

POLICY BRIEF

September 1, 2017

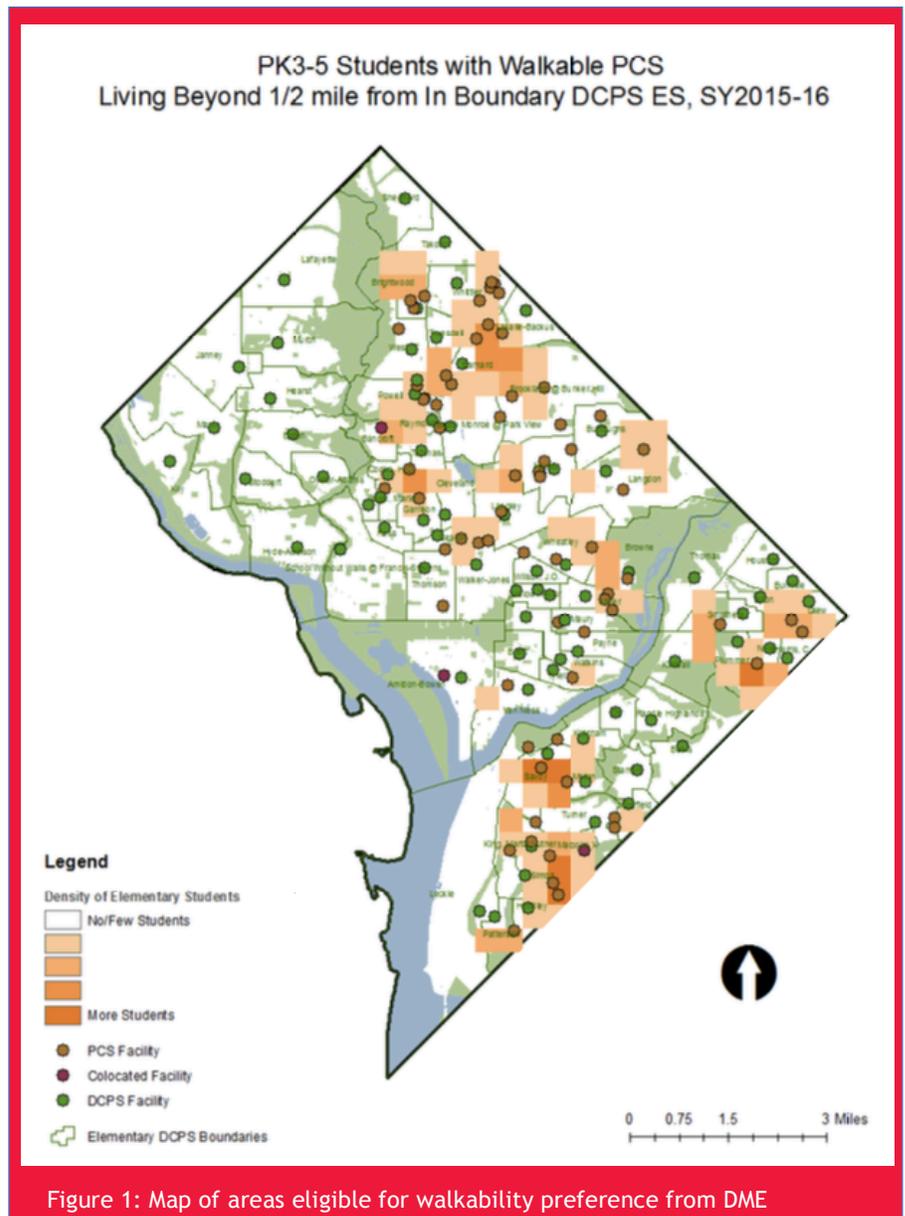
Mayor Bowser's Proposed Charter School Walkability Preference

Introduction

On Thursday, May 4, 2017, The Metropolitan Policy Center (MPC) at American University held a roundtable discussion about a recent proposal put forward by DC Mayor Muriel Bowser to provide a new preference in the school lottery for applicants who live closer to a participating charter school than to their assigned district neighborhood school, commonly referred to as a “walkability preference.” Twenty prominent housing and education policy experts gathered at American University to discuss the potential implications of such a proposal on academic achievement, community development, and social inclusion. This policy brief provides details on the discussion and specific recommendations moving forward.

What Was Proposed?

On January 30, 2017 DC Mayor Muriel Bowser proposed a walkability preference to enable public charter elementary schools to offer a proximity weight in the “My Schools DC” admissions lottery. Elementary students living within 0.5 miles of a public charter school and more than 0.5 miles from their zoned elementary school would be eligible for the proximity weight, if the charter school also opts in to offering the preference and the student ranks the school in their preference list.



The walkability preference would serve as yet another preference weight within the My School DC lottery system. Other preference weights include a sibling preference, a child of staff preference, and a transfer preference for students moving from one campus to another within the same charter school network.

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) analyzed the walkability preference proposal in February 2017.¹ They found roughly 48,000 PK3-5th grade public school students living in DC, 18,000 (37%) of which live further than 0.5 miles from their in-boundary District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) school. Of those students, 10,600 have a public charter school within 0.5 miles of their home, the largest number of which live in political Wards 5 and 8. See the map above (Figure 1), highlighting the areas with large concentrations of eligible students.



Participants discuss the potential impacts of the charter walkability preference

As part of this analysis, DME ran a simulated lottery using data from School Year 2015-2016 with the assumption that all charters would participate. Of 14,470 original applicants for PK3-5th grade seats, 1,441 (10%) were eligible, meaning that they lived within 0.5 miles of a charter school and further than 0.5 miles from their neighborhood DCPS school. Of the eligible applicants, only 254 gained new matches through the walkability preference. DME’s analysis found little net effect on at-risk applicants², observing that 42 at-risk applicants lost a match because of the preference, but 62 at-risk applicants gained a new match.

¹ “[Analysis of the Proposed Walkability Preference \(2/9/17\)](#)” DME, 2017.

² “At-risk” as defined in [DC Code § 38–2901.2A](#).

Framing Questions

After an introduction and description of the proposed walkability policy, the roundtable participants discussed three framing questions. The purpose of the questions was to facilitate a meaningful dialogue related to the potential implications of this policy.

1. How could the walkability preference affect student outcomes?
2. How would a walkability preference influence community development?
3. What might be some unintended consequences of a walkability preference policy?

Participants discussed the proposal’s potential impact on students, schools, and neighborhoods. The conversation began with a review of each question, and then focused more broadly on the proposal itself.

Potential Impacts on Students and Schools

Likely to have Minimal Impact because of Narrow Design

Participants agreed that this proposal would have minimal impact due to the exceedingly small number of newly matched students (254 out of 48,000 total elementary-aged students living in the District).

Could Reinforce Segregation Later

Though the proposal is narrow in scope, some raised concerns that, over time, the proposal could reinforce segregation within the District’s schools. By giving nearby residents a greater opportunity to gain admission to participating schools, the proposal could eventually crowd out families seeking a seat in schools outside of their neighborhoods. Like issues studied by the Neighborhood Preference Task Force in 2012,³ a walkability preference proposal could have an adverse effect on access for students in need of greater educational opportunity.

³ “[Neighborhood Preference Task Force Report for the DC City Council](#)”, DCPCSB, 2012.

Could Encourage Charters to Move to Wealthy Areas

Some participants also noted that the proposal might encourage charter schools to seek locations in affluent neighborhoods to serve a community with fewer at-risk students.

Could Undermine Neighborhood Schools

Some participants saw the likelihood that the proposal would undermine DCPS neighborhood public schools by implying that a nearby charter is, by definition, a better choice than their zoned school. In by-right neighborhood schools, parents and neighbors have guaranteed rights of access and voice. In charters, even with a potentially higher number of local students attending the same school, families do not have the same rights and may be less likely to participate.

Potential Impacts on Neighborhoods

Narrow Scope, but Could Alleviate Local Tensions

There were mixed opinions as to whether the proposal would help or hurt low-income communities. Some thought that the proposal, while small and only potentially relevant to a few neighborhoods, could help alleviate tensions between charters and their surrounding communities. Families living near charters currently put up with additional school traffic without any proximity preference in admissions.

Stokes Community Fears of Displacement

Other participants recalled community meetings in which residents expressed fears of displacement in areas eligible for the walkability preference. Affluent families could have an incentive to buy homes in eligible areas near their preferred charter schools.

“As DC is looking to increase educational equity, we should think carefully about the unintended consequences of the walkability preference. There may be ways that it exacerbates existing patterns of residential and school segregation and/or the displacement of lower-income communities and communities of color.”

- Dr. Ariel Bierbaum, University of Maryland

Other Issues to Consider

Need More Qualitative Data on Parent Choice

Participants agreed that several issues deserve further consideration related to the proposal. Quantitative analysis⁴ of lottery rankings is important and ongoing, but complementary qualitative data can also be useful for understanding how parents make decisions related to housing and school choice. Future research should also include analysis of parents who choose their neighborhood school or leave the District altogether in search of a better education for their children.

Lacks a Coherent Vision or Purpose

Some participants expressed concerns that the walkability preference proposal lacked a clear connection to a particular problem or community need. Is the goal more access to other school options, more walkable schools or greater access for the city’s most vulnerable students? Without a clear answer as to what issues the preference aims to solve, the proposal fails to justify its potential negative implications.

Other Ideas that Could Accomplish More

Several participants mentioned other policy ideas that may have do more to increase educational opportunity:

- Expand the most in-demand programs based on student waiting lists.
- Set aside a limited number of walkable seats within each charter school so that future residential migration does not crowd out those seeking access from farther away.
- Create an “at-risk” preference in school admissions, like the recommendation offered by the DC Advisory Committee on Student Assignment⁵ in 2014.
- Provide opportunities for charter schools to “repatriate” themselves into being a neighborhood DCPS school with a zoned boundary.

⁴ Glazer and Dotter. [Market Signals: Evidence on the Determinants and Consequences of School Choice from a Citywide Lottery](#), Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, April 2017.

⁵ [“Final Recommendations on Student Assignment Policies and DCPS School Boundaries”](#), DME, 2014.

Conclusions

Participants agreed that the Mayor's walkability preference proposal warrants further study and community input prior formal introduction before the DC Council. The recent controversy⁶ surrounding DCPS chancellor Kaya Henderson's special school placements proves parents' fraught relationship with the city's lottery system. Many participants felt that the walkability preference proposal represented an opportunity for affluent families to game the system by buying their way into charters of their choosing. Policymakers must carefully weigh the utility of any changes made to the lottery with the potential for lost trust from the public and negative outcomes for students, families, and communities. Policymakers and researchers should also continue to study both quantitative and qualitative data related to how parents choose schools for their children. Additionally, policymakers should take a holistic approach to education policy that considers the impacts of school choice and school siting on community development in a changing city.

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The Metropolitan Policy Center

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⁶ Davis and Jamison, "[After favoritism revealed in school lottery, D.C. parents wait on apology.](#)" Washington Post, May 21, 2017.