Timing is Everything:
Late Registration and Stratified Access to School Choice

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Abstract: School choice policies necessarily impose registration timelines, constraining access to schools of choice for students who register late. Drawing on administrative data, survey data, and interviews with 33 parents in Boston, we find that late registration is common and highly stratified: Nearly half of black kindergarteners miss the first registration deadline, a rate almost three times higher than their white peers, consigning them to the least preferred schools. Contexts of instability and bureaucratic complexity serve as barriers to registering months in advance, and parents describe disengagement from the school system following their late registration. These findings show how despite equal access in theory, bureaucratic structures such as timeline-based lotteries hinder many families, particularly those disadvantaged already, from full participation. Inequality in school choice outcomes and experiences thus results not only from families’ selections, the focus of previous research, but also the misalignment of district bureaucratic processes with family situations.

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School choice remains a contested yet increasingly popular approach to school assignment. Though advocates suggest school choice promotes equal access to quality schools by allowing families options beyond their zoned neighborhood schools (Archbald 2004), families’ school selections in choice systems perpetuate inequality and segregation (Bifulco, Ladd, and Ross 2009; Goyette 2008; Hastings, Kane, and Staiger 2005; Phillips, Larsen, and Hausman 2015; Renzulli and Evans 2005; Saporito and Sohoni 2007). To understand this stratification, scholars have primarily studied processes underlying families’ choices, such as how they learn about and evaluate school options (e.g., Bell 2009; Neild 2005; Saporito and Lareau 1999).

Beyond families’ preferences and selections, however, school choice also involves bureaucratic practices that may stratify school assignments and school choice experiences (Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018). For example, the set of schools that families can actually access is dictated in part by when they register for and select schools. However, timelines – inherent in school choice systems – have been overlooked in research and policy conversations as a source of inequality in school choice that would persist regardless of the schools families want or select.

This article analyzes registration timing as a mechanism underlying inequality in access to and experiences with school choice, drawing on new administrative, survey, and interview data on families registering for Boston Public Schools. In Boston, which operates a compulsory choice system, a considerable proportion of school registrants register “late” – after initial priority deadlines. Although registration begins in January, more than one-quarter of new students do not register until the summer. By the time these families register, the most popular schools are full, relegating many families to one of their least-preferred choices or to a school they did not select.
We examine the stratification, sources, and implications of late registration, detailing how social contexts engender racialized and spatially concentrated inequalities in registration timing that, in turn, inform parents’ experiences with school choice. Our analysis highlights the limitations of choice policies as a means to substantially reduce inequality and segregation; regardless of parents’ preferences and choices, the implementation of these policies fails to account for families’ situations, ultimately perpetuating inequality. While in theory, school choice lotteries offer all students equal access to the schools they desire, in practice, bureaucratic structures further disadvantage already marginalized groups in the school choice process.

BACKGROUND

Proponents argue that by breaking the link between residence and school assignment, school choice allows students in neighborhoods with failing schools to access higher-performing options (Archbald 2004). This framework linking choice and equity has driven school choice policies nationwide, epitomized by the 2001 No Child Left Behind legislation enabling families to opt out of underperforming schools. In recent years, charter schools have proliferated, cities such as Washington, DC, Newark, and Los Angeles are streamlining enrollment systems across sectors, and large urban districts including New York City, Chicago, and Denver have begun to offer open enrollment in district schools.

However, race and class inequalities are sustained and even exacerbated in school choice landscapes, as white and higher-income families often use school choice to avoid schools with predominantly non-white and/or lower-income student bodies (Bifulco et al. 2009; Goyette 2008; Hastings et al. 2005; Kimelberg and Billingham 2012; Phillips et al. 2015; Renzulli and Evans 2005; Saporito and Lareau 1999; Saporito and Sohoni 2007). Furthermore, while both school location and academic performance are important to families across race, white families are more
likely to have high-quality options nearby than black and Hispanic families and thus do not have to choose between proximity and quality (Denice and Gross 2016). For working-class and poor families of color facing this choice, nonacademic attributes may take precedence over academic performance, due to logistical constraints related to transportation, childcare, or scheduling needs; limited information about school options; and a lack of experience with high-resource, academically rigorous schools (Bell 2009; DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010; Neild 2005; Pattillo, Delale-O’Connor, and Butts 2014; Pérez 2011; Rhodes and DeLuca 2014; Sattin-Bajaj 2014).

While research identifies families’ varied preferences and selections as a critical source of inequality in school choice, these choices occur within a bureaucratic structure designed to meet its own objectives. To manage the considerable logistics of assigning thousands of children to schools early enough for schools and families to plan accordingly for the new school year, districts institute deadlines, typically months before the start of the school year, by which families must register and select schools in order to receive top priority in school assignment. Those who miss these deadlines are effectively shut out of many schools filled by those who registered earlier. Importantly, since public school districts guarantee a school assignment regardless of when a family registers, it is not that families who miss deadlines are failing to comply with rules per se; rather, they are not participating in school choice as needed to maximize their access to preferred schools. Though late registration is a known challenge to practitioners, it is largely invisible in academic and policy discourse about school choice.

**Obstacles to Meeting School Choice Priority Deadlines**

Prioritizing early registrants in school assignment, while efficient for districts, presumes families know about, understand, and are able to complete the school choice and registration process well in advance of the start of the school year. Yet previous research challenges these
assumptions. When school choice is non-compulsory, families’ participation varies, with white families and higher-income families more likely to opt in (Bifulco et al. 2009; Goyette 2008; Phillips et al. 2015; Saporito and Sohoni 2007). Even among those who select schools, families differ in the extent to which they actively gather and weigh information on their options (André-Bechely 2005; Pérez 2011; Sattin-Bajaj 2014).

Families, particularly low-income families, immigrant families, and families of color, face numerous barriers to participating in school choice as designed, suggesting that they may register late for reasons other than valuing education less or feeling less strongly about which school they are assigned. Particularly in large urban districts with a vast array of options, the registration process is often complex, opaque, and difficult to navigate, even for relatively advantaged parents (Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016). Disparities in information about schools across class and race likely extend to information about the school choice and assignment process, such as registration timelines and the consequences of registering late. In multi-lingual, immigrant cities, many families may not be literate in the language(s) districts distribute information in and/or the process may be vastly different from what they experienced in their native countries (Valdés 1996). Meanwhile, families typically receive insufficient support in the choice process from school and district staff (Pérez 2011; Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018).

Moreover, residential and household mobility are particularly common among lower-income families and families of color. These families often move due to circumstances beyond their control and draw on extended kin networks that support children across multiple households (Desmond, Gershenson, and Kiviat 2015; Jarrett and Burton 1999; DeLuca, Wood, and Rosenblatt 2017). When children move into the district over the summer due to unanticipated circumstances, they have no option but late registration, no matter how choices are
organized within their district. Thus, the families who may stand to benefit most from school choice also likely experience the greatest challenges in taking full advantage of it.

**Theorizing Implications of Late Registration**

Missing school choice priority deadlines may be consequential. First, late registration constrains access to school choice. After families enter their selections, districts assign students to schools. We conceptualize equal access to school choice as families who select the same schools having equal opportunity to secure assignments in their chosen schools. We focus here on the extent to which families’ selections are afforded equal weight by school districts, recognizing that families often face different tradeoffs and make different choices (Denice and Gross 2016). Considering registration timelines shows how the equal opportunity provided by school assignment lotteries in theory breaks down in practice. Instead, priorities based on registration timing privilege those able to meet early deadlines. Regardless of which schools families desire, by design, late registrants choose from fewer seats than those who registered earlier. By the time they register, the most popular schools are already oversubscribed and late registrants are assigned to whatever schools are left, effectively limiting their ability to exercise choice. Sattin-Bajaj (2014), studying high school choice in New York City, describes how school staff expend considerable effort to ensure families submit paperwork on time; those who miss the deadline are unable to participate in school choice (see also André-Bechely 2005). Lareau et al. (2016:291) note that some parents miss charter school deadlines “not by hours or days but by months,” precluding them from the opportunity to access these educational resources. Districts institute timelines to ensure efficient assignment and smooth transitions for students, yet these practices may limit the school options available to families in ways that reinforce or exacerbate existing inequalities.
Second, late registration may shape families’ experiences with the school choice process. For example, while school choice is often framed as a means of empowering families (Scott 2013), if parents feel they do not have the opportunity to exercise choice due to their late registration, school choice may foster disengagement instead. Amidst confusion related to the school choice process itself and feelings of being “chosen” rather than choosing, parents often exercise limited agency and feel frustrated, disempowered, and constrained (Pattillo 2015). Parents in Chicago interviewed by Pattillo et al. (2014:246) often did not know how the process worked after submitting choices and sometimes encountered “silence, resistance, rejection, or deception by the school district.” Thus, rather than cultivating educated consumers who feel empowered to make a decision, experiences related to late registration, such as assignment to schools not selected and difficulty obtaining information from the district, may lead to feelings of disillusionment and constraint.

This article analyzes whether and how registration timing serves as a mechanism underlying inequality in school choice. We examine who is experiencing systematically reduced access to school choice, why, and what this means for families. Specifically, we assess racial and spatial inequalities in when families choose schools, relative to district timelines. We then consider how these inequalities are rooted in broader contexts of instability and bureaucratic complexities. Finally, we analyze the implications of registering late for family engagement and experiences with school choice. We do not aim to quantify the effects of registration timing on school assignment, but rather, center parents’ experiences and understandings to examine their perceptions of the district, the choice process, and subsequent school engagement in light of their late registration. Attending to registration timing illuminates how, regardless of families’
preferences and selections, bureaucratic structures stratify families’ access to and experiences with school choice.

**RESEARCH SETTING**

Boston Public Schools (BPS) serves approximately 56,000 students across 125 schools (Boston Public Schools 2016). Like many of its large urban counterparts, BPS is a majority-minority district: 42 percent of students are Hispanic, 35 percent are black, 14 percent are white, and 9 percent are Asian. In addition, 70 percent of students are designated as economically disadvantaged, as measured by participation in foster care, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and/or state health insurance (Boston Public Schools 2016).

Also like many of its diverse urban peers, the district has a long, complex history of school assignment, desegregation, and integration. The current school assignment plan, first implemented in the 2014–2015 school year, sought to provide more manageable choice lists that still provided high-quality options and options closer to home. Under this plan, families choose from a customized list of schools based on their home address. For kindergarteners, each list has 10 to 14 schools on average, including several “high-quality” schools, as measured by standardized test score performance, to ensure a range of options regardless of the quality of schools in a child’s immediate neighborhood.

Families new to BPS must register and rank schools in-person at one of several registration centers around the city. To inform families about the registration process, BPS conducts information sessions, posts billboards and lawn signs, and partners with community organizations like Head Start across Boston’s neighborhoods. Informational materials are available in multiple languages. Registration occurs in several rounds. During our research,
students in transitional grades – pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, sixth grade, and ninth grade – began registering in early January (Round 1). Subsequent rounds began in February (Round 2, the first registration round for non-transitional grades), late March (Round 3), and mid-May (Round 4). At the end of each round, all children registered in that round are entered into a lottery for school assignment based on their selections. Those who register after the final round ends in June are assigned on a first-come first-serve basis. With each successive round, fewer seats remain in each school, so families registering later have fewer schools and seats available. Children who cannot get a seat at one of their selected schools are placed on waitlists and administratively assigned to a school with space. Once children enroll in a school, they only re-enter the lottery system if/when they wish to attend a new school.

Boston’s compulsory choice policy is designed so that all families make choices. In Boston, like districts such as New Orleans and Cambridge, MA, choice is not “opt-in”; there is no default zoned neighborhood school for any child, neighborhood, or circumstance. This is an important case study context, as late registration in other policy settings could be attributed to families preferring their default neighborhood school and not wanting to opt in to other choices. Boston’s compulsory choice policy enables us to analyze late registrants as a group experiencing systematically reduced access to the same educational resources as their on-time peers. Additionally, while large-scale school choice is often studied in the context of middle or high schools (Pattillo et al. 2014; Denice and Gross 2016; Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018), in Boston, school choice extends down to pre-kindergarten. This case allows us to examine the role of timing when families first interact with the educational system.

As the district guarantees K-12 enrollment, missing BPS’s registration deadlines does not prohibit enrollment in the district overall. However, those registering in later rounds are
restricted to schools with availability. After the first round in January, seats in many schools, particularly high-performing schools, are filled and have long waitlists, precluding families who registered late from accessing these schools. For example, of the 72 schools for five-year-old general education kindergarteners entering in 2017–2018, 50 were at capacity after the first round and 61 had waitlists as of the final round in mid-June (Boston Public Schools 2017). Thus, while late registrants make choices from a list of school options, like those registering earlier, in practice they only have access to the schools on their list with seats still available. Of the schools without waitlists by the summertime, none were in the top test score quartile of district schools, two were in the second quartile, two were in the third quartile, and five were in the bottom quartile.¹ Late registrants are thus effectively shut out of high-performing schools no matter their selections.

Importantly, late registration is not a Boston-specific issue; all school choice systems set deadlines and thus will be impacted by the timing of when families register and what seats are available at that time. School choice in other locales often involves schools selecting among students, whether via lottery or other means (Jennings 2010; Lareau et al. 2016; Pattillo 2015), effectively limiting access for families that do not apply by priority deadlines. As districts continue to expand choice and integrate enrollment systems, registration timing will likely become increasingly central in discourse on school choice.

DATA AND METHODS

We draw on multiple data sources – BPS administrative data, a survey of summer registrants, and in-depth interviews with 33 summer registrants – to analyze late registration as a mechanism for inequality in school choice. The administrative records allow us to compare the demographic characteristics of early and late registrants on a population level, the survey...
tabulates families’ self-identified reasons for summer registration within predetermined categories, and the qualitative interviews enable us to probe the social contexts and narratives of families who registered over the summer.

This research originated from the district’s recognition of late registration as an important concern for families and staff. When discussing school registration and choice in Boston, a district administrator raised the issue of late registration, encouraging us to collect and analyze data so they could understand and ultimately serve this population better. We partnered with the district to develop and analyze a survey of families and shared our findings from the survey, interview, and administrative data analysis with district leadership and staff.

**Administrative Data**

We draw on administrative data on all BPS registrants from January 1 through September 15 in each of three years: 2014 (n=13,295), 2015 (n=11,837), and 2016 (n=12,245). For each registrant, we obtained information on the registration date (also coded by registration round), the grade for which the child was registered, the child’s race, whether the child was Hispanic, the family’s primary language, and the family’s zip code. This information was collected by the district on forms submitted at registration. The data include all children registering for BPS as new students but exclude students seeking to transfer between different BPS schools.

Pooling these data across the three years, we compare the demographic characteristics – race/ethnicity, language, and neighborhood income – of registrants over time. We created a combined variable for race/ethnicity, coded as Hispanic if the child is Hispanic and coded as the child’s race otherwise. Languages aside from English and Spanish were categorized as “other”; the most common other languages were Haitian Creole (1.9 percent), Vietnamese (1.6 percent), and Portuguese (1.3 percent). Analyses of language data exclude 2014, when more than two-
thirds of observations were missing this information. Otherwise, missing data are minimal. We operationalize neighborhoods using zip codes, drawing on the 2011–2015 American Community Survey for neighborhood demographic data.

In the analyses presented, we focus on kindergarten and pre-kindergarten registrants, though we conducted identical analyses including all grades. Pre-kindergarten has expanded in Boston in recent years; in 2016–2017, BPS enrolled approximately 3,000 pre-kindergarten and 4,000 five-year-old kindergarten students (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2017). Pre-kindergarten is thus a common entry point to school, though unlike five-year-old kindergarten, slots are not guaranteed to registrants. Since registration is for children new to BPS, pre-kindergarteners do not register again for kindergarten. Thus, our analyses include pre-kindergarteners with kindergarteners to examine patterns of public school registration at the age of school entry in Boston.

Survey Data

We also draw on a brief survey of families who registered in the summers of 2014 (n=831) and 2015 (n=787). Though all children registering late – after the first round for which they are eligible – are disadvantaged by the timing of the bureaucratic process, with fewer school options available than those who registered earlier, we surveyed and interviewed summer registrants to understand the experiences of those who face the greatest disadvantages in access to school choice. Summer registrants are relegated on a first-come first-serve basis to whatever schools are left over after children registered previously have been assigned. Furthermore, after the first round in January, summer is the second most frequent time when families register and is referred to in the registration centers as “summer peak.”
Registration staff provided parents with a paper questionnaire to complete while waiting. This survey, translated into multiple languages, asked how they learned about registration, what kept them from registering sooner, and demographic information such as race/ethnicity, language, zip code, and grade(s) of child(ren) registered. The survey was distributed from mid-July through mid-September at all district registration centers. Table 1 compares our survey sample to the population of summer registrants in the administrative data. Compared with the population, we surveyed a slightly lower proportion of Hispanic children and a slightly higher proportion of multiracial children or those of another race.

<<Table 1 about here>>

**Interview Data**

We also interviewed 33 individuals who registered children for school over the summer: 25 mothers, six fathers, an uncle, and a social worker who registered two foster children on her caseload. Through the interviews, we sought to understand late registration through the narratives of families experiencing it firsthand, building on previous scholarship on marginalized families’ experiences with school choice (e.g. Pattillo et al. 2014; Pattillo 2015; Rhodes and DeLuca 2014; Sattin-Bajaj 2014). We approached the interviews with a commitment to these families alongside a recognition of our different social positions, as graduate students without children whose racial, class, and linguistic identities do not match the lower-income, black and Hispanic, and often nonnative English speaking families BPS primarily serves.

The 2014 survey invited registrants to include their contact information if willing to be interviewed; 66 percent of those surveyed did so. From these, we drew a sample aiming to vary race/ethnicity, neighborhood, reason for late registration, and grade. We attempted to contact 105 English-speaking families in the months after they registered. Consistent with other research on
disadvantaged groups (DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010), our challenges contacting families and scheduling interviews underscore the unstable and hectic lives of late registrants. We anticipate our interview sample is less likely to include families that changed their contact information—many phone numbers were disconnected just weeks after registration—or have life circumstances that precluded them from meeting for the interview. Also, due to our (lack of) language capacity, we only conducted interviews in English. Thus, our findings about the contexts and implications of late registration likely understate the instability in these families’ lives both prior to and following registration as well as the additional complications of navigating an English-centered bureaucratic process when English is not one’s native language.

As we sampled for range, our interview sample was not intended to be representative of our survey sample. As shown in Table 1, our interview sample is less Hispanic and more English-speaking than the survey sample. We conducted interviews in locations of respondents’ choosing, typically their homes but also other places such as coffee shops or respondents’ workplaces. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were semi-structured, focusing on families’ experiences with the registration process, how they came to register when they did, their school choices, what was important to them in selecting schools, and their thoughts on their school assignment. Despite differences in social location, we found that respondents were typically forthcoming and appreciated our efforts to learn about their experiences with school registration.

All interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo in two rounds: first, thematic coding based on the interview topics, and second, analytic coding based on the contexts surrounding late registration and the implications of this experience for families. For example, the first round of coding included codes reflecting reasons for late registration that aligned with
the survey categories (e.g., lack of information). In the second round, we coded based on categories identified inductively (e.g., lack of coordination with other agencies). Throughout the coding process, we reviewed our coding in regular meetings to ensure intercoder reliability. In addition to reading full interview transcripts, we reviewed coded excerpts and wrote memos to analyze themes for each respondent as well as across the sample. We also created matrices to summarize respondents’ experiences with late registration. The findings presented here draw upon this inductive analysis.

FINDINGS

While school choice enables families to select among educational options, district policies constrain these choices for those who cannot or do not meet bureaucratic expectations. Specifically, when families register determines when their choices are entered into the lottery and, by extension, which schools are still available to them. Regardless of their school preferences, those who register late have access to fewer school options.

Late registration is not a marginal issue, but rather, constrains access to school choice for thousands of students in Boston. More than 3,000 children registered for BPS over the summer and into the first couple weeks of each school year, constituting over one-quarter of all children registered since January 1 of each respective year. Despite extensive outreach by the district, more than one in three kindergarten registrants miss the first registration deadline.

We find that late registration is highly stratified, disproportionately experienced by black and Hispanic children as well as children living in lower-income neighborhoods. Instability and complex bureaucratic systems create barriers to meeting school registration timelines. Further, the late registration process and school assignment results disempowered and created hardships for families. Together, these findings show how bureaucratic policies like registration timelines
put the full promise of school choice out of reach for many families, exacerbating inequality in access to and experiences with school choice.

**Stratification in Late Registration**

First, we investigate inequality in the extent to which families meet bureaucratic expectations for early school registration. We find that late registration is highly stratified across race and space, such that disadvantages following from late registration overwhelmingly affect black and Hispanic families and are concentrated in lower-income, non-white neighborhoods. In this section, we present analyses on kindergarten registrants, who constitute nearly 60 percent of total registrants before mid-September, to analyze disparities in registration timing among cohorts of students at the age of school entry. This sets the stage for subsequent analyses in which we use the survey and interview data to examine the processes generating these inequalities and the ramifications of late registration. Except where noted, the disparities we present are similar when including all grades and when restricted to five-year-old kindergarteners.\(^7\)

Table 2 presents registration rates over time by race/ethnicity, language, and neighborhood income, revealing substantial stratification, particularly with respect to race/ethnicity and neighborhood income, and illuminating how common late registration is for some groups. For example, nearly half of black kindergarteners do not register in the first round, a substantially greater proportion than the 17 percent of white kindergarteners who miss the first deadline. Thus, black students are much more likely to be blocked from high-performing schools even if they ranked them first (Boston Public Schools 2017). Examining summer registration specifically, black kindergarteners are 3.3 times as likely, and Hispanic kindergarteners 2.8 times as likely, to register over the summer compared with white kindergarteners.\(^8\) This indicates clear
racial disparities in the schools children can access, regardless of family rankings, because of
differences in registration timing.

While disparities by language are more nuanced—kindergarteners in families with a
primary language other than English are slightly more likely to register after Round 1 but slightly
less likely to register over the summer—there are clear spatial inequalities. Almost half of
kindergarteners in low-income neighborhoods miss the first priority deadline, and these students
register over the summer at more than twice the rate of those in high-income neighborhoods.10
Figure 1 shows clear trends by neighborhood income: summer registration rates decrease as
neighborhood income increases. This spatial stratification means that the restricted access to
schools resulting from late registration disproportionately affects families in lower-income
(typically non-white) neighborhoods.

Multivariate logistic regressions, presented in Table 3, show that race/ethnicity predicts
late registration even for children in similar neighborhoods. Taking neighborhood race and
income into account, Hispanic, black and other/multiracial students register after the first priority
round and register over the summer at higher rates than white students. Asian students also
register late at higher rates, though this is only statistically significant when all grades are
included. Students whose families’ primary language is neither English nor Spanish register late
at higher rates than those in comparable English-speaking families. Results for children in
Spanish-speaking families are less clear; on balance, they appear to register late at similar rates
to English-speaking families when covariates are included. Finally, children living in lower-
income neighborhoods are more likely to register late, holding child race/ethnicity, language, neighborhood percent white, and grade constant.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{\textless\textgreater Table 3 about here}\textgreater

A black child and a white child living in the same place should theoretically have equal access to the same schools. However, because the black child is more likely to register late, in practice the white child has more school options available. Thus, given district policies granting students registering in earlier rounds first priority, registration timing creates systematic inequalities in school choice access based on race, neighborhood, and, in some cases, language spoken.

**Contexts of Late Registration**

Comparing demographic characteristics by registration round demonstrates stratified access to school choice, but does not illuminate the social processes underlying these patterns. If late registrants feel less strongly about school assignment, perhaps the system is operating efficiently. Table 4 reports survey results that implicate structural factors in late registration rather than a lack of interest or a passive approach to school choice. Residential mobility and mobility of children across households account for approximately half of summer registrations. Survey respondents also cited information gaps and multiple school options as reasons they could not register early, suggesting a complex choice landscape families must navigate. Only a small proportion of summer registrants said school assignment was unimportant to them, though this may be susceptible to social desirability bias.

\textit{\textless\textgreater Table 4 about here}\textgreater

Our interviews further illuminate families’ situations in the months preceding the start of school. Families were often frustrated and surprised to hear they were late, especially as most were registering either weeks before school began or as soon as their individual circumstances
would allow. In line with the survey, the interviews underscored how late registration rarely stemmed from a lack of interest in schools or even a desire to “opt out” of school choice. Parents often described active participation in school choice, researching schools and strategizing to find the best educational environment for their children. However, bureaucratic expectations did not account for their individual and institutional contexts, as residential, household, and economic instability as well as multiple and complex institutional systems hindered their ability to register and select schools on time.

Instability

Residential, household, and economic instability constrained parents’ abilities to register in alignment with the district timeline. As the district’s timeline assumes a long-term, stable plan for families, parents must know *eight months* ahead of time where their child will live in order to participate in the system as designed. However, for many of the families we interviewed, that was not something they could plan for or guarantee. Approximately half of surveyed families said that their late registration resulted from a recent move. Indeed, according to the 2011–2015 American Community Survey, 4.4 percent of Boston children ages 5–17 moved from another county, state, or country within the past year, suggesting that many students may be new to the school system following moves into the city. As we only conducted interviews in English, interview respondents typically described domestic moves, such as children’s moves to Boston to join a parent following a custody change; moves through the shelter or public housing systems; and moves following rent increases in neighboring towns. Consistent with research on the frequency of unplanned and reactive moves, particularly among low-income families (Desmond et al. 2015; DeLuca et al. 2017), respondents typically described situations in which they could not have timed their move differently to align with the district timeline. For example,
Sopheary, a Cambodian mother, was living in a shelter in a different area of the state for several months when a neighbor threatened her and she felt she could no longer live there safely. She was transferred to a motel in a Boston suburb before moving again a few weeks later to temporary housing in Boston, where we interviewed her.

For some, child custody abruptly changed during the summer due to custody disagreements, foster care placements, or adoptions, for example. In the case of one family, the mother, who lived in New York, was having personal and financial issues that made it hard for her to raise her two children on her own. While the father, Nelson, an immigrant from Cote d’Ivoire, was willing to have the children live in Boston with him, he did not know if or when the mother would take him up on the offer:

Nelson: It’s been a while now that the mother’s telling me she can’t do it…

Interviewer: So why did you decide in August?

Nelson: Well, because she sent them to me… She was talking about it. We didn’t know she was really gonna do it, because you know it’s not easy for a mother to kind of get rid of the kids. So we didn’t know she was really gonna do it until she did it.

Custody changes and moves were typically sudden, often resulting from parents making difficult decisions regarding their children’s well-being. If parents had more control over moving, they spoke about trying to wait to move until the school year was over to avoid disruption. Ironically, in trying to do what was best for their children, parents inadvertently lowered their chances of getting a desired school assignment.

Income instability sometimes led to unexpected changes in the affordability of school options. Three families we interviewed registered children late for public school when sudden changes impacted the affordability of the parochial schools they had been attending. For
example, Angel, a black mother, used a childcare subsidy to pay for Catholic school, but lost the subsidy when she started working full-time. Since her new job did not provide enough to cover the tuition, she registered her son for BPS. The residential, household, and economic instability experienced by many families, particularly poor families, belies the registration process’ inflexible timelines. Often, the unpredictable reality of parents’ lives prevented them from participating in the school choice process as designed and intended.

**Navigating Complex Systems**

As in other urban districts across the country, Boston’s school choice landscape is complex, offering a range of private, parochial, and charter schools in addition to public school options. As shown in Table 4, more than one in six summer registrant families surveyed attributed their late registration to unfamiliarity with the importance or particularities of the Boston choice system’s timing, and more than one in seven reported that they registered late because they were navigating school options beyond BPS.

The specifics of the district’s school choice policy were new to some families given their previous experiences with public education. Irene, a Chinese American mother with a Ph.D. and an annual household income over $200,000, had lived in other cities previously and found the process surprising and confusing:

> Boston school is very, very complicated for us, because when we were in Philadelphia, my daughter went to the school in our neighborhood, so did in Newton [a Boston suburb]. You don’t need to worry about register by what time, what kind of lottery, and you put your kid into what kind of waiting list.

Knowledge gaps hindering families from correctly participating in the Boston system thus stemmed not only from linguistic, technological, or other barriers, but also families’ experiences
with other school registration processes. Irene’s case illuminates how, though relatively less common, even upper-middle-class parents could be caught up in the bureaucratic particularities of the Boston system.

The choice landscape beyond the public schools adds to the complexity of the district policy itself. The survey found that many summer registrants had not yet decided on BPS by the time early registration deadlines occurred. The timelines of charter, parochial, and private schools often overshadowed the public school timeline for registration, especially since other timelines were better understood as “hard” deadlines for access. Samantha, a Latina mother, explained:

This year, like in January, I was already applying to charter schools just to make sure that she was already – at least in the lottery or on the waitlist… Charter schools, you can only apply during two months, between January and March. After March, if you apply, they’re not gonna waitlist you, nothing. Like, they will not take your application. Like I said, I didn’t make up my mind that I was finally goin’ do this [BPS] ‘til August.

Samantha understood the limited window to apply for charter schools and the timing of when families hear back. While unified enrollment systems have been implemented in other cities, Boston’s charter school lotteries remain separate. The timeline of this parallel school choice process occurred at the same time of year as the BPS registration process, but Samantha, like others we interviewed, did not consider navigating both systems simultaneously to increase her chances of getting her schools of choice in either or both systems. Focused on the time-sensitive process of getting a seat in a charter school, Samantha inadvertently let BPS timelines pass her by. Although the district encourages families to register for BPS even if they are also considering other schools, parents often oriented their choice efforts around other school timelines, looking
to BPS only later when other options were unavailable or no longer desired. Unfortunately, by then the BPS schools they wanted often had no seats remaining.

Navigating multiple school systems also involved parents’ efforts to do what was best for their children’s education given their children’s school experiences. Several parents made changes because their children advocated for a different school. For example, Nicole, a black mother, had a son attending a private Montessori program, but considered changing schools when her son began suggesting that the school context might not be the best fit for him. Parents like Nicole registered late because they wanted to wait out the school year before deciding on and making such a major transition for their families, in case the children changed their minds. However, when families take time to weigh these options, they are penalized in a model that prioritizes the preferences of families who submit selections earlier.

Beyond the complexity of school choice environments themselves, school choice intersected with other bureaucratic or social service systems, including homelessness and housing services, public assistance, child welfare, and residential facilities. Parents often trusted and relied on other systems to help them navigate the BPS system, and sometimes the timing of or misinformation provided by these systems contributed to their late registration. For example, a Puerto Rican family had signed over custody of their teenage daughter to a residential school due to her mental and behavioral health needs. The father, Claudio, said that when the school recommended she return to public school, he was assured they would take care of the transition, but this did not occur.

Claudio: We waited for the papers, waited for the papers. I called [the residential school]. Nothing. We was like, “Okay, it’s been a month already. No papers yet. Let’s see what’s going on”… We was thinking, “Oh, okay, maybe it’s because she [has ADHD]. They
haven’t find a school for her.” When we went in, she was not signed in in public school, so we had to do the whole signup process all over again…We didn’t find out until like, matter of fact, I think it was October 31st. It was more than a month.

Interviewer: What was she doing in the meantime?

Claudio: In the house.

Claudio thought the institution that was once fully responsible for his daughter would handle her transition, only to find that the institution had not followed through in accordance with either the district’s timeline or his daughter’s educational needs. As a result, this high-needs student was not only registered late but also out of school for two months. When other systems in families’ lives were not coordinated with the school district’s registration expectations, families were left in the lurch.

**Implications of Late Registration**

Generally, parents we interviewed accepted that their late registration had implications for their chances of a satisfactory and timely school assignment. They did not blame the school system for their missing the earlier registration deadline, instead indicating, as discussed previously, a mismatch between the district’s expectations and their life circumstances. Nevertheless, their experiences with late registration informed their perceptions of the school district overall. Specifically, in interviews, two outcomes often followed from summer registration: first, families were assigned to a school that they did not want, and second, they were notified about their school assignment close to or after the start of the school year. Although these outcomes reflect logistical necessities from the perspective of the school system – there are limited seats and processing school selections takes time – parents described how these situations complicated their lives and fostered negative dispositions towards the school
system. To the extent that the school choice process further marginalizes some families from the school system rather than engaging and empowering them, this raises important long-term implications for late registration beyond the school assignment.

**Unwanted Assignments**

Late registrants are assigned wherever there is space, even if the assigned school is one they did not select. Certainly, not all late registrants experience this; a few interview respondents reported assignments to schools they ranked highly. For example, Ismelda, a Dominican mother working in a beauty salon, registered her son for 12th grade after he came from the Dominican Republic to live with her. She selected the high school in her neighborhood because it was nearby. Her son was assigned to that high school and she was satisfied because the school communicated with her regarding her son’s attendance and behavior.

However, experiences like these were relatively rare among our interview respondents. When children were not assigned to one of their top-choice schools, this often created issues with transportation and scheduling, which then hindered parents’ ability to engage with the school community and build social connections with other parents. Elsie, a Hispanic mother working as an administrative assistant in Providence, moved to Boston over the summer when she got off a public housing waitlist. Elsie was unhappy with her daughter’s school assignment, as it was in a different neighborhood – “really far.” Although the district provided bus transportation for her daughter, Elsie said the distance made it difficult for her to participate as she would like. For Individualized Education Program meetings, she said, “I have to get out even earlier [from work] so that I can make it, ‘cause I have to go all the way to Boston [from Providence] and take two buses all the way to [the school]. When there is events and stuff for parents at night, it’s hard. I don’t have a car right now.”
When parents did not receive a school they selected, they were often left feeling disempowered, as if the choice they were promised was illusory and the school characteristics they valued were ignored by the district. Parents noted that despite making selections at registration, the school system ultimately made the choices. Charity, a black mother working at Bank of America, said every school she wanted was full by the time she registered. She explained that the assigned school was “just a huge headache because it doesn’t coincide with my time. I’m late for work every day. I explained that to them, and it was like, ‘There’s nothing that we can do.’ You just get put wherever the computer puts you.” These experiences may also be common among early registrants who do not receive a satisfactory assignment. Nevertheless, late registrants have fewer options available to them, since many schools have already reached capacity during earlier rounds of registration. While some parents reported that district staff warned them they might have fewer choices, late registrants, at least at the time of our research, select from a full list of schools regardless of their actual availability. As a result, families were often disappointed due to the gap between the options they perceived and the options actually available to them.

Anna, a black mother working at a nonprofit organization, said her daughter was assigned to a kindergarten an hour away by bus, which she found highly inconvenient because she had to leave work early two days each week to pick her up. Anna described finding out about the assignment: “Oh my gosh, I actually started crying because, not a school that I picked, it was too far for her to be away from me.” Anna applied for a transfer. “I can’t do it. I work. I can’t leave work to come pick her up off the bus.” Her daughter’s school assignment not only created logistical hurdles for her family, but made Anna feel that ultimately, she had little choice in the matter despite entering her selections at registration.
They didn’t take any consideration of the information that I gave them that they asked for… That’s the point of us going down to register, is they ask us what schools we want our kids to go to, that’s the schools that we chose. And for them to select the school that we didn’t choose, most times we didn’t choose because we didn’t look into them, we didn’t care for them, that’s the reason why we didn’t choose them… If those schools wasn’t available, we should’ve gotten a phone call… or a letter in the mail, or email, something… [saying] schools that you chose are not available, here’s a list of schools that are in your area, you wanna look in, make some more selections, come in, or something, you know. Give us the option to shop around, see what the schools [are].

She portrayed the school system’s choice policy almost as a bait and switch: district staff asked for her preferences only to then ignore them for her ultimate assignment. Anna understood the system’s constraints, but felt the district could have reached out to give her other options rather than assigning her to a school that was unknown to her.

Bryan, a black father working in marketing and home improvement who registered after his son came to live with him, said his son was assigned to “one of the worst schools in the city… I never picked this school. It was not even one of my nevers. It was the nevers of the nevers.” He described the distance he had to travel to take his son to school, exacerbated by the traffic at that time of day, saying, “I had to accept it. I had no choice.” This experience of blocked access to the schools he wanted left him frustrated: “It’s like a fucking raffle; it’s like a lottery you’re trying to win. You’re fucking trying to just get a kid into school. It should be equal opportunity or something. Fucking get all these schools up to par.” This disillusionment speaks to some parents’ understanding of their assignment as exemplifying the inequality and injustice of the system overall. Bryan’s reference to a raffle is accurate in the sense that outcomes are
determined by chance conditional on entry, but also illuminates a view of the school system overall as one with few winners and many losers.

**Waiting for an Assignment**

Even aside from whether late registrants received a desired school, they often described difficulties finding out their school assignment in a timely fashion. After families register, the district needs to process rankings and coordinate with other departments such as transportation, special education, and language testing. With early registration, this does not pose a problem – the district begins registration in January in part so that when families receive assignments in March, they have time to get off waitlists, select other options, and coordinate transportation and scheduling. However, with summer registration, the system’s processing time runs up against the beginning of the school year. For the registration centers, the influx of families who come over the summer delays the timeliness of assignment for each student and strains their already limited staffing.\textsuperscript{15} Parents, meanwhile, described the implications this late notice had for their families, creating stress and precluding them from sufficiently preparing their children for school.

Parents notified about their assignment right up against the start of the school year typically felt frustrated with BPS overall. They described having to be extremely proactive to find out their assignment, even though they were told the district would get in touch with them when an assignment had been made. Beyond the stresses and inconveniences, this lack of communication also portrayed the school system as inefficient and uncaring. Lindsay, a white mother recently placed at a shelter in Boston, described the importance of an appropriate school for her second-grader given his severe behavioral issues. Although ultimately assigned to a school she was satisfied with, Lindsay said that despite calling repeatedly, she did not receive the
letter with her assignment until after school had already started. She felt this inhibited her ability to help her son establish a routine:

That’s kind of detrimental because that’s when they go over lesson plans and everything with the students, and they kinda get a feel for what their classes are gonna be like… Especially with a child like mine, that’s information that he needs, because he needs to be mentally prepared so he knows what his routine is gonna look like.

As with assignment to a school parents did not rank, these inconveniences also informed parents’ perceptions of the school system. Lindsay said the teacher told her that children frequently find out their school assignments at the last minute or after the first day of school. Though she acknowledged the district had many students to process, Lindsay said, “[It] seems like in a big city, they should be a little bit more concerned about their schools and how the children are learning.” Lindsay, a parent new to BPS, interpreted waits for an assignment as a sign of the system’s lack of concern for children’s education.

Sally, a white mother and BPS teacher with a master’s degree, also described her frustrations with the district as she waited to receive an assignment for her son, who was expelled from his private school at the end of the previous school year. Sally said she called every day without receiving a response. “I’m like, ‘He’s starting school tomorrow, and we don’t know where to send him’… It was a nightmare for those of us who were trying to find out where our kids were going to school over the summer… We were again sitting there waiting at the whim of BPS.” Each of the schools and other BPS departments she contacted said they did not have assignment information. She explained the stressful nature of the process:

The waiting was ridiculous… I could understand waiting a week, that they do it once a week rather than for each individual kid. To have to wait over a month and not find out?
It’s just not okay. It’s very stressful. It left us really uncertain of our plans, right until the last second.

This experience also left her with negative feelings about public schools in Boston: “Honestly, I felt disgusted. I feel really sad. I feel really, really sad, as a person from Boston, and as a teacher in Boston…The process seems like a joke. It’s like rinky dink nonsense.” As Sally explained, the uncertainty, stress, and time spent following up took a toll on her confidence in the school system for which she worked.

Rashida, a black and Hispanic mother, also described continually calling to find out her son’s school assignment. “Usually they say you gonna learn in three to five days and that didn’t happen. It was like the worst process ever.” Just as Rashida had missed early registration, because she had moved from another state, she described how BPS did not meet the timeline they had promised her. Rashida said her mother talked to a district administrator and wrote letters complaining.

They didn’t do anything until she said she worked with [this company] and someone in her field works…with the Boston Public Schools, and that’s when they did something…

They knew, they just wasn’t trying to give anything out, because how come right after when we threatened you guys with that information, that you tell us?

Rashida expressed a lack of faith in the school system, presenting the system as one that willfully holds information from parents unless they can effectively leverage that information out of them through threats or connections. The experiences these parents described – often among their first interactions with the district their children are now a part of – informed their perspective on the school system, more often than not leaving them frustrated and disillusioned.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Drawing on multiple methods, we identify school registration timelines as a mechanism stratifying access to and experiences with school choice, alongside and regardless of families’ varied information, preferences, and selections. First, examining registration over time reveals a process that reinforces racial and spatial inequalities to systematically advantage some groups over others. Second, survey and interview data suggest that late registration results not from families’ indifference to school assignment, but from contexts of instability and the multiple school and social service systems they are navigating. While these families may appear to opt out of school choice, our interviews revealed the opposite: families actively sought to secure the best education for their children yet were constrained by bureaucratic expectations misaligned with their circumstances and knowledge. Third, interviews illuminate the profound implications of late registration for families, as unwanted or delayed assignments create stress, hardships, and disillusionment with the school system. These findings draw attention to registration timing as an institutional structure that constrains access to school choice for many families. As districts shift away from models with guaranteed neighborhood schools, school assignment increasingly hinges on bureaucratic processes such as timelines.

Thus, efforts aimed at guiding families to select higher-quality schools can make only limited strides in reducing inequality. Even if all families ranked schools based on academic performance, access to high-performing schools is extremely limited after the first registration round in Boston (Boston Public Schools 2017). Though we do not quantify the effects of late registration on assignment to high-performing schools, families face substantially reduced – or even nonexistent – chances of assignment to those schools if they register late. The findings also underscore how experiences with public systems constitute a powerful form of political learning.
As an introduction to the school district for many families, the experience of late registration may be consequential for perceptions of and engagement in schools and perhaps the state more broadly.

Late registration creates complications for districts as well, which must process large numbers of registrants over the summer and respond to families frustrated by unwanted and/or delayed assignments. Seeking to boost early registration, BPS continues to try to increase outreach to families about registration timelines. BPS has also worked to improve customer service for families coming to the registration centers, though staff have limited resources with which to support the large numbers of summer registrants.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize how the invisibility of late registration perpetuates an inaccurate portrayal of school choice as equitable, ensuring access to high-quality schools for all, when in reality, access to these schools is effectively blocked for those registering late. Moreover, in part because so many families register late, districts can promote school choice as a process that benefits families who participate as recommended. For example, BPS reported that in 2016, 77 percent of five-year-old kindergarteners and 71 percent of four-year-old pre-kindergarteners registering in the first round were assigned to one of their top three choices (Boston Public Schools 2016). Late registrant families registering earlier in substantial numbers would compromise this high “success” rate. As long as there are not enough seats in high-quality, highly selected schools, late registration enables districts to shift the responsibility for poor school choice outcomes to families’ individual decisions rather than inadequacies of the system itself.

Our findings raise important questions for further research. Analyzing administrative data on the specific schools selected by – and ultimately assigned to – registrants across time is
necessary to quantify the extent to which registration timelines shape access to high-quality schools. Additionally, the perspectives of families who do not speak English are critical to take into account to consider how English-centered district processes may additionally disadvantage access to school choice. Future research should also examine timelines and other bureaucratic structures across different policy contexts, such as “opt-in” intra- and inter-district choice systems, school voucher programs, and charter, magnet, parochial, and independent schools. Studying other contexts of compulsory choice would provide further insight into the process of late registration. For example, when compulsory choice begins in later grades, as in New York City, some of the information gaps presented here may be mitigated by families’ current participation with those educational systems (Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018).

Still, deadlines and the consequences for missing them are inherent in all bureaucratic systems with high-stakes entry points and a limited supply. The Boston case provided the opportunity to examine the implications of registration timelines applied system-wide, demonstrating how despite policies that set the same rules for all families, the choice process operates differently for different groups in practice. Research in other policy contexts distinguishes among parents who do and do not participate in school choice, but we show how even when all parents are required to engage with school choice, some are systematically disadvantaged in ways that mirror broader inequalities.

Relatedly, scholars and policymakers need to consider who participates – and who can participate – in policy reforms as designed. Families meeting bureaucratic expectations to participate in programs such as those offering housing or school choice may differ from the families reformers are most interested in helping or who stand to benefit most from reforms (Walters 2014; Chyn 2016). Opting out of one’s neighborhood school “must be done within a
very certain time frame” (André-Bechely 2005:68) and some families are better positioned to meet these expectations than others.

For districts, improving registration outreach efforts is essential. Informational materials should convey explicitly that registration, although year-round, grants priorities based on when families register and carries consequences with regards to access for those who register later. Districts might develop materials drawing on insights from behavioral economics to encourage early registration (Richburg-Hayes, Anzelone, and Dechausay 2017). Additionally, as shifting administrative burdens from individual families to the state can increase participation in social programs (Herd et al. 2013), more streamlined coordination between the public school system and other school options and social service systems would help families register earlier.

Due to the unforeseen events and instability we have documented, however, it will be impossible to fully eliminate late registration. Our findings align with research showing that when families do not respond to choice policies as designed or intended, this often reflects a misalignment between how policymakers expect families to approach the process and the realities of these families’ lives and options. For example, faced with sudden, unexpected moves, parents searching for housing may focus on meeting basic needs rather than prioritizing schools (Rhodes and DeLuca 2014). Research on housing choice programs in the form of vouchers highlights the limitations of offering “choice” amidst constraints, such as landlord discretion, that structure the options families can access (Rosenblatt and DeLuca 2012).

Yet lateness, while reflecting actions and situations of families, is a bureaucratic construct, as districts decide the meaning and implications of being “on time.” Extending the priority registration round would immediately expand access and provide more families a chance of assignment to more schools. Indeed, beginning in 2017, BPS reduced the four rounds of
registration to three. Additionally, providing same-day assignments so registration staff can identify which schools still have seats available when parents come to register could help to increase transparency for families and address the issue parents experienced of delays in hearing back. Other districts should reflect on their own school registration and choice processes to identify ways to mitigate the challenges and inequities associated with late registration.

Certainly, families exercise agency even in the face of constraints and instability as they seek to enact their preferences. Yet beyond families’ preferences and selections, bureaucratic structures also shape access to school choice. Until districts solve their “arithmetical problem,” in which there are “more students than…seats available in higher-performing, sought-after schools” (McDermott, Frankenberg, and Diem 2015:522), choice systems – despite claims of equitable access – must inevitably consign many families to options they neither prefer nor deserve. Bureaucratic structures such as priority deadlines enable efficient operations in choice contexts but create a racialized and spatially concentrated distribution of access.

RESEARCH ETHICS STATEMENT

The institutional review board at Harvard University approved this research protocol. All interview participants gave informed consent prior to their participation. Adequate steps were taken to protect the confidentiality of survey and interview participant data. Boston Public Schools provided de-identified administrative data.

ENDNOTES

1 The other two are early education schools without standardized testing. Of kindergarten general education seats remaining after Round 1, none were in schools in the top standardized test quartile; 80 percent were in schools in the third or fourth quartile.
We use September 15 as a cut-off date to include children registering near the start of the school year; “same-year” assignments reflecting mid-year moves are a different population than late registrants.

A small proportion of registrants may have been registering mid-year to begin school that same year, rather than the following fall. However, we do not expect that this substantively affected our results, particularly as we focus on kindergarteners, who are much less likely to have same-year registrations, and those registering over the summer, as school is not in session at that time.

2.3 percent of observations are missing grade information, 2.1 percent are missing race/ethnicity, 1.9 percent are missing zip code, and 2.3 percent are missing language when 2014 is excluded; these observations overlap almost entirely.

We also interviewed three individuals who were ultimately ineligible.

This does not mean English was the native language of all respondents. We present all quotations verbatim, acknowledging that respondents might have been able to express themselves more easily with researchers fluent in their native language.

Compared with grades 1–12, kindergarteners have lower late registration rates, perhaps because they are generally new to school in general, while others are typically coming to the district from other school systems, a transition that may be more likely to occur over the summer. Among kindergarteners, four-year-old pre-kindergarteners are slightly less likely to register late than five-year-old kindergarteners. Though schooling is not compulsory in Massachusetts until age six, five-year-old kindergarten may be more widely perceived as the expected time to begin school, such that kindergarten parents who miss early deadlines may be more likely to come to
the registration centers late, whereas pre-kindergarten parents might turn to other options or keep children at home instead.

As this implies, the composition of registrants also shifts over time. While white and Asian children comprise one-third of Round 1 kindergarten registrants, this proportion is halved by Round 2; after Round 4, fewer than one in eight kindergarten registrants are white or Asian. Meanwhile, the proportion of kindergarten registrants who are black or Hispanic rises from 62 percent in Round 1 to 84 percent after Round 4.

Among students in all grades, summer registration rates are higher among Spanish-speaking families (32 percent) and families speaking another language (33 percent), compared with English-speaking families (25 percent), perhaps due to recent moves from other countries.

Patterns are substantively similar when examining other neighborhood characteristics, such as poverty rate and percent white. This is unsurprising given the high correlations between these measures. We present neighborhood income here in an effort to be judicious, but this does not imply that this is the most critical dimension of neighborhoods related to late registration.

Ordered logistic regressions examining registration in successively later rounds yield substantively similar results.

Interviews focused on how families came to register when they did rather than defining their registration as “late.” Still, respondents often introduced the concept of lateness as they compared their actions with the district’s policy. For example, before raising the topic of registration timing, we asked Elias, a Bangladeshi father, if he would have liked any other information before registration. He replied that he wished he had known about early registration
priorities. Recalling his August registration, he said, “This is late… That’s why [my son] couldn’t go [to pre-kindergarten].”

Moreover, when respondents reported on the survey that they had “too much going on” to register early, extended discussions underscored the role of urgent or unanticipated situations at the time of on-time registration, such as one mother who was experiencing complications with her pregnancy during January and February.

While affluent white families are likely best positioned to be able to participate in and meet the requirements of multiple school systems, even these families may end up registering late due to the complexities of the system and the inflexibility of the bureaucratic timeline to any family circumstance (Lareau et al. 2016).

In Boston, limited staff capacity over the summer stems from staffing cuts over time as well as contractual agreements of unionized employees limiting work hours during summer months.
REFERENCES


Table 1: Survey and Interview Samples Compared with Administrative Data on Summer Registrants

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Notes: Table displays percentages and, for interviews, number of respondents. Administrative data are child-level; surveys and interviews are household-level. Percentages exclude missing data. In the survey, 3.0 percent of observations were missing race/ethnicity, 4.5 percent were missing language, 13.2 percent were missing grade, and 6.6 percent were missing zip code. In the interviews, neighborhood and income tabulations exclude the social worker.
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Multiracial</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Primary Language (2015 and 2016 only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Round 1 (%)</th>
<th>Late (%)</th>
<th>Total Number of Registrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Neighborhood Median Household Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Round 1 (%)</th>
<th>Late (%)</th>
<th>Total Number of Registrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$25,000–$50,000</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000–$75,000</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over $75,000</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total** 63.8 24.2 12.0 21,768

Notes: Percentages displayed are row percentages (e.g. 60.1 percent of Hispanic registrants registered in Round 1), pooled across years. Neighborhoods are operationalized using zip codes. Percentages exclude observations missing data on that variable.
### Table 3: Characteristics Predicting Late Registration, 2015 and 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kindergarten</th>
<th></th>
<th>All Grades</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1: After</td>
<td>Model 2: Summer</td>
<td>Model 3: After</td>
<td></td>
<td>Model 4: Summer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Priority Round</td>
<td>Priority Round</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O.R. S.E.</td>
<td>O.R. S.E.</td>
<td>O.R. S.E.</td>
<td>O.R. S.E.</td>
<td>O.R. S.E.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2.92 0.48 ***</td>
<td>2.83 0.58 ***</td>
<td>2.40 0.30 ***</td>
<td>2.03 0.23 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3.62 0.57 ***</td>
<td>3.06 0.58 ***</td>
<td>2.67 0.33 ***</td>
<td>1.97 0.20 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1.20 0.16</td>
<td>1.15 0.22</td>
<td>1.21 0.11 *</td>
<td>1.38 0.13 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Multiracial</td>
<td>1.80 0.21 ***</td>
<td>2.01 0.35 ***</td>
<td>1.57 0.15 ***</td>
<td>1.50 0.13 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>0.97 0.11</td>
<td>0.72 0.10 *</td>
<td>1.04 0.09</td>
<td>0.91 0.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.31 0.11 **</td>
<td>1.21 0.12 *</td>
<td>1.37 0.08 ***</td>
<td>1.18 0.06 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Median</td>
<td>0.99 0.003 **</td>
<td>0.99 0.005 *</td>
<td>0.99 0.002 ***</td>
<td>0.99 0.002 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Income (in thousands)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Percent White</td>
<td>1.00 0.003</td>
<td>1.00 0.004</td>
<td>1.00 0.002</td>
<td>1.00 0.002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>14,087</td>
<td>14,087</td>
<td>23,520</td>
<td>23,520</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Table displays odds ratios. Priority round is Round 1 for kindergarteners, sixth, and ninth graders and Round 2 for all other grades. We omit 2014 due to considerable missing data on language, but results are nearly identical when all three years are included. Results are substantively similar when individual zip codes are included as controls instead of the neighborhood measures presented here. White is the reference category for race/ethnicity and English is the reference category for language, as previous analyses demonstrate these groups to be advantaged in this process. Models exclude observations with any missing data (0.2 percent of observations in Models 1 and 2; 2.3 percent of observations in Models 3 and 4). Standard errors are clustered by zip code (30 zip codes). * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001. Year and grade are included as controls but are not shown.
### Table 4: Barriers to Earlier Registration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2014 Survey (n=831)</th>
<th>2015 Survey (n=787)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recent move</strong></td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>54.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just moved from another town or state</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just moved from another country</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child just came to live with me</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Information gap</strong></td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t know registration began in January</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t know timing of registration mattered</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t realize child was old enough for school</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multiple school options</strong></td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counting on alternative to BPS</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure about BPS</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Too much going on</strong></td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not feel strongly about school assignment</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: We aggregated responses into the five bolded categories. The table displays percentages, which do not sum to 100 because respondents could select multiple options. Percentages exclude missing data; 7.1 percent of observations were missing in 2014 and 8.4 percent were missing in 2015. “Child just came to live with me” was added to the 2015 survey following interviews suggesting custody changes as an important issue in late registration.
Figure 1: Neighborhood Income and Kindergarten Summer Registration Rates, 2014–2016

Notes: Points represent individual neighborhoods and are scaled by the child population; only neighborhoods with at least 100 kindergarten registrants total are included. Neighborhoods are operationalized using zip codes and labeled with corresponding commonly-used Boston neighborhood names.