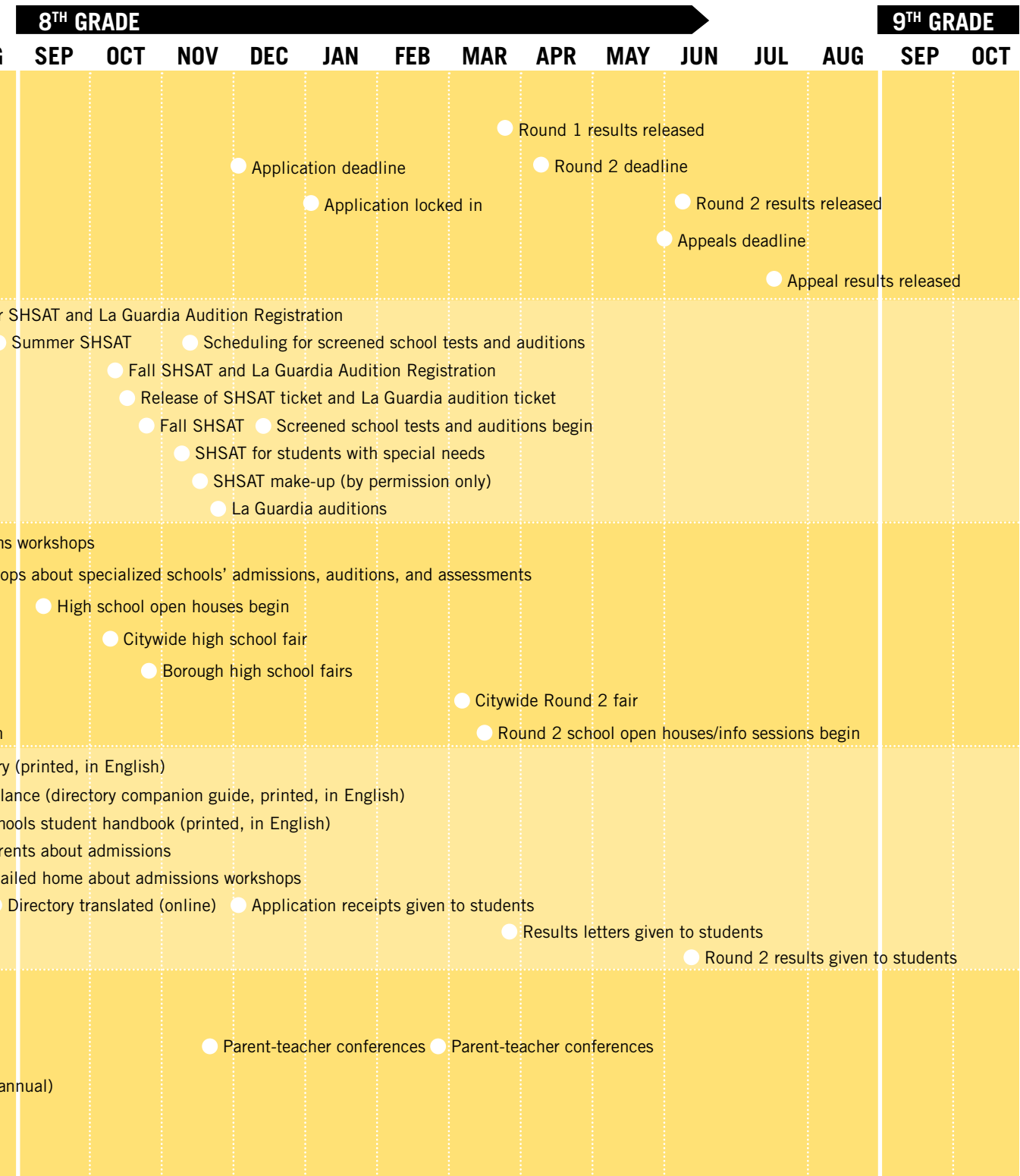
^{*} For research on the efficacy of school choice, see ["School Choice and School Performance in the New York City Public Schools - Will the Past be Prologue?"](#), Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst and Sarah Whitfield, October 2013; ["The New York City High School Match"](#), Atila Abdulkadiroglu, Parag A. Pathak, and Alvin E. Roth, 2005; and MDRC's ongoing evaluation of [New York City's small schools](#).

^{**} See ["The Demand for High School Programs in New York City"](#), Aaron M. Pallas and Carolyn Riehl, September 2007, for further discussion of decision-making and school choice.

THE ADMISSIONS TIMELINE



(SPECIFIC DATES VARY ANNUALLY PER THE DOE CALENDAR)





PROJECT FRAMING

“How invested you are in the process impacts where you end up in high school.”

– DOE POLICYMAKER

PRINCIPLES HELD BY THE DESIGN TEAM:

1. Informed choice is about more than information. It's about engagement and meaning.

2. People's experiences can be designed to be more engaging and meaningful.

**FURTHER READING ON CHOICE EXPERIENCE AND OUTCOMES:
FOUR ARTICLES AND A BOOK**

Botti, Simona & Sheena S. Iyengar. "The Dark Side of Choice: When Choice Impairs Social Welfare." *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*. 25.1 (2006): 24-38

Hibbard, Judith H., and Ellen Peters. "Supporting Informed Consumer Health Care Decisions: Data Presentation Approaches that Facilitate the Use of Information in Choice." *Annual Review of Public Health*. 24 (2003): 413-33.

Iyengar, Sheena & Kanika Agrawal. *A Better Choosing Experience*. *Strategy+Business*. 61 (2010).

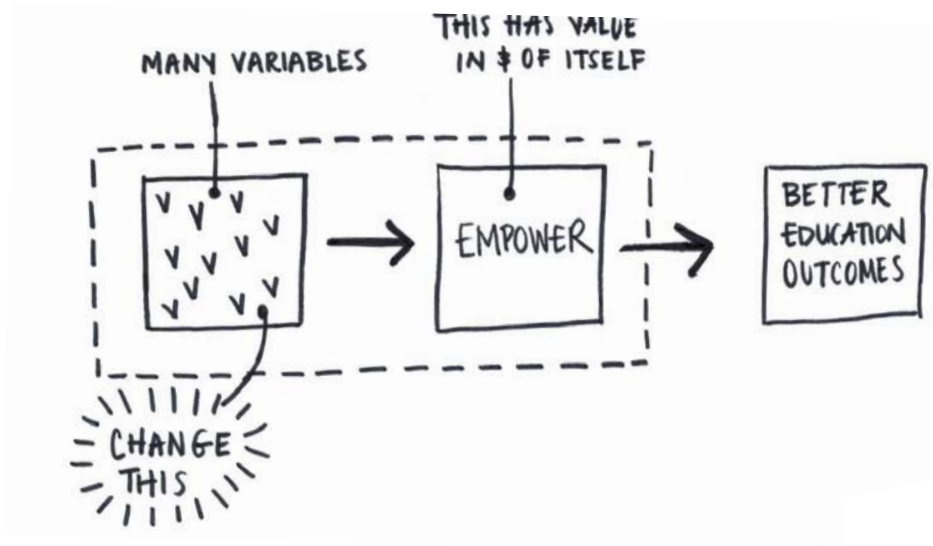
Levin, Irwin P. ; Sandra L. Schneider; and Gary J. Gaeth. "All Frames Are Not Created Equal: A Typology and Critical Analysis of Framing Effects." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 76.2 (1998): 149-188

Sunstein, Cass R. *Simpler: The Future of Government*. Simon & Schuster (2013).

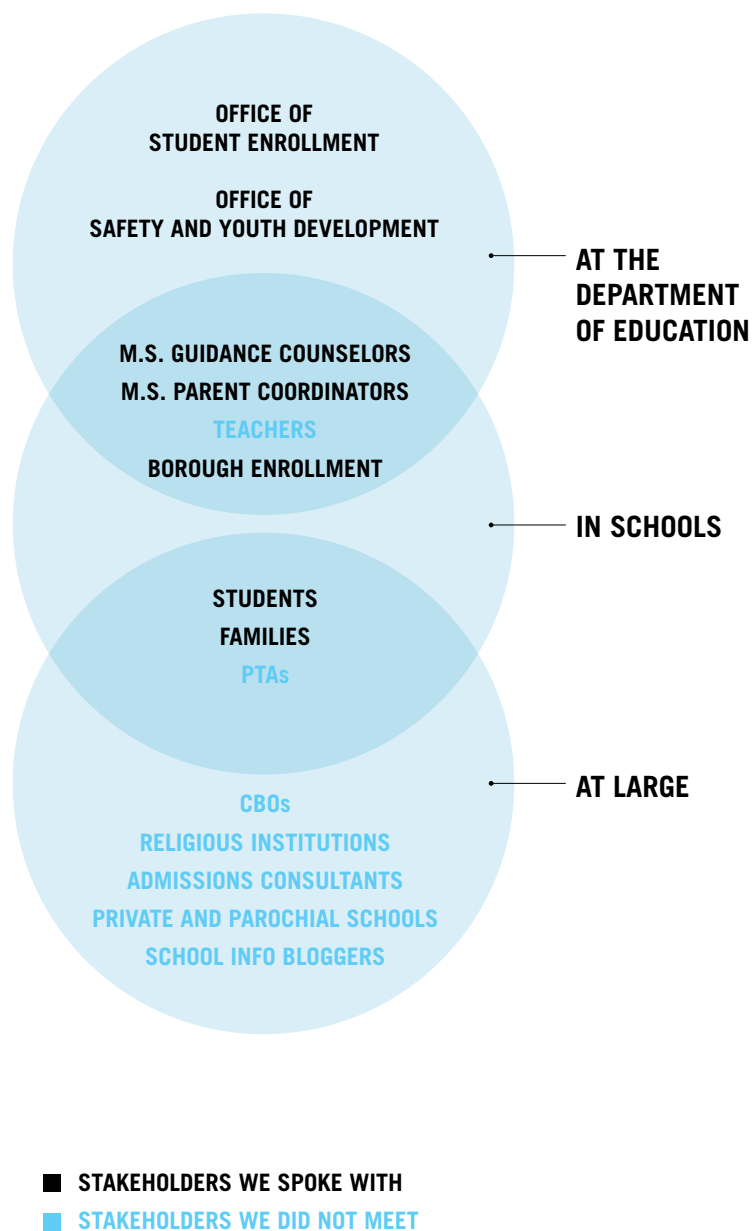
DESIGN PREMISES

Our work is premised on certain understandings about how people experience choice-making and how design can influence human experience:

- People don't just need data to make choices – they need ways of evaluating options and relating those options to their own lived experience.
- As designers, we try to identify factors that make a process feel engaging and meaningful (or not). Then we **can design ways to actively support more engagement and meaning** during the evaluation stage.
- More engagement and meaning lead to more informed choices.
- **More informed choices produce better outcomes.**

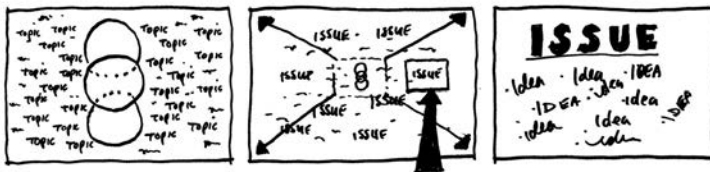


We can change the conditions under which people evaluate choices to add or detract from their confidence, competence, and empowerment.



DISCOVERY GOALS

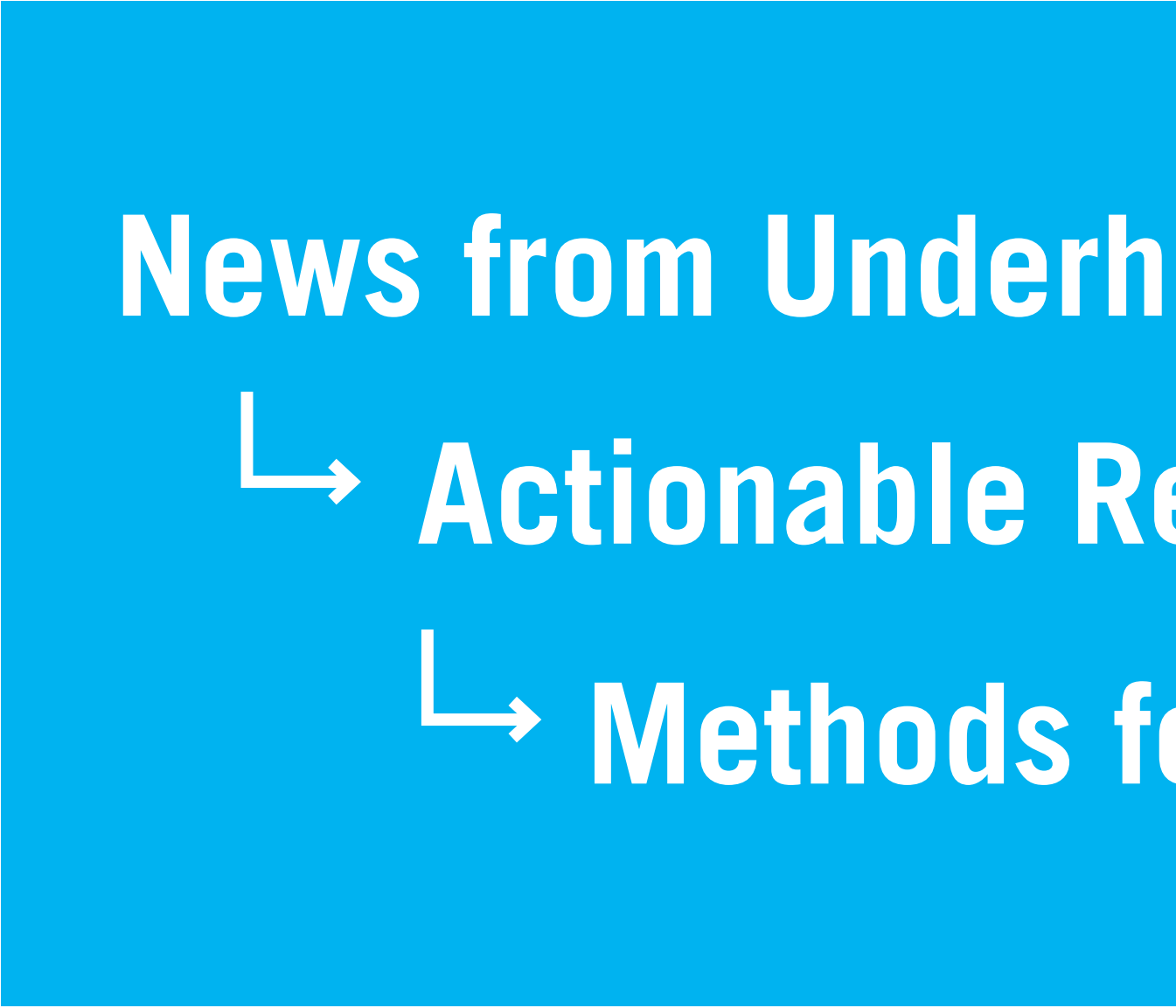
Our discovery work focused on how participants experience the high school admissions process. Specifically, our goals were 1) to **understand challenges**, as well as successes and satisfactions, in different participants' admissions journeys, 2) to **learn what resources people use** to evaluate their options and where they expected or desired different supports, and 3) to generate concepts to guide **subsequent design** of new or improved tools, communications, or interactions.



We hoped to identify key participants, plot their issues, then target the most salient for design.

DISCOVERY PROCESS

Our discovery process was developed to align with goals we heard in preliminary discussions with the managers of the admissions process, the DOE's Office of Student Enrollment: that we provide policymakers with news from participants in the process, that we deliver actionable recommendations, and that we either provide or propose methods for the implementation of those recommendations.



News from Underh

↳ Actionable Re

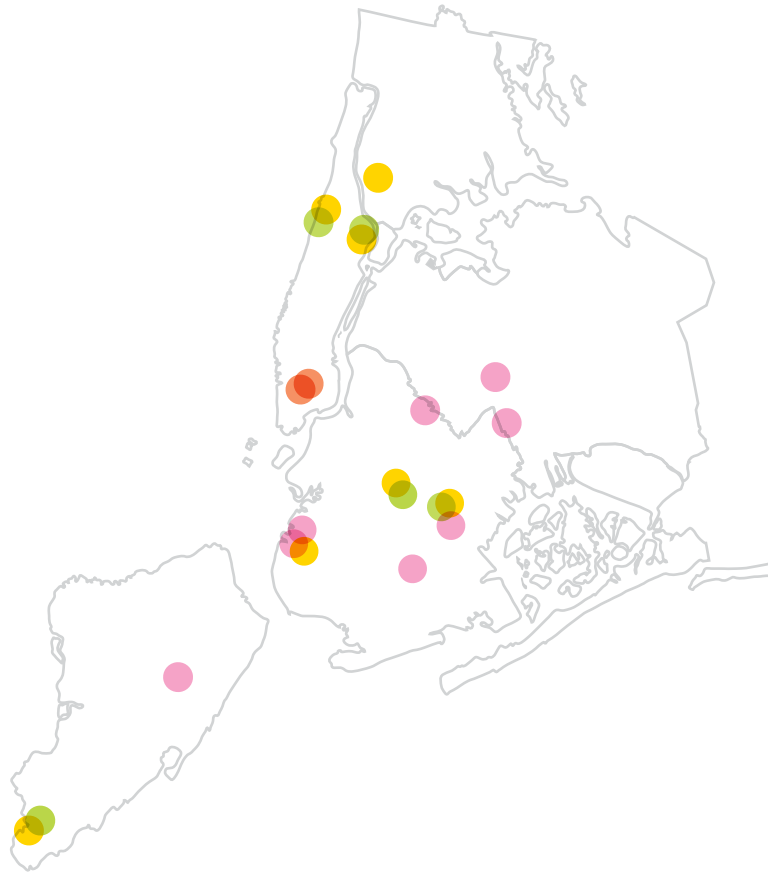
↳ Methods fo



FIELDWORK

“Having choice is great;
making the selection is not.”

– GUIDANCE COUNSELOR



● DOE LEADERSHIP

- 13 Office of Student Enrollment Staff**
- 2 Office of Safety and Youth Development**

● FIELD STAFF

- 4 Middle School Guidance Counselors**
East New York | 225 Students | 90% Free Lunch
Elmhurst | 1558 Students | 78% Free Lunch
Midwood | 373 Students | 100% Free Lunch
St. Albans | 561 Students | 49% Free Lunch
- 3 Middle School Parent Coordinators**
Forest Hills | 1035 Students | 48% Free Lunch
Sunset Park | 1365 Students | 80% Free Lunch
Sunset Park | 511 Students | 85% Free Lunch
- 1 Borough Enrollment Officer**
Serving Brooklyn & Staten Island

● STUDENTS

- 17 Rising 9th Grade Students in Schools**
South Bronx | 286 Students | 93% Free Lunch
Sunset Park | 511 Students | 85% Free Lunch
- 5 Rising 9th Grade Students at Home**

● FAMILIES

- 5 Parents of Rising 9th Graders at Home**
Bed-Stuy | Mid-Income | → Laguardia
East New York | Low-Income | → Charter School
Tottenville | Mid-Income | → Mckee Technical
UES | Mid-Income | → Frank Mccourt
UWS | High-Income | → NYC Lab School

PEOPLE WE SPOKE WITH

To structure our fieldwork, we identified a wide range of stakeholders in the admissions process and narrowed in on those most intimately involved.

We spoke with policymakers from the Office of Student Enrollment at the DOE's headquarters and visited a borough enrollment office. We walked the halls at eight economically and racially diverse middle schools, where we talked with guidance counselors, parent coordinators, and 8th graders who were about to graduate. We also met with five families at home, to get a sense of how parents and children interact around admissions.

Our conversations centered on the needs, hopes, and reactions that people had throughout their experience with high school admissions. With families, we observed whether they entered the process early in 6th grade or came late to the process in 8th grade. To meet our goal of representing diverse voices, we met with students who had special needs, who were from English-language learning homes, and who came from low-income backgrounds. Ultimately we talked with more than four-dozen individuals across all five New York City boroughs.



Research fellow Bridget Monahan speaking with 8th graders in the Bronx.



“Twelve is too many.
I tell my students not
to put any high school
on that application
unless they’re absolutely
sure they want to
go there.”

– M.S. GUIDANCE COUNSELOR



We spoke with parent coordinators
and guidance counselors at
seven schools in Queens and Brooklyn.





“We visited 10 schools — that gave us a lot of good perspective.”

– **MOTHER OF 8TH GRADER**

To better understand how students felt about the admissions process, we used associative card games when meeting with 8th graders in Brooklyn and the Bronx.

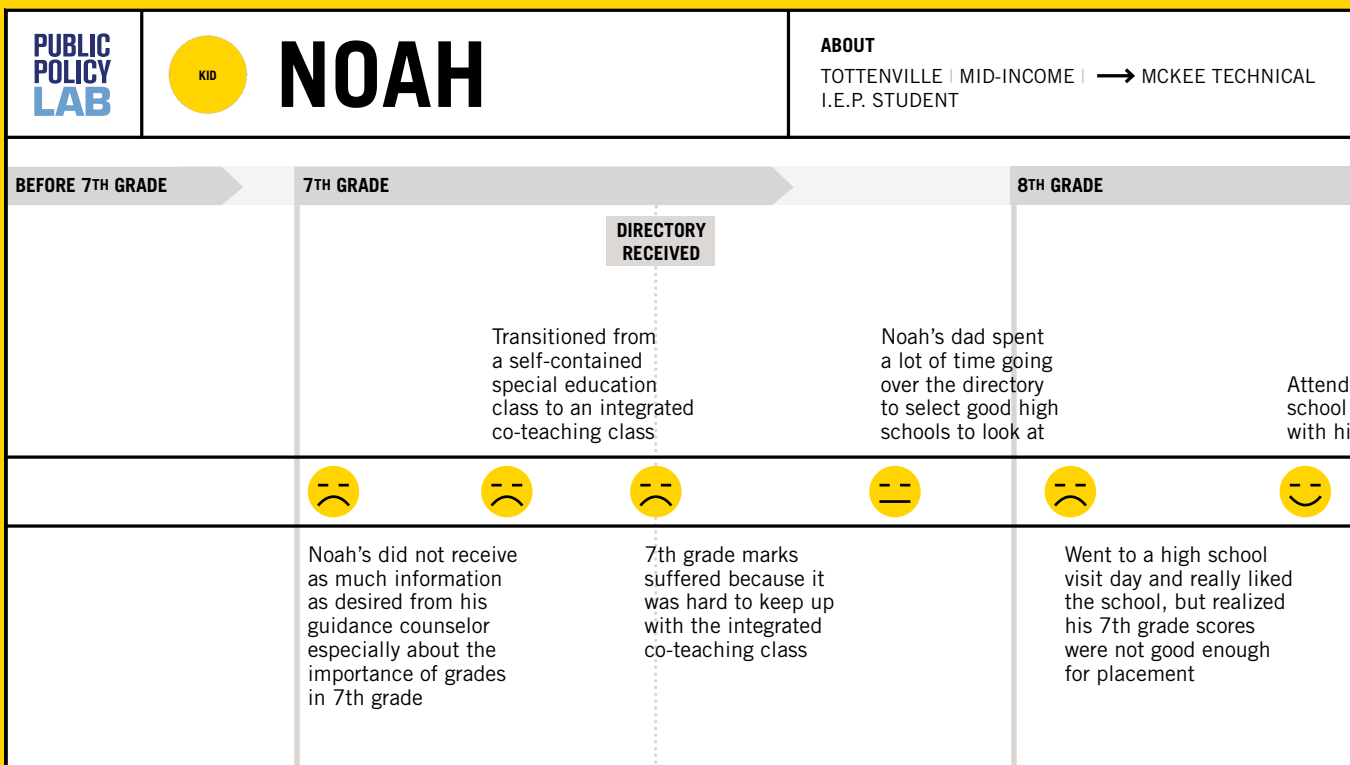
“I think I put eight schools on the application. But I really only researched and knew about the first three.”

– **8TH GRADE STUDENT**



KID STORY: NOAH

Noah is from a middle-income home on Staten Island and has an Individualized Educational Program (IEP). Noah's parents are divorced, and from what he told us, the parental advice he received during the admissions process was sometimes contradictory. Noah's dad acted as an involved project manager, but Noah believes he could have received better support from his guidance counselor, particularly around how he needed to perform academically in order to be eligible for the most selective schools. When Noah transitioned from a special education class to a general education class in 7th grade, his grades suffered; **neither he nor his father were aware that his 7th grade performance could affect his high school choices.** While Noah was not eligible to apply for the school he liked most, he was ultimately happy with his other choices and is looking forward to high school.



Names of students, parents, and guidance counselors have been changed.

"I never heard anything about high school in 7th grade."

"My dad told me to think about high school, but I live with my mom, and she wasn't focused on it, so I didn't think about it until I had to."

"After I visited a high school with an awesome program I really wanted to go to, I realized I had f#\$@ed myself in 7th grade."

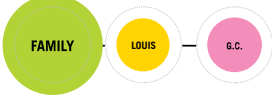
	PARTICIPATION	TYPES OF EXPERIENCES		
		 POSITIVE	 MIXED	 CHALLENGING
	9TH GRADE			
	APPLICATION DEADLINE	ROUND 1 RESULTS	ROUND 2 RESULTS	APPEAL RESULTS
ed many fairs s dad		On admissions day, Noah learned he was placed at his third choice and he was happy about it		
				
	Selected five school that he liked for different reasons and listed them in order or preference on the application			Noah is look forward to high school and making new friends

	 ALBERT	ABOUT FATHER OF NOAH → MCKEE TECHNICAL LIVES IN TOTTEVILLE MID-INCOME
BEFORE 7TH GRADE	7TH GRADE	8TH GRADE
Unable to impact son's performance in part because son lives with his mother	DIRECTORY RECEIVED Did not look through directory	Attended G.C.'s parent info session Attended school open houses
    		  
Heard from friend that 7th grade performance was important	Unaware of how 7th grade switch to CTT classes could impact 7th grade performance Received no information from G.C. emphasizing the importance of 7th grade performance	Attended borough fair

	 MARTIN	ABOUT FATHER OF LOUIS → LAB LIVES IN U.E.S. HIGH-INCOME
BEFORE 7TH GRADE	7TH GRADE	8TH GRADE
	DIRECTORY RECEIVED Read through directory	Attended parent workshop Made school visits
	 	  
Spoke to friends about high schools, admission process	Parent gossip leaves him thinking the process is like an arms race	Attended borough fair

Names of students, parents, and guidance counselors have been changed.

	PARTICIPATION 	TYPES OF EXPERIENCES  POSITIVE  MIXED  CHALLENGING				
		9TH GRADE				
APPLICATION DEADLINE	ROUND 1 RESULTS	ROUND 2 RESULTS	APPEAL RESULTS			
						
Was glad to have limited Staten Island choices, submitted application	Happy with son receiving his #3 choice					

	PARTICIPATION 	TYPES OF EXPERIENCES  POSITIVE  MIXED  CHALLENGING				
		9TH GRADE				
APPLICATION DEADLINE	ROUND 1 RESULTS	ROUND 2 RESULTS	APPEAL RESULTS			
						
Filled out application for son	Proud of son for getting #2 choice		Found out son didn't want #1 choice			

KID STORY: REGINA

Regina is a student from the South Bronx with an Individualized Educational Program (IEP), indicating that she’s eligible for special education services. She told us that her parents weren’t really involved in the admissions process, and that she felt like she received limited help from her middle school guidance counselor. She picked schools that had dance programs, and she got into one of her choices. However, when her mom found out that the school was in the Bronx, she wouldn’t let Regina attend. Regina’s mom encouraged her apply to charter schools, but she did not get into one. When we spoke to her, the day before her 8th grade graduation, she was anxiously trying to track down her guidance counselor to find out what she could do to find a high school to attend. She didn’t want to drop out.

PUBLIC POLICY LAB KID REGINA		ABOUT SOUTH BRONX LOW-INCOME → HIGH SCHOOL UNDETERMINED I.E.P. STUDENT	
BEFORE 7TH GRADE	7TH GRADE		8TH GRADE
	DIRECTORY RECEIVED		Worked very hard to prepare for tests with teachers
	☹️		😊 ☹️
	Went through the directory with brother, looked for HS with dance program, but he didn't have authority to approve her choices		Met with GC, felt they could have been more helpful

Names of students, parents, and guidance counselors have been changed.

"I got into a school with a ballet program and was excited about it, but my mom found out it was in the Bronx and told me I couldn't go."

"I want to work with my guidance counselor to get into another school, but when I go to talk to her, but I have a hard time finding her."

"I hope I'm placed somewhere by the end of summer so I don't have to drop out."

TERMINED	PARTICIPATION	TYPES OF EXPERIENCES			
		POSITIVE MIXED CHALLENGING			
9TH GRADE					
APPLICATION DEADLINE	ROUND 1 RESULTS	ROUND 2 RESULTS	APPEAL RESULTS		
Found schools with ballet programs she wanted to attend	Was accepted to school but when parents found out the location they wouldn't let her go	Met with GC, felt they could have been more helpful in second round	Talking to dance teacher about where she could go to HS, but dance teacher not in position to get her placed		Not sure where she is going to HS, worried about dropping out

	 KYLE	ABOUT SOUTH BRONX LOW-INCOME → BRONX SCIENCE BASKETBALL PLAYER
BEFORE 7TH GRADE	7TH GRADE	8TH GRADE
	DIRECTORY RECEIVED	Too and
		  
	Went through directory with parents their guidance didn't help him select schools	Lost friends because he wouldn't apply to same school as them Info on school websites was different than info in Directory, which was confusing

	KID AALIYAH	ABOUT SOUTH BRONX LOW-INCOME → DISCOVERY DEALS WITH BULLYING
BEFORE 7TH GRADE	7TH GRADE	8TH GRADE
	DIRECTORY RECEIVED	Visited schools in Manhattan Talked to friends, th were not
		  
	Didn't understand why HS prep was happening	Auditioned for La Guardia, did not pass

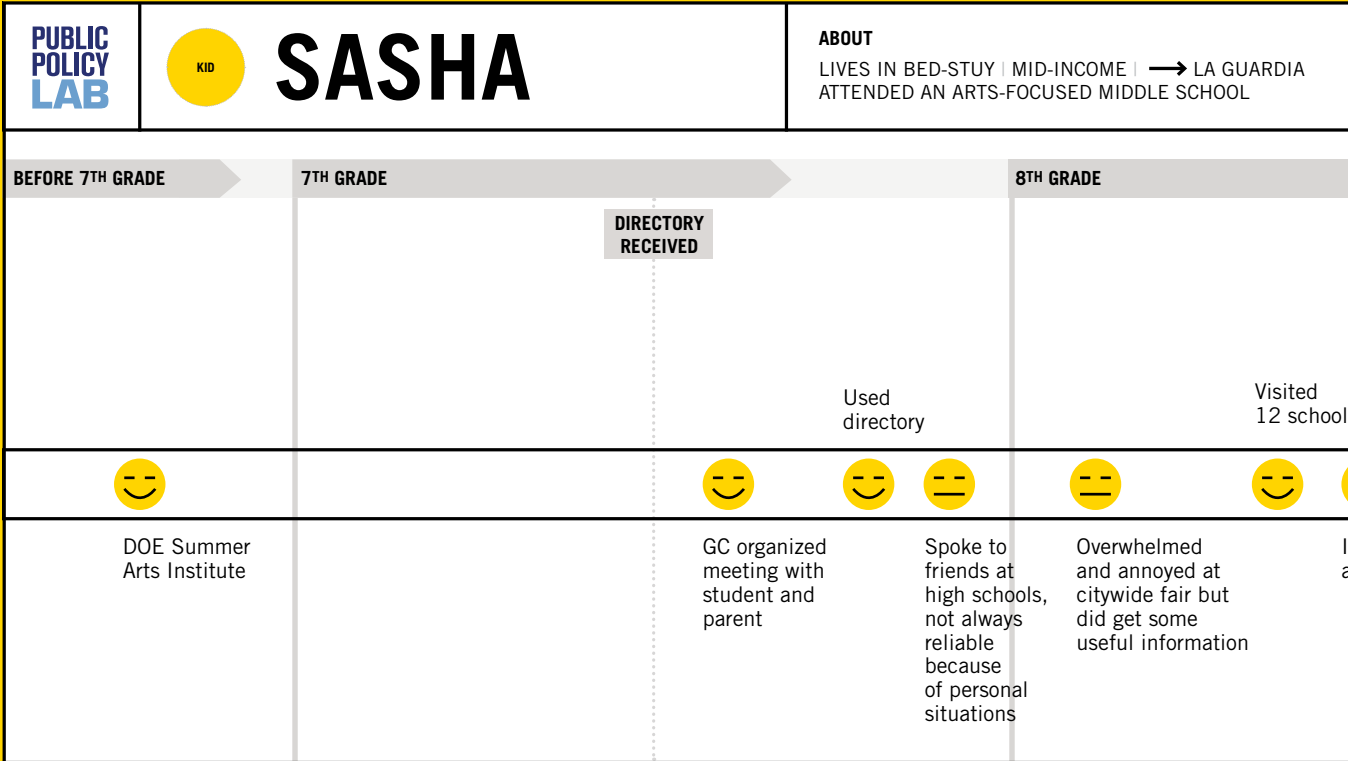
Names of students, parents, and guidance counselors have been changed.

					PARTICIPATION FAMILY Kyle G.C.		TYPES OF EXPERIENCES 😊 POSITIVE 😐 MIXED 😞 CHALLENGING	
					9TH GRADE			
					APPLICATION DEADLINE	ROUND 1 RESULTS	ROUND 2 RESULTS	APPEAL RESULTS
ok SHSAT d did well						Accepted to Bronx Science		
					😐	😐	😐	
Felt that the GC could have offered more support							Went to orientation, felt overwhelmed, worried about HS	

					PARTICIPATION FAMILY AALIYAH KC		TYPES OF EXPERIENCES 😊 POSITIVE 😐 MIXED 😞 CHALLENGING	
					9TH GRADE			
					APPLICATION DEADLINE	ROUND 1 RESULTS	ROUND 2 RESULTS	APPEAL RESULTS
ney helpful						Did not get in to first choice school		
					😊	😐	😐	
Sought guidance from teachers she trusted							Researched school she was accepted to, realized it's a good fit for her interests	

KID STORY: SASHA

Sasha lives in Bed-Stuy with her parents and two younger siblings in a middle-income home. Both Sasha and her mom placed a lot of importance in Sasha feeling confident about all of her school choices. Sasha’s mom hustled to get Sasha to auditions, open houses, and workshops; she described the admissions process as a full-time job. Sasha’s middle school guidance counselor was actively involved throughout the process, particularly early on. Sasha listed Beacon as her top choice, and didn’t get in; she did receive a seat at La Guardia, a specialized arts school that’s well-regarded and highly selective. Even still, she was so emotionally invested in her number-one choice that she found herself sobbing on results day.



Names of students, parents, and guidance counselors have been changed.

“My guidance counselor was amazing. He spoke to both of us and convinced my mom not to push choices I wasn’t excited about.”

“My mom says the most important thing is to know your kid. She knows I want to be an artist.”

“I listed 8 schools. Beacon was my #1. When I saw that I didn’t get in, I started crying so hard, the school called my mom.”

 PARTICIPATION FAMILY SASHA G.C. TYPES OF EXPERIENCES POSITIVE MIXED CHALLENGING				
APPLICATION DEADLINE ROUND 1 RESULTS ROUND 2 RESULTS APPEAL RESULTS				9TH GRADE
Submitted application				
Interviews at schools		Sad about results		Happy with school

	 BETH	ABOUT I.S. 381 BROOKLYN GRADE C SCHOOL 15 YEARS EXPERIENCE AS G.C.
BEFORE 7TH GRADE	7TH GRADE	8TH GRADE
	DIRECTORY RECEIVED	Has a single contact at OSE who answers her questions Meets with students about choices at their request
		    
Holds 6th grade orientation to cover time management and study skills with an eye toward H.S. requirements	Holds sessions to remind 7th graders about importance of grades and attendance; to remind 8th graders about open houses. Shares 8th grade info with 7th graders	Assigned summer homework: make a list of schools and criteria Orientation for families about admissions process– not very well attended Attends open houses for new schools; receives flyers for schools, passes info to students

	 MADELINE	ABOUT WALTER CROWLEY QUEENS GRADE A SCHOOL 17 YEARS EXPERIENCE AS G.C.
BEFORE 7TH GRADE	7TH GRADE	8TH GRADE
	DIRECTORY RECEIVED	For questions, relies on a single good contact at Student Support Services Holds parent workshops about admissions, but attendance is low
	 	  
	Assigns summer homework: list of schools & prompts about choice criteria	Holds individual meetings with 8th graders to discuss choices Gives student questions to answer at school fair

Names of students, parents, and guidance counselors have been changed.

				TYPES OF EXPERIENCES  POSITIVE  MIXED  CHALLENGING
				9TH GRADE
APPLICATION DEADLINE	ROUND 1 RESULTS	ROUND 2 RESULTS	APPEAL RESULTS	
Reviews every application, calls parents with questions		Helps students make a plan for Round 2		
 	 			
en s, ers on	Assigns admissions deadline a week before the application is due	Counsels students around results		

		TYPES OF EXPERIENCES		
		 POSITIVE	 MIXED	 CHALLENGING
				9TH GRADE
APPLICATION DEADLINE	ROUND 1 RESULTS	ROUND 2 RESULTS	APPEAL RESULTS	
Spends her winter break entering data into SEMS				
				
nts o ask irs	Feels badly for students she feels are unjustly overlooked for their top choices			Wishes she knew how students do in high school, both for relationships and for recommendations



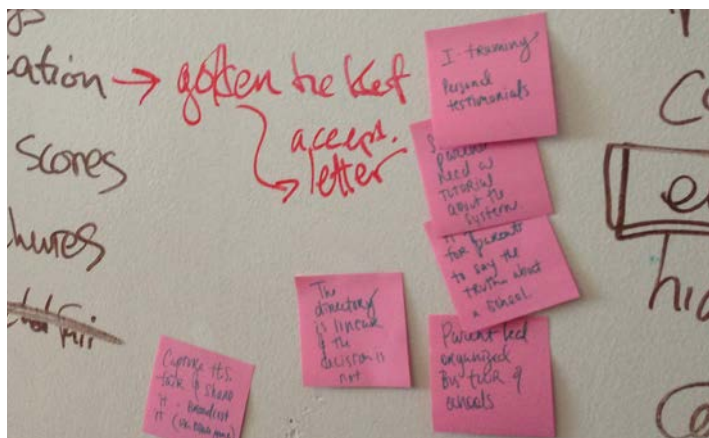
WHAT WE HEARD

“The more your kid knows about herself, the easier it is to choose.”

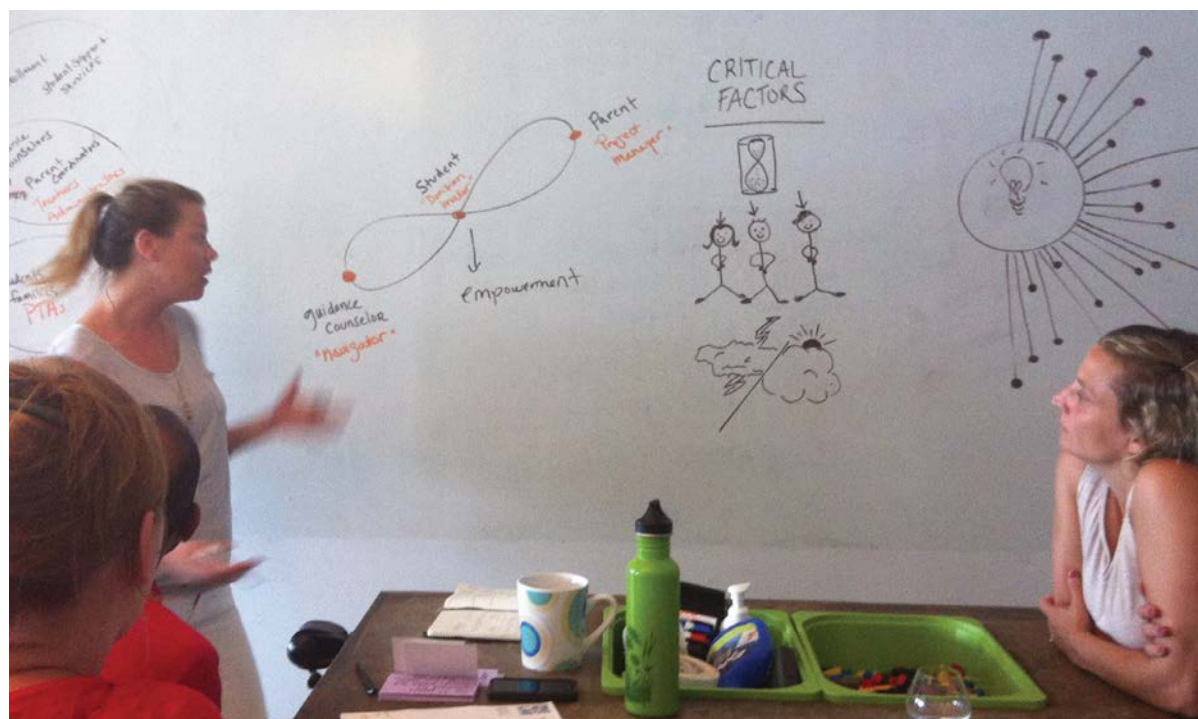
– MOTHER OF 8TH GRADER

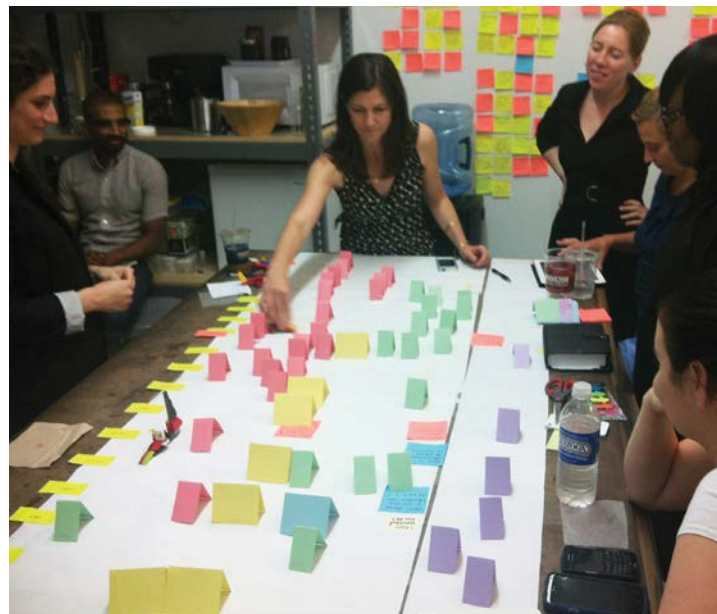
“It was too much information, too much to take in. It’s boring and I stopped trying to care about it.”

– 8TH GRADER



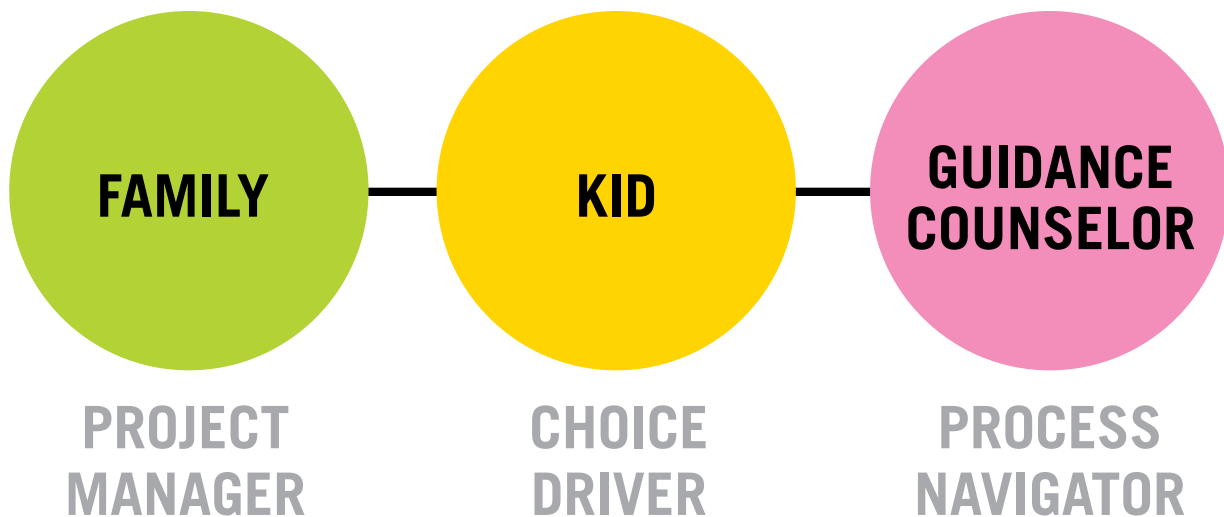
After fieldwork, our team sorted through notes from over 50 hours of conversations, looking for key ideas.





We built a physical representation of the admissions timeline, to help ourselves understand the process.





We found that ideally there's a loop of information and conversation flowing between students, parents, and counselors.

KEY PARTICIPANTS AND ROLES

Our conversations confirmed that (in the current process) the student, their family, and their guidance counselor are the key participants in evaluating options and making choices. We observed that the best decision-making processes are student-centered, with a family member and guidance counselor assisting a student with evaluation and school selection. In a student-centered process, each participant has a role:

- Students are the choice-drivers, applying to high schools based on their sense of who they are and what they want to become.
- Family members (usually a parent or grandparent, but sometimes a sibling, uncle, or cousin) serve as project managers, managing time and deadlines.
- Guidance counselors act as process navigators, leading both family and student through the requirements of the admissions system and creating pathways around obstacles.

“My daughter and I spoke to a lot of people. More than anything, we spoke to each other.”

– **MOTHER OF 8TH GRADER**

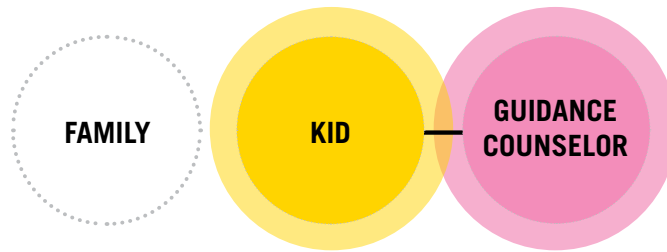
“How do I explain to these kids why they didn’t get into the schools they were qualified for? I don’t know how algorithms work.”

– **M.S. GUIDANCE COUNSELOR**

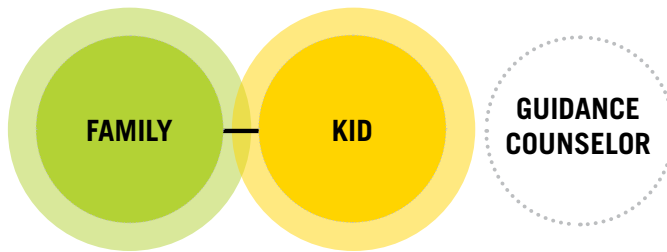
“You go to your friends for information about schools last. Your friends [are going to] change a lot of times.”

– **8TH GRADER**

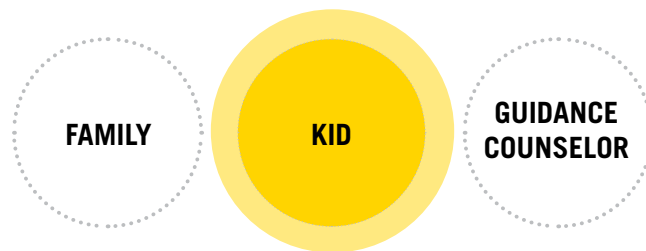
FUNCTIONAL STATE



FUNCTIONAL STATE



WEAK STATE



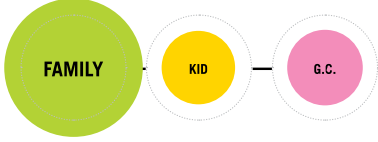
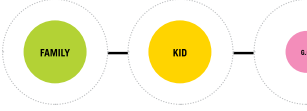
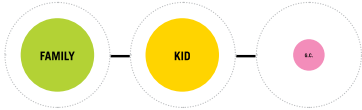
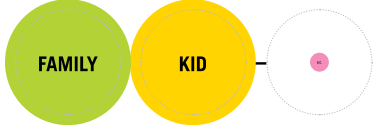
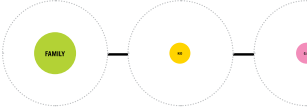
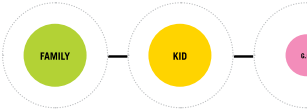
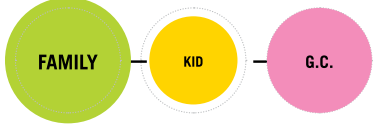
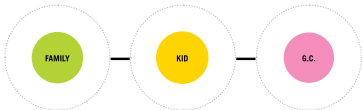
ROLE BALANCING

Optimally, all three key participants are engaged in carrying out a meaningful evaluation of a student's school options. If paired with just a family member or a guidance counselor, a student can still experience a functional evaluation process, although both participants will carry a heavier load. However, our conversations suggested that **if the student is left alone to evaluate their school options, they're unlikely to make truly informed choices.**

“We’re forced to rely on turnkey information. But we know that each family has different expectations and a different set of circumstances.”

– DOE STAFF MEMBER

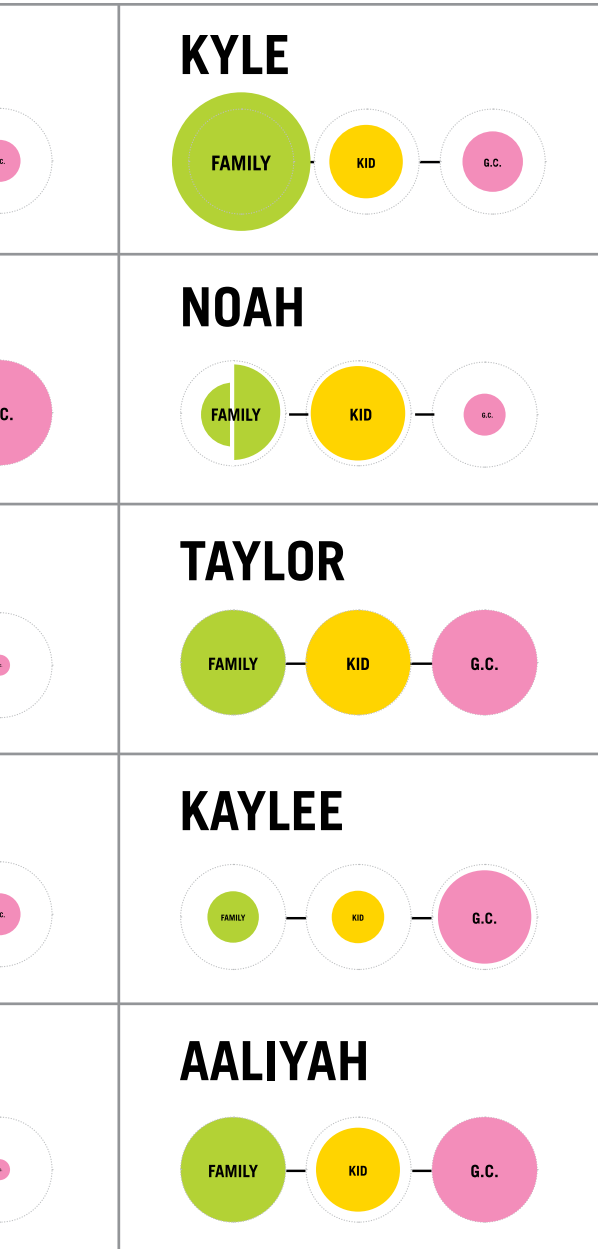
STUDENTS

REGINA 	LOUIS 	BRITNEY 
AMBER 	ARIANNA 	JEFF 
HANNAH 	JAMES 	RHONDA 
LEVI 	SASHA 	JAXSON 
SIYED 	ZOEY 	GRANT 

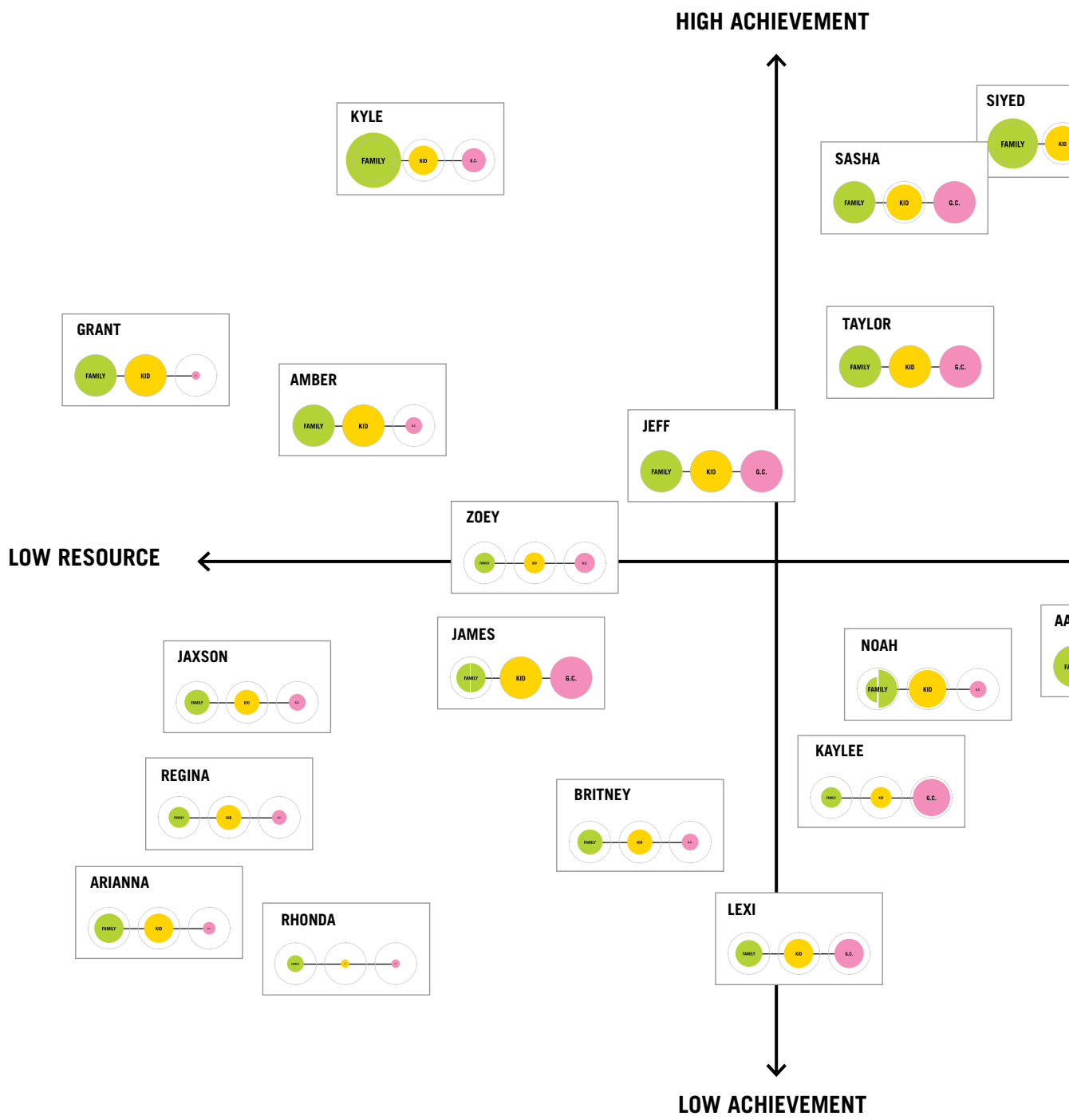
Names of students, parents, and guidance counselors have been changed.

MANY CHOICE EXPERIENCES

We mapped the participant roles for each student we spoke with, turning up many different variations in how families, kids, and their guidance counselors engage in the process.



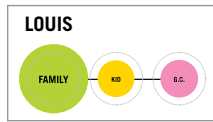
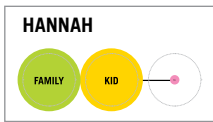
Participants struggled to find personal relevance amidst the superabundance of admissions deadlines and data.



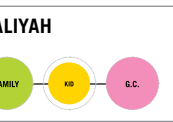
Names of students, parents, and guidance counselors have been changed.

MANY CHOICE CONTEXTS

Individual choice processes are occurring in many different contexts. Some processes occur in environments with lots of supports and opportunity, some less so.



→ HIGH RESOURCE



COMMON NEEDS

We identified four needs that all key participants share – things they require so that they can make meaningful choices for themselves or the children they guide. These needs apply equally to students, families, and guidance counselors, to low and high achieving participants, and to those with extensive resources (time, income, social capital, etc.) or limited resources.

1

Optimized Use of Available Time

3

First-Person School Experiences

CRITICAL FACTORS



Aspects of time, trustworthy personal experience, and emotional meaning surfaced repeatedly.

2

Clearer Visions of the Future

4

Balance of Facts and Feelings

COMMON NEED 1

Optimized Use of Available Time

The admissions process can seem overwhelming. Families and school staff reinforced the need for clear, simple tasks for each stage of the admissions process – so whether they begin thinking about high school when in 6th grade or never consider the process until 8th grade, they know what explicit steps to complete right now in order to have the best choosing experience.

COMMON NEED 2

Clearer Visions of the Future

It's hard for anyone to imagine where or who they might want to be in four years. To make school choices with the best long-term outcomes, middle-school students (and the adults who guide them) need to visualize their high school or adult selves and the multiple possible futures that could await them.

COMMON NEED 3

First-Person School Experiences

To simplify the school evaluation process and make it feel more personally relevant, all families and middle school staff need access to first-person school tours, reports, or reviews – either through in-person visits or by hearing about other people’s direct personal experiences.

COMMON NEED 4

Balance of Facts and Feelings

Choosing where to attend for the next four years requires a tricky calculus of rational assessment (of school performance, travel distance, a student's admissions chances, etc.) and gut instinct (about 'fit' between school and student, social and cultural context, etc.). Families and staff need guidance around how to make good decisions that respect and balance both deliberative and emotional aspects of the process.

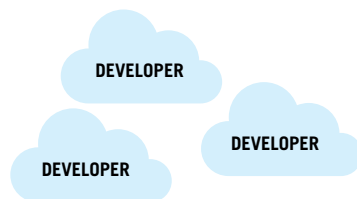


ACTION ITEMS

“I’d like it to feel more like an adventure – maybe it’s a little scary, but exciting.”

– DOE POLICYMAKER

+ Families need to have more than one top choice, so they're not so fixated on a single outcome



DESIGN BY DEVELOPERS



DESIGN WITH STAKEHOLDERS

NEXT STEPS

We used the needs identified during our fieldwork to create a series of prompts for design action, featured on the following pages. These prompts spring from the stories people told us. But they're distilled and refined, with an eye to feasibility and relevance.

The prompts are ideas that we think should be explored through the mechanism of design. The prompts are intended to generate feasible responses — things that can actually be implemented for use by families, kids, and guidance counselors. What kinds of things? Communications, tools, or services — many of which can build upon or complement all the great work the DOE already does.

The DOE can engage with a variety of partners in designing around these prompts. Here we've specifically considered partnerships with technology developers, as well as with stakeholders directly through co-design processes.

PROMPTS FOR DESIGN ACTION



Each prompt is designed to spark multiple responses — from apps and websites to communications and services.

+ Families need help managing the admissions process, so they can do a better job facilitating their kid's choice

+ Guidance counselors should stay with a group of kids through middle school, so they can offer more personalized high school recommendations

+ Tweens should get help thinking about a future that is more than a week or two away, so they can make better long-term decisions

+ Middle school guidance counselors want more feedback on how their students do and feel in high school, so they can better guide current students

+ Families who are new to the process need more support, so the eldest kid doesn't have an especially bad experience

+ Kids with split families need additional support, so they can handle any conflicting advice about the process

+ Kids need a push to investigate schools outside their comfort zone, so they don't miss good options

+ 7th graders need to understand that they are already in the process, so they can adjust their behavior

+ Families need information about seat availability, 12:1:1 enrollment, and details of admissions priorities, to be better advocates for their kids

PROMPTS FOR DESIGN ACTION

+ Good schools in low-income areas need additional help with marketing, so they can overcome negative perceptions

+ Families listen to multiple sources, so they need ways to sort truth from fiction

+ Middle school guidance counselors need to visit high schools in person, so they can tell their students about them

+ Callers to P311 should get feedback, so they know their concern is being addressed

+ Kids need first-hand experiences of high schools, so they can feel which are the right personal fit

+ Kids need to process their admissions results in private, so they don't experience school outcomes in a stressful group context

+ High school fairs should be more digestible, so they don't overwhelm and disappoint families

+ Kids need the process broken into small chunks, so they don't get bored, bogged down, or confused by the long timeline

+ Families need to consider the actual offerings of schools near them, so they don't dismiss a school just because of neighborhood biases

+ G.C.s and borough enrollment officers want stronger connections to each other and to Tweed, so they can feel in the loop

+ Participants need a process that engages with their personal circumstances, so their humanity isn't 'disappeared' into data

+ Families need to have more than one top choice, so they're not so fixated on a single outcome

PROMPTS FOR DESIGN ACTION

+ Guidance counselors need more transparency and clarity around admissions priorities and placement, so they can better set expectations

+ Kids and parents need to grasp the process milestones so they can make the best use of the time left before the application is due

+ Participants should understand the admissions priorities better, so they can use their time to investigate relevant choices

+ Families need events with flexible hours, so they can attend without missing work

+ Kids and parents need to talk at home about choice priorities and deadlines, so parents can help kids handle the process

+ Kids should get personalized default lists, so they can focus on likely schools – or explore overlooked options

+ Kids should be guided on a process of self-discovery, so they can make school choices that enhance their inner selves

+ Guidance counselors need first-hand experiences of high schools, so they can feel which are the right fit for kids

+ Families need to imagine multiple positive future scenarios, so they don't get stuck on a single top choice

+ Guidance counselors need to understand kids' strengths and weaknesses, so they can make informed high school recommendations

+ Participants want sorting tools, so they can judge if schools match their preferences

+ Kids need a consistent advisor throughout middle school, so they can get high school recommendations from someone they trust

KID

PROBLEM...

"I am a tween."

"I am figuring myself out."

"I procrastinate."

"I don't have too many informed support systems."

"I think I get to choose whatever high school I want."

I NEED TOOLS TO...

discover myself, understand and investigate my choices, use my time well and help me imagine my possible future, so I can select high schools that will fit me well socially and academically and prepare me for life as an engaged adult.

FAMILY

PROBLEM...

"We are new to New York."

"I don't have time to attend high school fairs."

"My child's guidance counselor is overwhelmed and doesn't have time to help."

"Every day my child's interest changes."

"There are so many choices I don't know where to start."

I NEED TOOLS TO...

help me keep track of important deadlines, know where my child is in the process, help her envision possible futures, find resources I can trust, and navigate the process so I can help my child select schools that will support her socially and academically.

G.C.

PROBLEM...

"I'm new on my job."

"I'm responsible for over 1,000 students."

"I don't understand how the process works."

"I don't know how things turn out for the kids I advise."

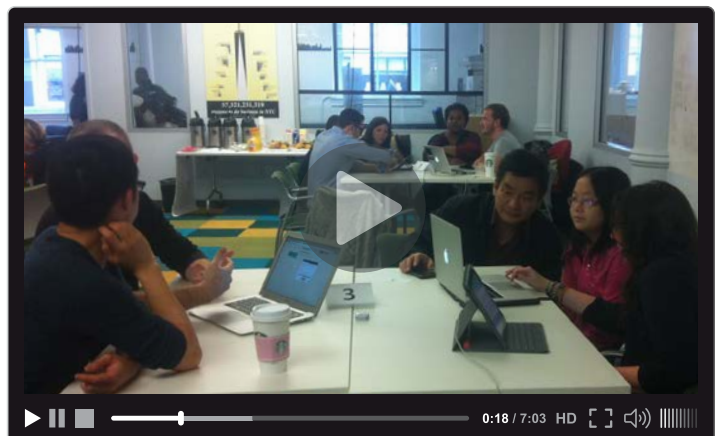
I NEED TOOLS TO...

help me keep track of high-risk kids; experience schools first-hand, so I can help my students pick good choices; understand admissions methods and track open seats; know how my middle school students do in high school, so I can better advise my next class of kids.

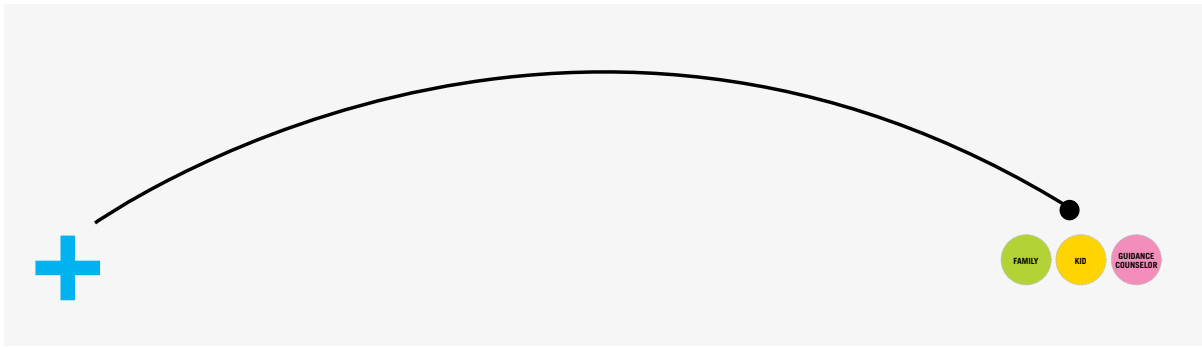
SOFTWARE CHALLENGE

In the fall of 2013, building on the work described in this document, the Office of Innovation led six software developers through the first School Choice Design Challenge (SCDC) to create prototypes of new digital tools for enhancing the high school admissions experience.

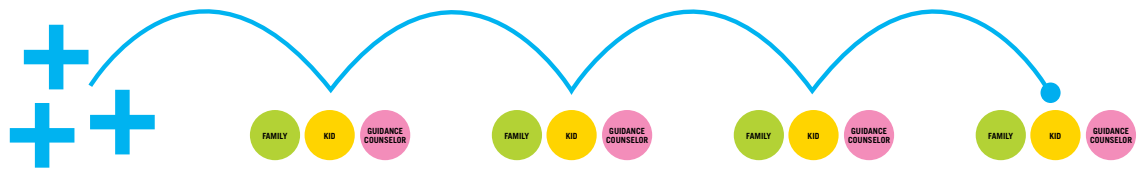
The participating developers – all of whom had prior experience developing tools that assist with college-finding, comparison-shopping, data visualization, etc. – used their expertise to rapidly design and test a range of web and mobile applications that aim to improve the evaluation of high school options. Through eight weeks of participatory design research, panels, and user feedback sessions with students and families, SCDC startups deepened their understanding of the challenge, validated their ideas, and pivoted their products to enhance the choice experience. The challenge culminated in the presentation demo products from each developer.



A short film, commissioned by the Public Policy Lab and the Office of Innovation, describes the goals and outcomes of the user-centered design process and the School Choice Design Challenge.



CONVENTIONAL PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION



ITERATIVE PROTOTYPING & EVALUATION

CO-DESIGN WITH STAKEHOLDERS

What do we mean when we say co-design? A conventional design process might start with a prompt inspired by user research, but development of a solution remains pretty hermetic until it's complete, when the product or program is implemented with the people it's meant to serve.

A co-design process is one in which the intended users of a service play a key and repeated role, participating in iterative prototyping and evaluation that helps to tailor responses to their actual needs.

We expect that this approach may give rise to variegated and locally adapted responses. We would recommend, nonetheless, that all responses – even those tailored to meet the needs of, say, English-language learners, or families going through the process the first time – should be designed to be fully accessible to all process participants, serving DOE's commitment to equity.

We recommend that co-design labs be held with kids, families, and guidance counselors in their local schools, at community institutions, or at public DOE events, such as the high school fairs.



CONCEPTUAL RESPONSES

CONCEPTUAL RESPONSES

To suggest the kinds of tools, communications, and services that the design prompts might generate, we've taken a selection of the prompts and spit-balled a range of conceptual responses.



Families need events with flexible hours, so they can attend without missing work

web-stream
parent
workshops

cable channel
with mini-
documentaries
on NYC schools

outreach
materials at
grocery stores,
churches and
transit stations



Kids need to process their results in private, so they don't experience school outcomes in a stressful group context



pop-up
one-on-one
counseling lab

matched high
school calls kids
at home

multiple
results days

CONCEPTUAL RESPONSES



Tweens should get help thinking about a future more than a week or two away, so they can make better long-term decisions

predictive
life story
generator app

future scenario
worksheets

staged time
capsule
around future
aspirations



Families who are new to the process need more support, so the eldest kid doesn't have an especially bad experience

target list
for guidance
counselors of 8th
graders who are
eldest in family

robo-calls to
homes of 8th
graders who are
eldest in family

crowd-sourced
videos of families
sharing tips
and lessons



Kids and guidance counselors need first-hand experiences of high schools, so they can feel which are the right personal fit

video tours
of schools
filmed by
students

testimonials
in the
printed directory

hop-on/hop-off
bus tours of
borough schools



CONCEPTUAL RESPONSES



Participants want sorting tools, so they can judge if schools match their preferences

okcupid-style
matchmaking
website with
match and
obstacle rankings

directory
as card deck

print-on-demand
mini-directories
by theme



Middle-school guidance counselors need to visit high schools in person, so they can tell their students about them

high school fairs
just for guidance
counselors

school tours
just for guidance
counselors

ms/hs guidance
counselor mixers

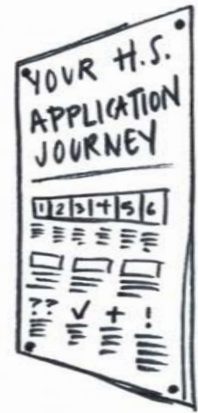


Kids need the process broken into small chunks, so they don't get bored or bogged down or confused by the long timeline

one school selection per month for a year, with ranking at the end

6th grade curriculum around choice-making

full-scale fold-out process map/poster



Families need to be excited about more than one top choice, so they're not so fixated on a single outcome

board game that spits out scenarios for different choices

application keeps rankings but groups top four, middle four and bottom four choices

testimonials about happiness despite not receiving top choice

CONCEPTUAL RESPONSES



Middle school guidance counselors want more feedback on how their students do in high school, so they can better guide current students

middle school
guidance
counselor
visiting days
at high schools

high school
reflection essays
written to middle
school guidance
counselors

guidance
counselor social
network to
connect ms & hs
guidance
counselors



Kids should get personalized default lists, so they can focus on likely schools – or explore overlooked options

pre-filled application with choices based on student/school criteria

list of reach, safety and wild card schools for each student

netflix-style "you might like" recommendations



Families need help managing the admissions process, so they can do a better job facilitating their kid's choice

sample questions about visioning for parents to ask kids

mobile counseling lab for walk-in workshops

text alerts about process milestones





ABOUT THE PROJECT

DISCOVERY

DESIGN

IMPLEMENTATION
+ EVALUATION

LEARNING +
PREPARATION

FIELDWORK

SYNTHESIS +
DOCUMENTATION

WEEK

1

WEEK

2

WEEK

3

WEEK

4

WEEK

5

WEEK

6

WEEK

7

WEEK

8

WEEK

9

130625_PPLProjectOutline.xlsx

Search in Sheet

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1											
2		Week of	WEEK 3	WEEK 4	WEEK 5	WEEK 6	WEEK 7	WEEK 8	WEEK 9		
3		June 10, 2013	June 17, 2013	June 24, 2013	July 1, 2013	July 8, 2013	July 15, 2013	July 22, 2013			
4		Day 1: AM	user-research planning & review	fieldwork findings	individual meetings with fellows to plan remaining deliverables, revise project outline	findings synthesis and conceptual responses	further findings synthesis and conceptual responses, plus presentation planning	final resenatation revisions	documentation plan review		
5		Day 1: PM	in-school fieldwork with school staff (MS guidance, parent coords; HS principals/outreach folks)	conceptual design & round robin crit with guests ABJ, Kathleen, Andrea	in-home fieldwork with families, students (recruited by PPL team, not DOE) +MULTIPLE EVENING FIELDWORK SESSIONS	invited guest: Bryan Boyer findings synthesis with guest	pre-pre-presentation crit with guests iZone crew	1 p.m.: presentation & feedback, followed by presentation debrief	documentation packaging		
6		Day 2	Thursday, June 13th	Wednesday, June 13th	Thursday, June 27th	Thursday, July 4th	Wednesday, July 10th	Thursday, July 18th	Thursday, July 25th		
7		Day 2: AM	in-school fieldwork with school staff (MS guidance, parent coords; HS principals/outreach folks)	in-school fieldwork with families, 7th- and 8th-grade students in triads	photo shoot fieldwork findings team discussion of revised project outline	holiday: remote Individual or small-team work	further findings synthesis and conceptual responses, plus presentation revisions	individual meetings with fellows, re: presentation revisions, storytelling planning	storytelling packaging revisions		
8		Day 2: PM	in-school fieldwork with school staff (MS guidance, parent coords; HS principals/outreach folks)	in-school fieldwork with families, 7th- and 8th-grade students in triads +EXTRA SESSION THURS AM FOR STATUS & FINDINGS	run-through of first ugly-duckling presentation discussion of non-presentation deliverables	holiday: remote Individual or small-team work	pre-presentation crit with guests OSE	team storytelling planning	project debriefing: what worked, what didn't		
9		Possible Deliverables,	Revised User-Research Plan, Revised Research Tools/Prompts	Research Visual Documentation & Findings, Visualizations of Current States, Preliminary Conceptual Designs	R: presentation v1 J: "the news" from interviews B: stakeholder slicing, research stats, plus help J with "the News"	R: presentation v2 J: various system/target models B: various system/target models	R: presentation v3, v4, v5, plus v1 of non-presentation assets J: TBD B: TBD	R: presentation v6 FINAL J: TBD B: TBD	R: v2 of assets for storytelling artifacts J: Artifact Product./Distrib. Plan? Project report? B: Additional Probes to Carry work forward?		
10		Possible Methods/Tools	n/a	journey maps, story-boards, on-the-spot reporting, word clouds							
11											
12											
13											
14											
15											
16											

Workflow by Week

Normal View Ready Sum=0

To make the most of our quick timeframe, we organized our work into half-day units.

PROJECT PHASING

This document represents the first phase of a user-centered design project – what we call “Discovery.”

User-centered design methods provide a means to understand peoples’ experiences and respond to them, in tangible ways. Our aim in this first phase was to learn how the school admissions process is being experienced by multiple stakeholders, then discover within those experiences the best opportunities for future design efforts.

Following a discovery phase, a typical next phase is “Design.” During this phase, the project team – policymakers, designers, and key service participants – work together to expand on the prompts identified in discovery. Typical design activities include further ideation, rapid prototyping, and testing, all carried out in multiple iterative cycles. The results of a design phase could include refined, production-ready prototypes and plans for pilot testing and evaluation.

During a final phase, “Implementation & Evaluation,” the agency takes the lead in rolling out pilots of the co-designed materials, while the design team provides design support and assistance with evaluation.



The team was fingerprinted and background-checked before being cleared to go into schools.



ABOUT THE TEAM

The **Public Policy Lab** is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. We partner with government agencies and community members to create more accessible and meaningful service experiences. We use these design projects to engage with policymakers around systems for more accountable and citizen-centered service delivery. Finally, we carry out deliberate testing and improvement of our own innovation model and publish our success and failures, to accelerate the evolution of public service design nationwide.

In 2010, the New York City Department of Education launched the **Innovation Zone** (iZone), a dedicated Office of Innovation that supports personalizing learning and accelerating college and career readiness among students. iZone sources solutions from the best and brightest minds in and outside of the education community, enabling us to influence policy and practice across New York City and around the world.

With nearly 1,700 schools, New York City offers families more choices than any other public education system in the country. The **Office of Student Enrollment** (OSE) manages admissions, enrollment, and transfers for students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12. OSE's mission is to increase access to high quality schools for all New York City students so that each student attends a school that prepares them for success in life.

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Strategist, Innovate NYC Schools

OFFICE OF STUDENT ENROLLMENT

Kathleen Brannigan,
Chief of Staff

Allison Dunn,
Director of Communications



Bryan Boyer, recently of the Helsinki Design Lab, visited us and provided feedback to the team.

Group work sessions took place at Public Policy Lab headquarters in Brooklyn and at DOE workspace in Manhattan (where we had at least one bike-room meeting).



SPECIAL THANKS

Our work on High School Admissions: Discovery for Design was possible only through the helpful contributions and generosity of many dozens of DOE staffers and New York City families. Any insights in the document come from their generously shared wisdom; all mistakes are the authors' own.

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FAMILIES & STUDENTS

We are indebted to the students and parents who shared their experiences with us. All names listed in this document have been changed to respect their privacy. We offer them our sincere thanks.

FRIENDS OF THE PPL

Thanks also to the following colleagues who provided feedback or assistance during the project.

Atomic Software
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NYC HIGH SCHOOL ADMISSIONS: UNDERSTANDING THE SCHOOL CHOICE EXPERIENCE

The [Public Policy Lab](#) formed a partnership with the [New York City Department of Education's Office of Innovation](#) and the [Office of Student Enrollment](#) to explore opportunities for improving the high school admissions experience. During the summer of 2013, we explored high school admissions through the insights of students, families, administrative staff, and policymakers.

Ultimately, we hope that the discovery process outlined in this document will inform the design of supports that assist students — particularly those from low-income and non-English-speaking families — in making more informed and confident decisions when applying to high school.



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