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INTRODUCTION

The new labor of school decision-making in an era of school choice

ETCHED VIVIDLY in my memory is a day when I was four years old. I sat in a dimly lit room playing with blocks of different shapes and answered a stranger's questions. As we sat together at a long rectangular table, the stranger showed almost no emotion. He nodded after I answered questions and jotted down notes in a medium-sized notebook. At the time, I had only a vague idea what the test was for or why the questions I was answering were important. When I left, I didn't know how to explain the test to my parents. I learned years later that I had taken New York City's Gifted & Talented (G&T) test with a testing administrator. My parents raised me in Brooklyn, New York, in the mid-1990s. When my mom learned about the city's coveted G&T program, she signed me up to be tested as quickly as she could. My parents waited anxiously for my results, wondering what would happen if my score was not above the 90th percentile.

Several months later, my parents received notice that I could attend one of the G&T schools in my borough. From there, I was tracked into a G&T class at PS3, a public school just outside the boundaries of my neighborhood. I stayed in my G&T class for only a few years before my parents decided a move to the suburbs was in my best interest. They worried about how tracked classes would shape my experiences in the school. They also wondered what would happen in fifth grade, when I would attend a middle school, and in eighth grade, when I would need to find a high school. If the pressure was so overwhelming in kindergarten, wouldn't it be even tougher later? The heightened urgency around competing for admission to schools in New York was different from their experiences walking to the neighborhood school some decades earlier, and they hoped for a simpler school enrollment process outside the city.

My parents' reflections on navigating New York City's school system over the years piqued my interest in how parents are faring more recently, as school

TABLE 1. Kindergarten choice rates New York Citywide (2007–8 to 2016–17)

Kindergarten students in all NYC public schools with valid zone assignment	School year				Percentage change over 10 years
	2007–8		2016–17		
Total	64,304		75,634		18%
Enrolled in their zoned school	46,075	72%	45,130	60%	–2%
Opted out of their zoned school	17,458	27%	27,116	36%	55%
Living in a “choice district”	771	1%	3,388	4%	339%
Exercised school choice	18,229	28%	30,504	40%	67%

Source: Data retrieved from Mader, Hemphill, and Abbas, “Paradox of Choice.”

choices beyond G&T programs have proliferated in urban areas across the country, particularly in New York City.¹ Across the nation, nearly 20 percent of families send their children to a school other than their regularly assigned public school, and enrollment in traditionally assigned public schools has decreased.² Parents may consider district transfers, magnet schools, and charter schools as alternatives to their assigned public school. Since the early 1990s, the sheer number and availability of school options in New York City have increased dramatically.³

The number of kindergarteners in New York City attending their zoned schools is a shrinking, narrow majority, as shown in table 1 and figure 1. Instead, many kindergarteners are traveling outside of their catchment zones to charter schools, schools with G&T classes and dual language programs, and traditional public schools.⁴ As figures 2 and 3 demonstrate, this is especially true for Black kindergartners in New York City. In alignment with a national policy agenda centered on school choice, options in New York City have expanded rapidly. This growth has been fueled by the New York authorization of charter schools in 1998, the development of magnet programming in school districts across the city, and the elimination of school attendance zones for schools in District 1 on the Lower East Side, District 7 in the South Bronx, and District 23 in Brownsville, Brooklyn.⁵

By vastly expanding the range of school choices, school districts also create new tasks for parents. Now that the sheer number of options has increased, making a school decision has become complex, requiring an investment of time, energy, and—for many parents—worry and anxiety. Parents now engage in time-consuming work to sift through more and more school options. They face a historically unparalleled demand to *make school choices*. The choices parents make during their children’s elementary school years can significantly influence the educational paths their children follow in middle school, high school, and

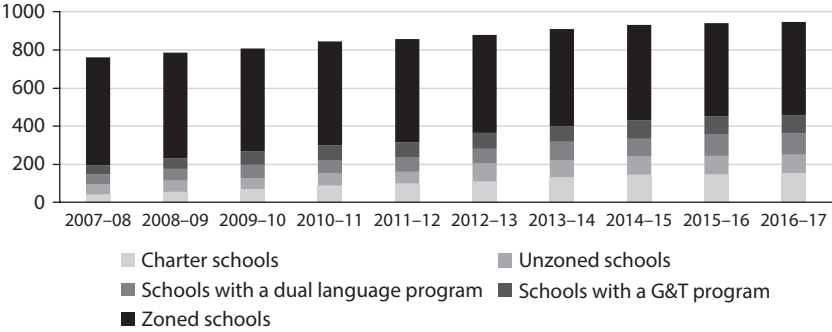


FIGURE 1. Number of elementary schools by admissions method, 2007–16.
Source: Adapted from Mader, Hemphill, and Abbas, “Paradox of Choice.”

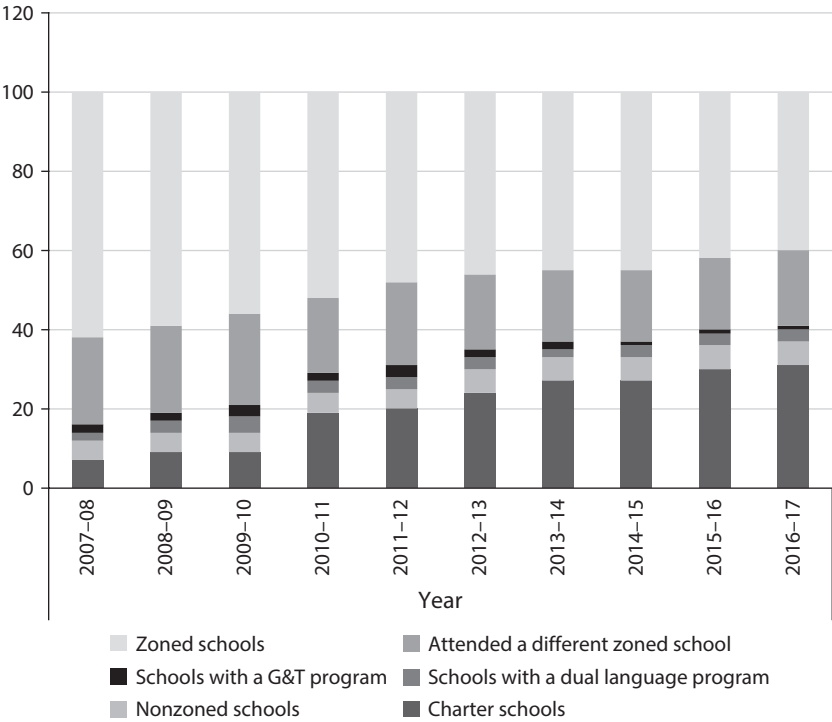


FIGURE 2. Black kindergarten enrollment by admission method.
Source: Adapted from Mader, Hemphill, and Abbas, “Paradox of Choice.”

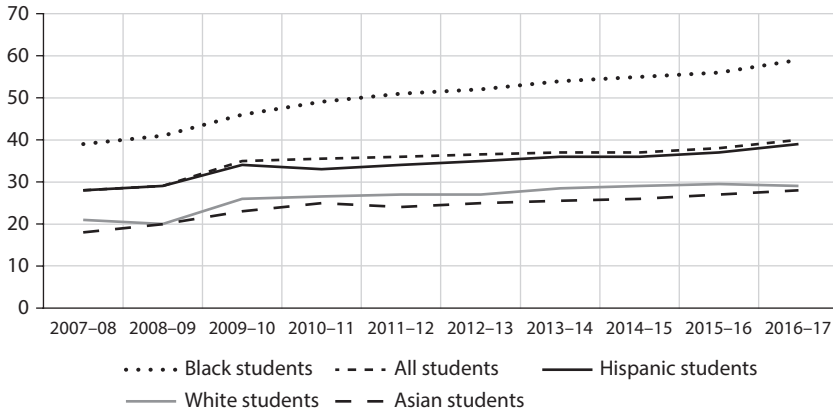


FIGURE 3. Rates of kindergarten school choice by race/ethnicity, 2007–16.
Source: Adapted from Mader, Hemphill, and Abbas, “Paradox of Choice.”

college. In this book, I illustrate how decision-making is a significant area of inequality. The concept of school decision-making labor illustrates how inequality manifests in the routine school decisions families face in their daily lives. Persistent inequalities create broad variation in how families develop and manage their labor strategies. These vast differences in turn reproduce inequities within New York City’s high-stakes school choice environment.

When the Department of Education (DOE) in New York City hosts enrollment informational sessions, the rooms overflow with parents. Websites, blogs, and books provide “how-to” guides for the enrollment process. During one fall, District 3, which encompasses Harlem and parts of the Upper West Side in Manhattan, held an informational elementary admissions event. It was a dreary October evening, but I managed to arrive at the meeting early. Twenty minutes before the start of the meeting, the seats were all filled. Mothers and fathers lined the walls and stood behind the last row of auditorium seats, anxiously waiting to hear more about admissions to pre-K, kindergarten, and G&T programs across the city. A slideshow illustrated that the process for getting into kindergarten would be a complicated one. Parents learned that applying to each of these programs would require separate application procedures and that they would have to keep track of a host of different dates. I watched as parents fumbled through their papers, took pictures of slides, and anxiously jotted down notes. A feeling of dread permeated the large auditorium as parents quickly realized the application process would be more complicated than they had anticipated.

The proliferation of school options in New York City has meant that school selection and enrollment for kindergarten is a multistep process beginning months and years before the start of the school year. Parents are expected to

attend informational sessions just like the one held for District 3, rank twelve schools in order of preference, and tour the schools they are considering for enrollment. As elementary school options increase, parents must make sense of a highly complex school choice system and manage the uncertainties of school decision-making. During our interview, Louise, a white, middle-class independent filmmaker referred to the rush to find schools as “kinder panic.” Louise explained that finding a school required an intensive investment of time and energy. She and other mothers she had come to know through various babysitting groups and park associations felt this idea of kinder panic depicted the great uncertainty they experienced and the fear they had as they navigated the application process.

A Tug of Wills

Nearly all the parents I interviewed expressed similar anxiety about the school enrollment process. The multitude of options can be overwhelming. In this book, I demonstrate how parents take on additional labor as they search for schools, form preferences for schools, and monitor their child’s experience in schools. The literature on school choice has extensively documented the rising expectations placed on parents to find the best educational options for their children. This shift reflects a more consumer-oriented approach to education, in which parents are seen as consumers who must navigate a marketplace of educational options.

I conceptualize parents’ increased expectations to make school decisions as a new form of labor parents must manage. Labor, in this context, refers to the time, effort, and resources parents invest in the process of choosing a school. Previous scholarship has identified forms of labor parents take on to raise children. For instance, mothers manage intensive care work responsibilities,⁶ working-class families work to evaluate neighborhood safety amid impoverished conditions,⁷ and families of color take on additional labor to evaluate racial inclusion in schools.⁸ While the school choice literature has identified the increasing expectations parents take on to search for schools, scholars have not conceptualized new school decision-making as a form of labor. I argue that parents’ labor requirements to search for schools are unevenly distributed. As I demonstrate, how parents engage in labor is shaped by gender and socioeconomic background and parents’ neighborhood contexts.

Over time, school choice systems have created more educational opportunities for families; however, parents are expected to engage in increased labor to make school decisions. By conceptualizing school decision-making as labor, I make visible the often-unseen work that goes into making educational decisions for children. Recognizing the school search process as a labor process deepens our theoretical understanding of the challenges families experience,

the inequities within school choice systems, and the need for better school support systems to help all families navigate school choice. Viewing school choice decision-making as labor also identifies vast disparities in parents' labor across socioeconomic background and gender. I argue that disparities in parents' decision-making labor reproduce inequalities within New York City's school choice system. To illustrate this clearly, consider the experiences of two mothers: Catherine, a middle-class Latina mother who lives on the Upper West Side, and Kelly, a working-class Black mother who lives in the Bronx.

Catherine was somewhat familiar with schools in New York City; she grew up in Queens during the 1970s and spent time working for the DOE. Catherine explained that she lived in a zone that was on the "edge." District 3 has a mix of well-performing schools and schools struggling to meet academic goals. Catherine, who is clearly aware of the options, explained, "I don't like that my apartment sits on the northern boundary of our zone. There are schools that are really great and then there are schools that are very terrible in the neighborhood. So, you know it depends, it's very hit or miss and sadly as you move south, they get better and as you move north, they get worse. So, it's just the reality."

Catherine started her school search when her daughter was in prekindergarten by reviewing school websites, visiting schools, and examining the curricula. She explained, "I invested a lot of time and money, taking off work, visiting schools, touring and speaking to administrators and teachers and figuring out my ideal setting." Catherine's research was extensive. She began the search for schools well before the start of the school year and completed her applications by the deadline. Catherine sifted through these options to determine which twelve pre-K schools to include on her list.

While her research was extensive, Catherine believed that the entire process was a waste of time. With lingering agitation, she explained, "Out of the twelve choices we got none of them. We're in District 3 and we were assigned to a school in District 5. A horrible school in District 5. When we visited, I wanted to cry."

Catherine went back to all the pre-K schools that had not accepted her daughter but soon learned that her daughter's chances were slim: "I was so far down, that dozens of children would have to leave the city in masses at each school for my daughter to even make it off of the waiting list." Catherine was desperate, but school officials explained that there was little they could do. Catherine tried her nearby pre-K, but staff there explained that they could not give her daughter a spot. Unlike in kindergarten, when all students are guaranteed a seat in their zoned neighborhood school, pre-K children do not have this guarantee.⁹

Catherine persisted. She walked into every school she applied for in her district. She was in disbelief: none of the schools had an opening, and she had

no idea what to do. She recounted, “I was told by the people at all these schools: don’t even bother, try somewhere else, we can’t do anything for you.”

At that point, Catherine took her chances calling and writing to the DOE directly:

I blew a fit. I wrote to the chancellor, and I called the office, and I just went crazy and complained and complained and complained. And I guess to get rid of me, they assigned me a person to call me back and work on my case. So, he was able to get me on waiting lists for different schools that I wasn’t on waiting lists for. These were places where I probably had a better chance of getting called.

Catherine noted that the back and forth between the DOE and the school they asked to wait-list her daughter continued through the summer. According to Catherine the ordeal turned into a “tug of wills,” and she, her husband, and daughter left for vacation with little idea of where their daughter would be attending pre-K that fall. “We spent the entire time in Europe freaking out that our child wouldn’t have a spot. When we came back, I had all these phone calls on my voicemail saying ‘your daughter has a spot at our school. Come tomorrow to claim it.’ But I was in Europe for two months, so I lost all those spots.”

Just days before the start of the school year and with some additional “fina-ling and begging,” Catherine was able to get her daughter a spot at a pre-K that she noted is “not perfect, but okay for the year.” Based on her experience for pre-K, Catherine was not looking forward to the kindergarten process. In New York City, after applying for pre-K, parents must apply again for kindergarten. Catherine described with dismay her recent experience with the application system:

The kindergarten applications opened up, and the whole nightmare begins again. The first day I opened up my application, I filled out my twelve schools, I clicked continue, and it erased all my schools and kicked me out of the website. So, I tried it again, and it did again. So, I just gave up. I’m waiting until later tonight maybe tomorrow. I’m figuring a lot of people were on it and that’s what happened but I’m going to wait and try it again, but I don’t have a good feeling about it and going into kindergarten it’s more serious because you’re trying to get a school where she can stay.

At the close of our interview that December afternoon, Catherine’s feelings of worry and desperation persisted. She was unsure of what the next school year would hold for her daughter. Would she be admitted into any of the twelve schools on her list? Would her daughter be put on a waiting list for all of the schools? Would she have to scramble once again to find a school?

Kelly's experience searching for schools in the Bronx was just as complicated and chaotic. I met with Kelly, who also grew up in New York City, in a local library just down the street from her daughter's school. I learned that, unlike Catherine, Kelly had a previous experience with the school enrollment process a decade earlier, when her now twenty-year-old daughter was a fourth grader. When Kelly's older daughter was in elementary school, a teacher recommended a local charter school. That teacher had noticed that Kelly's daughter scored lower in reading and had some trouble recognizing words. The teacher said, "I think she'll have a better way if she goes to a school named SUN." Kelly recalled that at the time she had not heard of the school, but following the teacher's recommendation, she took her daughter out of the local zoned school in fourth grade and enrolled her in SUN. Reflecting on her older daughter's progress since then, Kelly explained with pride, "That was the best thing I could do for her. She's twenty now and in college."

About ten years later, when her younger daughter was ready to attend elementary school, Kelly hoped that daughter would also be able to attend the SUN school. Her older daughter enjoyed the SUN school so much that Kelly felt it would also be a great fit for her younger daughter. Realizing that charter school admission is by lottery, Kelly also applied to several other charter schools in Manhattan.

Charter schools have their own procedures for admission, with preference given to families who live in the district, siblings, and English language learners. Kelly believed that because her older daughter attended the SUN school, her younger daughter would receive sibling preference. "When my youngest one was on the lottery, I just assumed that because my older daughter went to SUN that the little one would go right in because they were siblings. But they said it was only for one of the schools."

After finding out her daughter would not receive an admission preference, Kelly had no idea what to expect. She knew that in the past several years charter schools had become popular, and more families apply than the schools can accommodate. Shaking her head with dismay, as if reliving the experience, Kelly explained that she lost hope and the whole ordeal became "really depressing."

Kelly, like Catherine, persistently reached out to the SUN school about an open spot. "Every day, and I mean every day, I was calling asking what number is she? What number is she? I did that every day till they knew who I was." Kelly called the other charter schools as well, only to find that her daughter was even farther down the waiting list elsewhere.

Even though Kelly called all of the schools repeatedly, by the start of the school year none of the charter schools had any open spots. Left without any other options, Kelly enrolled her daughter in the local zoned school. Shaking

her head sadly, Kelly explained how she felt like she had failed: “I did not want her to go there because that’s where my daughter used to go, and it’s now a failing school. I was depressed about the whole situation.” Kelly was so disappointed in the outcome that she thought about sending her daughter to one of the Catholic schools in the area. Although private school was virtually unaffordable for Kelly, she knew the zoned school had lower rankings and did not know what else she could do.

She recalled how her daughter’s first few days at the school were tough. Each afternoon her daughter would tell her how she was the only Black student in the class and the class was entirely Hispanic.¹⁰ Kelly worried about how her daughter would fare in a class without any other Black students.

Fortunately, the SUN school called a few days later to see if Kelly was still interested in the school. Her face beamed thinking back to the moment she received the phone call. “I was at work when they called to ask if I was still interested. Before they could even finish, I said ‘Yes! Yes!’ I was in tears.” The moment was so special for Kelly that she captured it in a picture she showed me that day. She explained how she put the photo on her Facebook page. She was so excited that a spot had opened for her daughter.

Kelly later learned that a spot had opened only because a family moved out of the city. She was grateful but noted that the process was not easy. Kelly recognized that only a stroke of luck allowed her daughter to attend the charter school. She keeps this in mind during her grueling early morning travel routine. She and her daughter wake up at five forty-five in the morning and later take naps on the train to make it to her school by seven twenty-five. The commute is tough on them both, but “as long as it’s a good school, where I know she’s getting her education, I’ll do it. I hate the travel, but I’ll do it because I want the best.”

Her daughter has been at SUN since pre-K, and Kelly plans for her to stay at the school: “She’s not going anywhere. I won’t even move because I want her in that school.” Kelly loves that SUN charter school is hands-on, that school officials know all the students by name, and that they frequently call to check up on the families.

Even as Kelly spoke with joy about her daughter’s experience at the school, she remained aware of the rarity of such opportunities and how stressful the school search can be. Her daughter shared with her that students in the traditional public school—in the same building as SUN charter school—express resentment at the better services and resources the charter school students receive. Kelly explained with exasperation, “It’s really not right to me. It shouldn’t be a lottery.” Kelly was happy that the SUN school worked out for her daughter, but her own daunting and turbulent experience pointed to a glaring and hard-to-forget reality: all school choices are not equal, and a parent’s persistence, effort, and investment do not guarantee admission.

School Decision-Making Labor

Throughout this book, I examine the experiences of parents, like Catherine and Kelly, who are trying to make sense of the New York City elementary school choice process for their young children. Parents are variously frenzied as they sift through hundreds of school options across the city, bewildered by complex school quality measures, unsure of how to rank twelve schools in order of preference, or filled with unbearable anxiety as they wait months to hear back from schools. The process of making school decisions is fraught with uncertainty—an uncertainty that has increased with the proliferation of school choice options. During the past few decades families with young children have faced an ever-changing school choice landscape that is both liberating and debilitating. Choice-based educational policies have increased the school options available at the elementary level—significantly amplifying the uncertainty and complexity of school decision-making. I use the term “decision-making labor” to conceptualize how parents work to make school decisions and form school preferences. This book illustrates the different ways parents take on additional labor through the school search and how the system reproduces the very inequalities school choice policies were meant to reduce.

Researchers writing about school choice have examined how parents form preferences for schools;¹¹ others have considered the range of social and institutional advantages and disadvantages parents face.¹² Their findings suggest that how parents make school decisions is shaped by their relative social positions and access to resources. As demonstrated by Kelly and Catherine’s stories, engaging in the school search process has also become time-consuming, painstaking work. Parents spend more time than ever before navigating school options outside of their neighborhoods and discerning which school would be a good fit for each child. Parents increasingly perceive of school decision-making as an uncertain and risky endeavor, yet parents’ tactics for minimizing the potential risks and unpredictability of school decision-making are shaped by their relative social positions. As parents make school decisions, they are evaluating a variety of costs and benefits associated with different schools and hoping to minimize enrollment uncertainty.

These uncertainties are also amplified because of the neoliberal assertion that people operate as rational actors and the belief that public education should be distributed in markets.¹³ My argument offers new pathways for understanding how advantage and disadvantage operate as parents make school decisions. I examine how parents cope with the uncertainty of school enrollment. To navigate this uncertainty, parents engage in decision-making labor. I argue that school choice inequality is driven by parents’ unequal decision-making labor as they search for schools.

Similar to the managing of uncertainty that families take on in times of economic precarity or in times of danger and global calamity,¹⁴ parents perceive of school decision-making as an uncertain and risky endeavor. Psychologist Barry Schwartz notes that increasing the number of choices can be powerfully liberating and equally debilitating.¹⁵ Having a multitude of school options can have negative consequences for parents who thereby face increased expectations to select “excellent” schools.

As sociologist Marianne Cooper has shown, in an era of great insecurity families engage in “security projects”—various strategies to get by during economically risky times.¹⁶ I focus here on how security projects can be understood through the lens of urban school choice policy. Due to legislation stemming from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, an increasing number of charter schools and out-of-zone options offer families more autonomy in selecting schools.¹⁷ Parents gain more flexibility but also shoulder greater responsibility to make school decisions. Just as Cooper notes, the risks that Americans must individually manage have steadily increased. In the case of school choice, government responsibility has retracted while parents have taken on the high stakes of school decision-making.¹⁸

The expansion of school choice options limits the government’s authority in assigning children to schools and shifts school decision-making authority to parents.¹⁹ While families have always had to engage in work to raise their children, the task of deciding on a school is challenging and increasingly unpredictable. School choice policies focus on individual decision-making and require parents to engage in intense relational work to gather and evaluate information.²⁰ Parents must take on additional labor to handle their new decision-making expectations. When mothers like Catherine write letters to school administration to access schools, and when mothers like Kelly tirelessly call schools to see if enrollment slots have opened, they take on additional labor in hopes of minimizing the potential risks and uncertainty of school decision-making.

Vast economic and social differences also shape how parents engage in decision-making labor and experience the risk of school decision-making. All the parents I interviewed believed that the quality of the school would influence their child’s ability to get ahead in life. Parents managed the uncertainties of school decision-making sensitive to what their school decision would mean for their child’s future. Yet parents’ feelings of uncertainty are framed by their relative social positions and access to resources. I argue that school choice produces additional labor that is racialized, classed, gendered, and more challenging depending on home residence. Throughout this book, I argue that if parents are increasingly charged with searching for schools, we must take seriously how school choice policies reproduce inequality. We must also invest in providing broad access to high-quality public schooling for all families.

Past scholarship has evaluated the effectiveness of school choice as a reform mechanism.²¹ Often missing from this discussion is the standpoint of parents. How we study educational policies also matters for parents' experiences.²² Parents' ability to feel more secure about their school decisions is constrained by their social position and access to resources. There are many potential school opportunities, and the possibilities seem open, available, and limitless. In reality, all options are not created equally, and parents worry about the risk of making a wrong decision. School choice should provide opportunity, but schools are nested in segregated neighborhoods and not all parents have equal access to all school choice choices or have equal opportunity to get into each available school.

How Did We Get Here?

Catherine's frenzied and chaotic search for schools, Kelly's tumultuous journey to enter a charter school, and even my own parents' anxiety about school enrollment are linked to broad increases in public school options in New York City in recent decades.²³ Three decades ago, complex school decision-making may have been a New York story, but increased school options have become common in urban and suburban areas across the United States—significantly amplifying the uncertainty and complexity of school decision-making for all families of young children.²⁴

Federal and state legislation since the mid-1990s has ensured the growth of school choice and altered the accountability systems surrounding public education in New York City. The NCLB of 2001 and the Race to the Top Act (RTT) of 2011 fueled the growth of school choice options across the United States.²⁵ In addition to expanding school choice, legislation has also given families in New York City greater access to school performance data. NCLB required school performance data be made available to families.²⁶ Several years later, the RTT grants encouraged performance-based evaluations for teachers. Parents now have far greater access to school performance data, grade-specific academic standards information, and a host of new school options.

School choice legislation at the federal level significantly broadened options at the local level, particularly in New York City. Under former school chancellor Joseph Fernandez, the city expanded the availability of school choice options through a citywide school choice plan in 1992.²⁷ Over the next few years, school choice continued to expand, and in 1998 New York signed into law charter school legislation. School choice increased dramatically at the high school level throughout the 1990s and reformed dramatically following 2002, when Mayor Michael Bloomberg assumed control of New York City's public schools. These reform efforts, known as Children First, led to significant changes in the K–12

public school landscape.²⁸ In 2004, New York City introduced a universal high school system in which all incoming freshmen were required to rank up to twelve high schools for enrollment. Several years later, school choice expanded to the younger years, and in 2009 parents were first able to apply to any elementary school through a standardized admission process. During the 2013–14 academic year, New York City broadened enrollment and adopted a comprehensive on-line open enrollment system for elementary school.²⁹

The introduction of open enrollment policies in New York City over the past thirty years has allowed students to attend public school within or outside of their district across K–12 levels. Open enrollment policies seek to expand the number of public school options by dissolving geographic attendance zone boundaries.³⁰ Following national trends, several New York City school districts have also introduced experimental magnet programs, most notably the Central Park East Elementary School in East Harlem’s District 4.³¹ At the elementary level, school choice continues through a variety of schools and programs including charter, magnet, dual language, and nonzoned schools.

Today, more and more elementary students in New York City have enrollment opportunities outside of their neighborhood public schools. Compared to the early 1990s, when there were fewer than forty elementary schools with Gifted & Talented programs in New York City, there are now more than ninety. In addition, there are nearly one hundred nonzoned schools, more than one hundred dual language schools, and over one hundred fifty charter schools serving elementary students.³² Urban areas across the country have also experienced an unprecedented shift in demographics, so parents across socioeconomic backgrounds traverse cities to enroll their children in schools.³³ Given these changes, how are parents coping? How are parents handling the new expectations to choose schools in New York City, and what can we learn from them that can help us make sense of school choice across the United States?

The New York school choice process is unique due to the high levels of competition to enroll in the highest performing preschools early in a child’s education and reliance on testing and applications for enrollment into top high schools. Across the United States the evolution of school choice reflects the greater complexity of enrollment. Federal legislation and the continued expansion of options now place the burdens of research, assessment, selection, and sacrifice on parents, whose anxiety levels are rising.

The Limits of Markets-Driven School Choice Theories

The expansion of school choice policy at the national and state levels has been fueled by dominant ideologies around school choice that posit that schools will function most efficiently as education marketplaces.³⁴ Under the free market ideology, the education marketplace is meant to provide effective levels of

choice and competition.³⁵ A central motivation behind the market orientation is that increased school options will promote equity in education, providing greater access to high-quality schools for low-income families in underperforming school districts. Under this premise, parents should experience more opportunity to exercise choice and more families will have access to high-quality schools. Early market theorists also argued that detaching school assignment from a family's place of residence had the potential to decrease the consequences of residential segregation by reducing inequality across schools, drawing middle-class families to cities, and giving working-class parents greater access to higher-performing schools.³⁶

In practice, school choice policies can also reinforce segregated school environments—as they did following desegregation in 1954. Even with the introduction of greater school choice options in urban and low-income areas, the most disadvantaged parents do not always reap the full benefits of school choice.³⁷ Patterns of school segregation persist,³⁸ and charter school studies reveal that higher educated parents are more likely to participate in choice programs.³⁹ Schools can also play an active role in shaping their student body through marketing, location, and recruitment methods. These strategies can effectively “skim” students by limiting access for those with disabilities, English language learners, or those who do not perform well on standardized tests.⁴⁰

Consumer behavior theories undergird school choice policies, suggesting that, as rational consumers, parents will make logical school choice decisions and leave low-performing schools in favor of higher-performing schools. Instead, scholars of school choice explain that parental choice is constrained by access to information, social networks, and resources.⁴¹ Substantial barriers, such as having time to gather information and geographic proximity to highly rated schools, further curtail the decisions disadvantaged parents can make. Parents with greater access to cultural and social capital and advice from informed networks benefit more from the multichoice system. The most disadvantaged families and students with the greatest needs are often disproportionately excluded. Existing inequalities constrain a family's capacity to choose between schools. As a result, the practice of increasing school choice has not empowered most families as market theories predicted; instead, disadvantaged families are now responsible for choices they often cannot fulfill. The economic model does not account for the gendered, classed, and racialized disadvantages parents experience when making school decisions.

Integrating a Labor Framework into School Choice Theory

While the market framework has dominated policy conversations about school choice for decades, recent research has made it clear that parents' actual experiences are inconsistent with theories of rational consumer behavior.

Rational choice theory presumes that parents will make decisions that accurately weigh the costs and benefits. However, the various costs and benefits that parents evaluate are shaped by their relative social positions and access to resources.⁴² I argue that we need to think about school choice within a new framework centered on parents' decision-making labor as they take on the responsibility of searching for schools.

The decades-long shift in legislation and recent open enrollment policies place the onus on parents to navigate all available options. This legislative turn to expand school choice has happened in conjunction with states' retreat from responsibility for citizens. Through a labor framework, I illustrate how parents navigate their new decision-making responsibilities. I argue that educational inequality is increasingly driven by parents' uneven decision-making labor during the school choice process.

School Decision-Making Labor across Gender, Social Class, Race, and Neighborhood

Important structural factors shape how parents take on additional labor during the school search. Sociologist Shelley McDonough Kimelberg introduced the term "privilege of risk" to describe how advantaged families can accept and manage certain risks, aware that they have the financial resources and a network of support to shift their set of risks if necessary.⁴³ I describe how similar perceptions of risk shape how working-class and middle-class parents make school decisions. The concerns parents downplay and their worries inform their education preferences and strategies for gaining access to certain schools. Parents' labor strategies lead to disparate outcomes in decision-making, reproducing the very inequalities school choice policies were meant to reduce.

A school decision-making labor framework can help us make sense of the *within-family* dynamics of the choice process across class and racial and ethnic backgrounds. Between parents, school decision-making labor is shared unevenly. Gendered expectations for child-rearing require mothers to assess and manage the labor of the school search with great urgency relative to fathers. Parents' access to resources, experiences as children, and class identity shape how parents perceive of the uncertainty of school decision-making and the logics they use to make school decisions. School decision-making labor is also shaped by parents' racial and ethnic backgrounds. Persistent racism and discrimination require Black, Latina/o, and immigrant families to routinely monitor educational spaces that are known for inequitable practices. Parents from racialized groups navigate threats of marginalization as they search for schools and as they monitor their children's experiences in schools. Variations in school quality throughout New York City neighborhoods shape how families evaluate

their options and decide how far they will travel to enroll their child in a school. When parents exit their home neighborhoods for schools elsewhere, community life becomes destabilized. Parents experience this as they lament the loss of community for their children who traverse the city throughout the day, sharing few connections with children in their neighborhoods.⁴⁴

The labor framework helps us make sense of parents' experiences when choosing schools. The framework considers the work parents do on behalf of their children's education. As Lois André-Bechely notes, parents engage in *work* when choosing schools.⁴⁵ This "choice work" and the resulting labor strategies parents forge are shaped by the intersection of race, class, and gender. The additional labor parents take on during the school search is also entangled in existing inequalities in schools and further perpetuated through school choice policies. Examining school choice from the parent perspective makes clear that school districts must invest in providing high-quality school options for all families.

The Elementary School Choice Process in New York City

New York City has the largest school district in the United States.⁴⁶ The city has a long history of offering public school options and provides an ideal setting for making sense of how parents take on additional labor through the school search. While some especially middle-class parents considered private schools, the book is centered around families who were primarily considering public schools for enrollment and who ultimately enrolled their children in public schools. I center the book on public school because public school options have rapidly increased in recent decades and reflect the shifting school choice landscape for families. Nationally, families are more likely to enroll their children in public relative to private school.⁴⁷

I also focus exclusively on the elementary school enrollment process in New York City. I center the project on parents of elementary-aged children because these families often limit the distance their young children travel to school.⁴⁸ Parents also make most of the decisions for elementary students, while high school students are more independent. At the high school level, school choices are less constrained by neighborhood in New York City.⁴⁹ More broadly, early school choices affect later enrollment patterns. By studying elementary school enrollment, I can better depict parental decision-making and the impact of new enrollment procedures.⁵⁰

I began this study just a year after New York City significantly broadened elementary enrollment and expanded school choices for kindergarteners.⁵¹ Although not all five-year-olds end up attending public school in New York City, as parents can homeschool their children or opt for private schools, the

rule means that all New York City children are entitled to an education beginning in kindergarten. If parents wish to send their child to kindergarten, school officials must find a placement for the child. While each child is guaranteed a spot, in many cases it does not have to be at the local zoned school.

New York City's public elementary schools are organized into thirty-two individual districts and regulated by the DOE. These districts roughly include about two dozen elementary schools and are governed by a Community Education Council (CEC) and a superintendent. Each elementary-aged child has an assigned school that is based on the child's home address. These schools are generally referred to as zoned schools.⁵²

In 2014, New York City introduced a citywide application process for kindergarten, called Kindergarten Connect.⁵³ Under the comprehensive open enrollment plan, there are additional public school options available for kindergarten and elementary school. Nearly 50 percent of elementary schools in New York City are nonzoned, meaning they do not have a geographic zone for enrollment and are open to all students.⁵⁴ Nonzoned schools generally admit students based on a lottery. These schools are often highly desired because they typically offer a specialized or enriched curriculum. For instance, nonzoned schools offer dual language programs, G&T accelerated curriculum, and STEM or arts-related learning opportunities.

Parents can also enroll their elementary-aged children in a zoned school that is not their assigned zoned school. These schools do have a zone for enrollment but may have open seats for a given year. Parents, for instance, can select a zoned school a few blocks away within their district or a zoned school several miles away in a different district. Across New York City there are a broad array of public schools technically available to families. At the same time, zoned schools still exist, and schools are still situated in segregated neighborhoods. Generally, children have the greatest chance of being accepted to schools within their district. However, parents can list any school—within or outside the district—on the application. If parents do not complete the online application, they can apply to schools over the phone or in person at a Family Welcome Center.

In New York City, the application for public elementary school is open from November to January for the next academic year. Parents rank, list, and apply to up to twelve schools. Families hear back from schools in March. A child's chances of being accepted vary based on the admissions policies of each school. Each district in New York City provides an elementary school directory and a map search tool, which can help parents determine their child's chances of being accepted at a school based on past enrollment data.

In March, if a child is not admitted to any of the twelve schools the parents chose, the child is guaranteed a spot at the neighborhood school—usually the school in closest proximity to the child's home address. Parents are also

notified if they are wait-listed at any of their twelve preferred schools. Parents can then decide to either preregister their children at the school that has offered an enrollment option or wait to hear back from their chosen schools that may have openings for wait-listed students.

New York City also offers G&T options for students who perform at a certain level on the G&T exam. Parents can elect to have their children tested for the G&T program between kindergarten and fourth grade. The advanced curriculum is offered in two ways: a few schools offer only G&T classes, and some zoned elementary schools provide G&T curriculum as a single class.⁵⁵

Operating outside of the DOE are charter schools—publicly funded independent schools. Charter schools are nonzoned and generally admit students based on a lottery. The admissions process for charter schools is conducted on a rolling basis, but the timeline overlaps with the public school application period so parents can concurrently apply to charter schools that have application deadlines in the spring. Parents can apply to individual charter schools or use the Common Online Charter School Application. Charter schools send admission and waiting list information on a rolling basis after April. Parents' decision-making process is thus very complex and must accommodate long waiting periods, the uncertainty of waiting lists, and separate application procedures for G&T programs and charter schools.

School choice in New York City is further complicated because the rules and requirements for applications constantly change. Over the course of my time interviewing parents and observing meetings and admissions events, the DOE made several changes to the policies and procedures guiding the admission process. For instance, during the 2014–15 academic year, the DOE changed the requirements for applying to the dual language program and then reversed those same changes the following year. Over time other large changes occurred: the number of schools parents could apply to, the application deadline, and the notification dates all shifted. During the study, 3K and pre-K options expanded, providing parents with options for schooling for children at three years old.

An Unequal Landscape: Study Participants and Elementary School Choice in New York City

Relative to other metropolitan areas, New York City offers a moderate level of school choice. According to the Education Choice and Competition Index, of the 112 largest school districts across the nation, New York City ranks 65th in terms of availability of alternatives to traditional public schools.⁵⁶ Because New York City adopted a centralized enrollment system, most parents are

immersed in the same sort of search processes at around the same time, even if they experience the enrollment period differently.

Over time the rates of kindergarten school choice have increased, as shown in figure 1. In 2007 only 28 percent of New York City kindergarteners attended a school other than the one they were geographically assigned. During the 2016–17 school year, this figure jumped to 40 percent. There is also substantial racial and ethnic variation in who attends school outside of their zone. As figures 2 and 3 show, nearly 60 percent of Black kindergarten students opt out of their zoned school or live in a choice district, relative to 30 percent of Hispanic students, 29 percent of white students, and 28 percent of Asian students. Although school options for kindergarteners in New York City have substantially increased since the early 2000s, these options vary in quality and exist within segregated neighborhoods. Low-income families are less likely to engage in school choice, and advantaged families are more likely to benefit from school choice plans.⁵⁷ During the 2016–17 school year in New York City, kindergarteners who were free-lunch-eligible and English language learners were 70 to 80 percent less likely than other students to opt out of their zoned school even when controlling for race, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics.⁵⁸

Access to options outside of the zoned school also vary across New York City neighborhood. In higher-income and predominately white and Asian neighborhoods (Upper East Side, Midtown, and Lower Manhattan; District 2), families enroll in zoned neighborhood schools. In contrast, families living in neighborhoods that have been historically Black and are gentrifying (Bedford-Stuyvesant, Crown Heights, and Central Harlem; Districts 5, 16, 17) rarely send their children to the zoned neighborhood school. Extensive variation in school quality across districts also drives parents' decisions to exit the neighborhood school.

School choice options in New York City also deepen between-school segregation. In fact, schools in New York City would experience less economic and racial/ethnic segregation if all students in public schools attended their zoned schools. Students across all racial and ethnic groups who opt out of the zoned school and attend a nonzoned school enter an environment with fewer proportions of Black and Hispanic students and fewer proportions of students eligible for free lunch.⁵⁹ White families in particular tend to select schools with higher numbers of white students.

With these disparities in school access in mind, I sampled parents to participate in the study with the intention of capturing New York City's diversity and illustrating different experiences with New York City's school search process. I interviewed 102 parents of elementary-aged children in New York City. The study mainly included mothers, with twelve fathers participating. This reflects prevailing norms about child-rearing and existing research that mothers are primary caregivers. To assess parents' social class and disadvantage, each

TABLE 2. Demographic characteristics (*N* = 102)

	Middle class (<i>n</i> = 48)	Working class (<i>n</i> = 54)
Household income		
≤50,000	6	54
≥50,000	42	0
Race/ethnicity		
Asian	11	1
Black	13	28
Latina/o	11	21
White	13	4
Partnership status		
Married	29	16
Separated or divorced	5	3
Single	11	33
Single with live-in partner	3	3
Education		
No high school degree	0	6
High school degree or GED	1	17
Trade school or some college	4	21
College degree or higher	43	10
Age of parent		
≤40 years old	20	30
≥40 years old	28	24
Gender of parent		
Female	44	46
Male	4	8
Type of school		
Not zoned by address	35	28
Zoned by address	13	26
School academic rating		
ELA rating (>City average—41%)	35	22
Math rating (>City average—38%)	34	20
Distance traveled to school^a		
≤0.5 miles	12	19
≥0.5 miles	36	35
Age of child		
≤6	22	24
≥6	26	30

TABLE 2. (continued)

	Middle class (<i>n</i> = 48)	Working class (<i>n</i> = 54)
Number of children		
One child	16	16
Multiple children	32	38
Residential status		
Homeowner	20	0
Renter	28	27
Low-income housing	0	27
Time in neighborhood		
≥10 years	21	30
≤10 years	27	24
Neighborhood poverty^b		
Low poverty (≤20%)	14	6
Above average poverty (21–30%)	33	38
High poverty (30–40%)	1	10
Residential borough		
Bronx	4	16
Brooklyn	9	4
Manhattan	28	33
Queens	6	1
Staten Island	1	0

a. Distance categories selected based on New York City transportation eligibility parameters (NYC Public Schools, “Transportation Eligibility”).

b. Poverty levels retrieved from the American Community Survey and augmented by NYC Opportunity (“Poverty Measure”).

interviewee responded to a demographic survey that captured their education, income, job type, access to government assistance, and experiences with economic challenges.

Across the sample, 12 participants were Asian, 41 were Black, 32 were Latina/o, and 17 were white. In terms of income, 41 percent earned above \$50,000, and 52 percent had a college degree or higher. Parents were classified as middle-class if they or their partners had managerial jobs, college degrees, and household incomes over \$50,000. Those earning less than \$50,000, without managerial roles or college degrees, were classified as working class. For more information on the demographic characteristics of the parents I interviewed, see table 2 and the Methodological Appendix.

Interviews with a diverse sample of New York City public school parents revealed that while school choice policy is intended to broaden opportunity and promote equity, school choice in New York City deepens inequality by further segregating students by socioeconomic status, race, and student ability and limiting opportunities for students who remain in zoned schools. Parents' process for making school decisions and sorting school options to access higher-performing schools also perpetuates inequality.⁶⁰ Families who opted out of their zoned schools often enrolled in schools with higher test scores, leaving behind concentrations of low-performing and more disadvantaged students in zoned schools.

This deepened inequality is also a consequence of unequal engagement with school choice options. School choice policies place the onus on individual parents to find high-quality schools for their children. As a result, parents expend a significant amount of effort during the school search process, which takes an emotional toll. For families facing barriers, the search requires even greater time investment. I argue that unequal participation in school choice is a result of the additional labor required to search for schools in New York City. Educational inequality is fueled by parents' uneven decision-making labor through the school search process.

Plan of the Book

Each chapter in this book builds an argument for how parents manage the uncertainties of school decision-making by taking on additional labor through the school search. Chapter 1, "A Mother's Duty: Gendered Work and the School Search Process," illustrates how gendered expectations of caregiving influence how families manage school decision-making in the home. In this chapter, I discuss intensive mothering ideologies, which conceptualize the long-standing belief that mothers must invest time and energy in raising children. Throughout this chapter, I highlight mothers' and fathers' accounts of the school choice process. I identify important differences in the school search process for single fathers and married fathers and for low-income and middle-income mothers. I conclude that while social class differences shape mothers' experiences through the school search, mothers absorb more of the labor of school decision-making than do fathers, regardless of class. Comparing the experiences of mothers and fathers through the school search, I also find that regardless of partnership status or socioeconomic background, mothers take on the labor of researching school options and evaluating school preferences. This chapter identifies important household-level inequalities in how school decision-making labor is experienced.

Chapter 2, “‘What I Want for My Kids’: Classed Work and Parenting Search Logics,” describes how parents take on additional labor through the school search by crafting class-based search logics. I profile the working-class parents who invest in the familiar, traditional neighborhood school. I also identify the working-class and immigrant parents who forge search logics in vastly different ways by searching for schools that counter the schools they attended as children. Last, I profile middle-class parents who resist standardization and encouraged individuality through nurturing-oriented search logics. All the parents, regardless of class, strongly believed that education was key to future success, yet they approached school decision-making differently because of variation in their perceived uncertainties about schools. Tracing parents’ sociohistorical biographies, constructions of their childhoods, and educational philosophies, the chapter provides a framework for how parents engage in school decision-making. I argue that class inequality substantially shapes the decision-making logics parents use to search for schools, creating uneven labor through the school search process.

Chapter 3, “You Don’t Really *Feel* the Diversity: Racialized Work and the Search for a Racially Inclusive School,” examines the education work Black, Latina/o, and immigrant parents take on to identify safe and inclusive spaces for their children. Issues of race, ethnicity, and culture shape how these parents engage in school decision-making. This chapter identifies how racialized families across class backgrounds monitor the racial climate within schools to protect their children from marginalization. I discuss the various ways Black, Latina/o, and immigrant families navigate the school search to create security for their children. I find that the additional diversity work they take on requires them to manage marginalizing experiences from school staff and administrators and to monitor their children’s experiences in schools following their enrollment decisions. This chapter also highlights parents’ feelings of insecurity when they are unable to find racially inclusive spaces for their children or when the schools they believe will support their children do not. I argue that race-based discrimination in schools and continued residential segregation shape how marginalized parents are able to approach their school decisions and which schools feel accessible and safe for their children.

Chapter 4, “Dealing with the World Outside the Door: Community Work and Cultivating Neighborhood Engagement,” considers the broader neighborhood context that shapes parents’ school decisions and neighborhood engagement. Here, I evaluate how parents forge neighborhood interaction strategies as their neighborhoods undergo demographic shifts and as school choice expands traditional neighborhood boundaries. This chapter examines how school choice availability complicates how parents make school decisions and challenges parents’ ability to build community ties for their children. Parents

contend with the loss of community they experience when their children attend schools outside their home neighborhoods. I argue that parents' neighborhood interaction strategies vary according to their residential context and social class background. Some parents draw closer to neighbors to build community, and others distance themselves from neighborhood life to protect their children. This chapter helps us understand how parents make sense of their school decision-making in the context of their children's neighborhood experiences. Because schools are nested in segregated neighborhoods, not all parents have equal access to school choices or equal opportunity to enroll in each available school. The uneven labor required to find and access schools based on home neighborhood drives parents' uneven experiences interacting in their neighborhoods.

The final chapter synthesizes all the previous arguments to explore the future implications of school choice expansion. I revisit the broader labor framework for the study and describe parents' ongoing uncertainties for the years to come. This chapter also synthesizes the inequities across social class, gender, race and ethnicity, and place of residence in the context of school choice. I demonstrate that educational inequality is increasingly driven by uneven decision-making labor during the school search process. If parents are expected to engage in increased decision-making labor, we must take seriously the persistent constraints families experience and parents' needs for greater support. I argue that rather than broadening opportunity, school choice policy places the burden on parents to find ways to equalize school opportunities. My conclusion is twofold: I offer suggestions for how districts can invest in improving the choice experience for parents and propose alternatives to current models of school choice that would ensure greater equity.

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