

School Choice or School's Choice for Early College High School Admissions

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School Choice or School's Choice for Early College High School Admissions: A Literature Review

Over the past few decades, public K-16 education has seen a vast movement centered on school performance, accountability, and centralized standards. Schools are expected to perform well and operate under similar standards. Despite this push, many school reform measures, policies, and practices directly conflict with the expectation for incremental growth in student and school performance as well as standardized policies and regulations. This is directly evident in the differing state and local education policies for alternative high school programs.

A multitude of options for students to earn college credit while in high school have developed over the past few decades. These include traditional dual enrollment programs, advanced placement, International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, and other college-transitional and transfer opportunities. The most radical on this spectrum are Early College High Schools (ECHSs), which are self-sustained high schools, dedicated to the efforts of offering college-level courses to high school students (Edmunds et al. 2020). ECHSs and community colleges or universities often partner to offer services. Longitudinal studies on the ECHS model indicate that most students who attend ECHSs are indeed obtaining college credit, and many are also able to graduate high school with an associate degree (Berger et al. 2014; Edmunds et al. 2020); however, what remains underexplored is how students get into these programs. These small high schools were designed to make higher education more accessible to

“underrepresented populations in higher education” such as ethnic minorities, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, English language learners, and first-generation college students (Berger et al, 2014). While the model has proven to be an effective reform method to offer historically marginalized students support resulting in degree completion, little is known about the specific policies, procedures, and practices that ECHS leaders and policy-makers use to recruit and select this target demographic that is historically underrepresented in higher education. This text provides a review of relevant literature on Early College High Schools and the known recruitment, selection, and admissions policies and procedures at the institutions, with a focus on North Carolina. Due to the lack of empirical research or standardization across institutions, further transparency, data collection, and research into these processes is recommended to conduct a critical policy analysis of current policies and procedures for recruiting and selecting students into these schools.

School Choice and Secondary Education Reform

One of the most significant reform measures in public education is the establishment of school choice. Lubienski (2005) maintains that twenty-first century parents and students have become consumers of education as the educational policy environment continues to increase in marketization. In this market, every child is viewed as a financial investment. In most states, including North Carolina, parents and students can choose what they deem to be the best type of education from various options, in-

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cluding traditional public high schools, magnet or vocational programs, charter schools, early and middle colleges, or private high schools sometimes with the use of vouchers (Chubb & Moe, 1990). School choice proponents assert that specialized curricula, such as those that allow students to take college courses, benefit at-risk populations (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Chubb & Moe, 1990). Others underscore that such a choice comes with a penalty as these initiatives could increase segregation by race, class, ability, and language proficiency (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Böhlmark et al., 2016; Brown & Makris, 2018; Duncheon, 2020; Frankenberg et al., 2017). For example, many parents are more likely to select schools with students from similar racial and ethnic backgrounds as their own children (Duncheon, 2020).

Delving further into school choice scholarship, parents are identified as the most prominent stakeholders who find the school choice process to be both arduous and important with an impact on both their child and their own personal identity expression and political empowerment (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Pattillo et al., 2014). Because of this, many parents employ resources such as school-choice consultants, residential relocation, and transportation, for favored school options (Phillippo et al. 2021). Hence, parents who are more educated, from higher income brackets, and who are more engaged in their child's formal education are more likely to know about and exercise the school choice options available (Duncheon, 2020).

Consequently, a phenomenon known as cream-skimming has emerged wherein students who are higher-performing and higher-income are more largely represented in choice schools (Duncheon, 2020; Jabbar, 2015). Another potential cause of this is the bottom line. Choice schools, particularly early colleges, receive ratings, interest, and state or donor funding based on completion rates. Further, various factors contribute to the demographics of choice schools. Although public, charter, early college and most other alternative high schools cannot hand-select students, each institution can alter the potential pool of applicants through their marketing strategies and location (Lubienski et al., 2009). Research on charter schools' marketing teams, for example, often send messages about race, culture, and academic achievement on their websites to signal fit in order to incentivize parents to select their institution (Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). Location is another factor

that contributes to college choice as lower-income parents may not have access to resources to transport their students to schools that are not in close proximity to their home. Other factors that could impact a student's potential to apply to a school or be selected include access to information about the schools, ability to satisfactorily complete an application or application process, as well as auxiliary requirements including but not limited to a student's academic records and testing scores or interviews (Duncheon, 2020). For schools with mandated target populations such as ECHSs, the aforementioned challenges of school choice could influence who applies to enter these schools.

The American Institute of Research has contributed some of the most comprehensive long-term studies on ECHS programs. According to AIR's national data, despite the disadvantages, in 2013, ECHSs were successfully enrolling high percentages of their target demographic— minority and low-income students (American Institutes for Research, 2013). As a testament to this, Berger et al. (2010) contended that 70% of early college students were students of color and at least 59% receive free or reduced-price lunch. Based on this data, it would seem that Early College High Schools were indeed effective in their pursuit to ensure equitable access to higher education for the designated underserved populations. However, a look at North Carolina's ECHSs demographics for racialized minorities conveyed a different account. Drawing from data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), the N.C. General Assembly reported that in the 2010-2011 school year, the racial and ethnic demographic totals for NC ECHSs were: 57.7% White, 23.6% Black, 10.8% Hispanic, 1.5% Native American, 2.6% Asian, and 3.7% two or more races ("North Carolina General Assembly Report", 2011). The 42.3% minority representation in NC ECHSs is a drastic difference from the 70% national average. Socio-economic and other background factors were not measured.

The most recent General Assembly Report documenting student demographics for Cooperative Innovative High Schools during the 2021-2022 school year were: 48% White, 19% Hispanic, 17% Black, 8% unknown, 4% Asian, 3% Multiple, and 1% American Indian/Alaskan ("Report," 2023). According to the NCDPI, Cooperative Innovative High Schools "target students who are at risk of dropping out of high school, first-generation college students,

and/or students who would benefit from accelerated learning opportunities,” (“North Carolina Department,” 2021). Examples of such schools include ECHSs, middle colleges, and other specialized high schools. Although the demographics denote an increase in participation by racialized groups since 2011, the lack of data disaggregation by school type leaves it impossible to discern ECHS demographics specifically.

ECHS Recruitment, Admissions, and Selection Process

Although general guidelines are mandated by the state of North Carolina for Early Colleges, much of the day-to-day functioning and policy-making is left to the school’s leadership, governing board, and partner institution. North Carolina statutes do not specify eligibility requirements for students seeking admission to an early college; however, it does indicate that schools should target: “(1) High school students who are at risk of dropping out of school before attaining a high school diploma. (1a) High school students with parents who did not continue education beyond high school. (2) High school students who would benefit from accelerated academic instruction” (Cooperative Innovation High School Programs). Similarly, Jobs for the Future (2022) indicates that the ECHS initiative’s commitment to serving underrepresented students is adapted into the governance policies of ECHSs at the state and district levels. Yet, Duncheon (2020) maintains that ECHS admission practices and target groups often vary greatly across localities. The scant literature available on the recruitment processes of these institutions indicates that ECHSs distribute materials to middle schools for recruitment (Muñoz et al., 2014). Subsequently, school counselors are able to disseminate information to parents and students (Fischetti et al., 2011).

In regard to selection, many ECHSs utilize a lottery system (Edmunds et al., 2012; North, 2011; Song & Zeiser, 2019; TEA, 2020). Before students are entered into the lottery, oftentimes, institutions utilize a screening process to determine eligibility. This process can vary between schools (Edmunds et al. 2020). While some districts have academic requirements for enrollment, others are prohibited from using academic records for enrollment purposes (TEA, 2020). It is assumed that this may be because often a student’s previous academic records may not reflect their future abilities. Over 75% of

early colleges employ essays and interviews in the admissions process (Berger et al., 2010). Extant literature reveals variance in the characteristics of the ECHS student populations in comparison to the surrounding district’s public high schools—with reported higher proportions of students of underrepresented students of color at ECHS (Berger et al., 2010). Inversely, other studies find that, on average, ECHS populations are similar to that of the surrounding districts when considering reduced or free lunch and race/ethnicity (Edmunds et al., 2017). Most notably though, ECHS students tend to have higher achievement rates than their non-ECHS peers (Berger et al., 2014; Duncheon, 2020; Edmunds et al., 2017).

The specific student populations that are targeted, how they are targeted, and why remains underexplored. Duncheon (2020) uses qualitative methods to explore the recruitment and selection practices at five ECHSs in the Texas borderlands. The findings from the study indicate that ECHS staff did invite all applicants from target groups; however, the admission processes favored students who were higher achievers academically and relatively privileged compared to other students in their district. The findings also suggest that ECHS staff had socially constructed ideals of the target populations based on their assumption of which students were more likely to succeed and were therefore deserving of admission.

Discussion/Implications

Because there are limited existing studies regarding the current recruitment or selection processes at North Carolina Early Colleges, researchers must rely on state eligibility requirements and individual ECHS resources. Concerning the former, there is a stark difference between eligibility requirements and selection. Selection procedures across many domains including hiring, politics, research and athletics often function under the assumption that the best-qualified candidate will be chosen (Merry & Arum, 2018). Within education, selection practices are often met with skepticism as traditional policies at elite higher education institutions, for example, often base acceptance on numerous non-academic factors including but not limited to legacy status, familial employment with the institution, athleticism, or the school’s interest in managing gender, race, or ethnic composition (Fullinwider and Lichtenberg, 2004; Karabel, 1972; Merry & Arum, 2018). Such practices are, to many, unfair. Further, Merry and Arum

(2018) maintain that a number of factors contaminate the integrity of selection procedures including subjectivity and internal, unobservable elements that are considered in deliberation and final decision-making. Such elements include interviews without objective scoring rubrics or blind faculty recommendations. Selection policies for secondary schools are met with even more contention as these institutions and institutional leader's play a significant role in either expanding or restricting opportunities for youth (Merry & Arum, 2018). The same issues with selection are apparent in Duncheon (2020)'s findings within Texas early colleges.

The available literature on admissions and selection policy in Early College High Schools indicates a need for further inquiry and analysis. A large field of literature known as critical policy analysis aims to critique policy to aid in reform. Critical policy scholars look to review, make public, and challenge policies that are often the result of unquestioned ideological visions of what schools should do and who they should serve (Apple, 2019). The study of school admissions and selection practices through a critical frame may "allow for a more nuanced, holistic understanding of the complexities associated with education policy, from creation through implementation to evaluation" (Apple, 2019, p. 277).

At the forefront of all educational research should be the students. Based on the research, ECHSs may be falling short of the mark in attracting or selecting students from target populations. For many of these students, access to higher education is not only a means to access their desired career, but a gateway to disrupt generational poverty through economic mobility. Therefore, the acquisition of information and opportunity for many of these students is dire to their success. It is therefore imperative for further inquiry into outreach, admissions, and selection practices at ECHSs is warranted to further increase participation by historically marginalized groups thereby aligning with the mission and values of these institutions.

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Author's Note

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