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SCHOOLS

New App Helps Students Select NYC Public High Schools

The free app aims to steer disadvantaged eighth-graders from low-performing choices

By Leslie Brody

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A new free app that helps students navigate the more than 400 public high school choices is slated to be released in coming weeks. PHOTO: NYU / HECKSCHER FOUNDATION

As New York City students gear up to apply to public high schools for next fall, a free mobile app aims to steer disadvantaged students away from low-performing choices.

Researchers say many low-income students apply to underachieving schools near home, in part because their families often lack counseling that can help them navigate a complex admissions process.

The NYC High School Application Guide seeks to nudge students toward better options. Students type in their address, interests and willingness to travel more than 45 minutes, and the app shows them matches with the best graduation rates, among other data.

The Heckscher Foundation for Children, which aims to help underserved youth, invested more than \$2.5 million in developing the app with guidance from New York University researchers.

“If this tool improves the ability of some underserved youth to make choices that will give them a better chance of graduating high school, even if it is a small number, it will have been a success,” said Peter Sloane, chairman of the foundation. The app highlights schools with four-year graduation rates higher than 65% in a city where the on-time rate was about 70% for the Class of 2016.

The city’s Department of Education has its own mobile tool called “NYC School Finder.”

“While we welcome additional tools and resources for families,” the city’s version gives information about options in an easy-to-use way, a spokesman said. It is important to look at multiple measures, and not just graduation rates, in assessing quality, school officials noted.

If students follow the Heckscher Foundation app’s recommendations, they will be steered away from most of the city’s troubled “Renewal” schools, which could exacerbate declines in enrollment at some of them. The city has invested millions in trying to improve these schools with social services, extended days and other resources.

In 2016, there were 19 Renewal schools with graduation rates below 65%, according to city data.

The city planned to spend a total of about \$568 million on the Renewal program over the four years ending in June 2018, the Independent Budget Office said. Now the city has 78 renewal schools, including 28 high schools.

Many city families have long expressed trepidation about the daunting process of applying to a system of more than 400 public high schools.

Among more well off families, eighth-graders invest a lot of time visiting high schools and preparing for exams that can help them get into the better schools. But struggling families with limited social networks often don’t hear about the best choices or can’t afford tutoring that some other students get. The city has boosted advisory services and free test preparation, officials said.

Mr. Sloane said the new app will highlight high-performing schools such as Bronx Center for Science and Mathematics, which has a 90% graduation rate among a student body where 86% qualify for subsidized lunch.

The website is live but the app is expected to be released in the coming weeks. Applications are due Dec. 1 for the first round of applications to city high schools.

Under the administration of former Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the city launched a choice system in 2004 that requires all eighth-graders to rank up to 12 high school programs from among hundreds citywide, with a central process that matches them to seats based on interests, abilities and other factors, depending on schools' priorities.

“We are working to ensure that every high school is a quality option, and believe students and families should consider all NYC high schools and their unique offerings,” a department spokesman said.

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