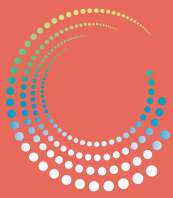


# Building a More Equitable Enrollment System in Los Angeles



**PARTNERSHIP**  
FOR LOS ANGELES SCHOOLS



policy  
brief



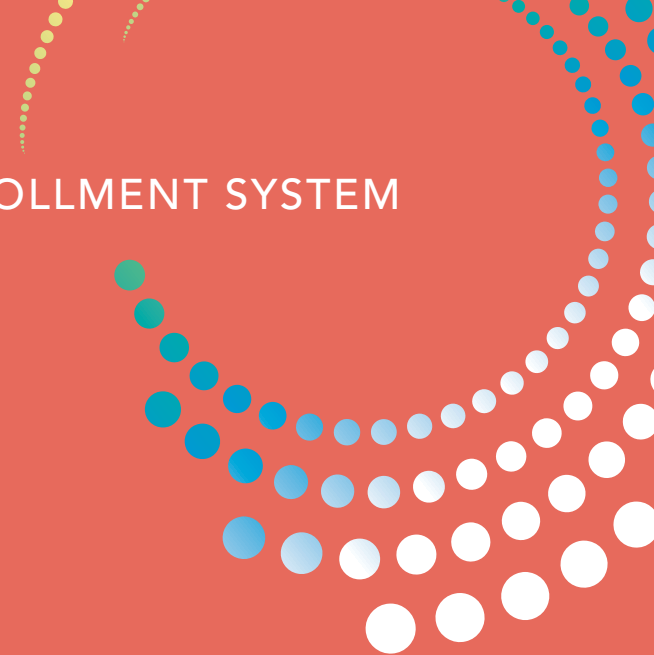
about the  
**PARTNERSHIP FOR LOS ANGELES SCHOOLS**  
and this  
**POLICY BRIEF**

The Partnership for Los Angeles Schools is a non-profit supporting school transformation in Los Angeles. The Partnership's network includes 19 Los Angeles Unified School District (LA Unified) schools in Boyle Heights, South LA, and Watts, serving over 15,000 students. Our transformation model combines rigorous and innovative instructional leadership programs with authentic community partnerships and family engagement to transform district public schools and lead system-wide reforms. As part of this work, we advocate for more equitable district policies to better support high need schools and communities.

Based on the experiences of our schools and the students and parents they serve, we have actively advocated for a better enrollment system in meetings with district officials, board members and partner organizations over the past several years. Now that the District has endorsed this position, we are optimistic that positive change toward a more equitable system is possible. This paper is intended to spark further conversation and build alignment on priorities for a new Los Angeles enrollment system. The content is based on our experience and conversations with school staff, parents and students, as well as our research of other school districts who have implemented unified enrollment systems.

This policy brief is part of a series on critical education policy issues made possible by the generous support of the Weingart Foundation.

# BUILDING A MORE EQUITABLE ENROLLMENT SYSTEM IN LOS ANGELES



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## SUMMARY

This policy brief examines the opportunities and challenges Los Angeles faces as it moves toward a unified K-12 enrollment system. The concept of a unified enrollment system is to offer families a single process, timeline and system for selecting a school for their student to attend. Los Angeles Unified School District (LA Unified) Superintendent Michelle King has repeatedly endorsed this concept and planning is underway within the district.<sup>1</sup> In support of the district's design and implementation of this system, we discuss five guiding principles and key recommendations we believe are critical to success:

- Include all publicly-funded schools;
- Make the system simple and user-friendly;
- Make important school information accessible and comparable;
- Offer equal opportunity for all students to attend high quality schools; and
- Meaningfully engage stakeholders

Given the complexity of changing district-wide enrollment systems, the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools recommends a multi-step implementation plan. The first step is to unify application timelines starting in fall 2017 — as LA Unified has announced in its plan to do. The next stage of implementation should be to create a unified information platform and unified application, starting in fall 2018. Finally, we envision a unified student assignment and enrollment system starting in fall 2019.

## BACKGROUND

Families in Los Angeles have more opportunity to exercise school choice than ever before. **The assumption that children will attend their default district-run neighborhood school is no longer the norm.** Families may also select a different district-run school, a magnet, a charter school, or a private school (to name just a few of the more prominent options). The table to the right details the change in total enrollment by school category between 2000 and 2015. There is considerable growth in enrollment across all school options except traditional LA Unified schools, where enrollment has declined. LA Unified is the second largest school district in the nation, serving over 550,000 students in district-run schools, but its enrollment has declined by more than 100,000 students in the last 10 years.

In many ways, the increase in school choice is an advantage to families, particularly those living in neighborhoods with lower performing schools. Giving families the ability to choose which school to enroll their child in holds the promise of access to higher-quality school options and/or specialized programs that will better serve the individual needs of their students. But increased school choice also creates complications for families, schools, and the education system.

**Los Angeles School Choice Enrollment (2000-2015)**

Option	Enrollment in 2000	Enrollment in 2015
Magnet Programs	53,000	73,000
Affiliated Charters	<1,000	42,000
Independent Charters	<5,000	101,000
Private	109,000	158,000



## PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

Families with the greatest needs are less likely to exercise school choice. Research from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has documented this dynamic and attributed it to the barriers of inadequate information, lack of convenient transportation, and uneven school quality close to their home.<sup>2</sup> The consequence is that **school choice can lead to increased segregation and concentration of need, as families with more resources and social capital choose alternatives to their traditional neighborhood school.** This can be seen in a comparison of incoming magnet versus traditional district school students within the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles for the 2016-2017 school year.

The table on the next page compares Boyle Heights magnet schools with traditional district schools' demographics and performance indicators. In the three examples below, both magnet and main programs share campuses but students take classes only within their specific programs. At all three campuses, incoming magnet students started the year with significantly different characteristics and needs compared with their classmates enrolled in the traditional main campus. Students in the traditional schools were more likely to be English learners, more likely to have disabilities, and more like to have lower scores on the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) summative assessments from the previous year. This comparison suggests that the proliferation of school choice is not equally accessed by all families and that the students and families in different school options have different characteristics.

*“It takes considerable parental involvement to successfully enroll into a magnet school and so we see more involved parents at magnet schools. Students at traditional neighborhood schools typically don’t actively choose that school. They went because it was their neighborhood school. Research and evidence suggest that parent involvement leads to more prepared students and consequentially higher performing students. And so we see a difference in parents and students across school type that is largely determined by parent’s ability to navigate the magnet enrollment system.”*

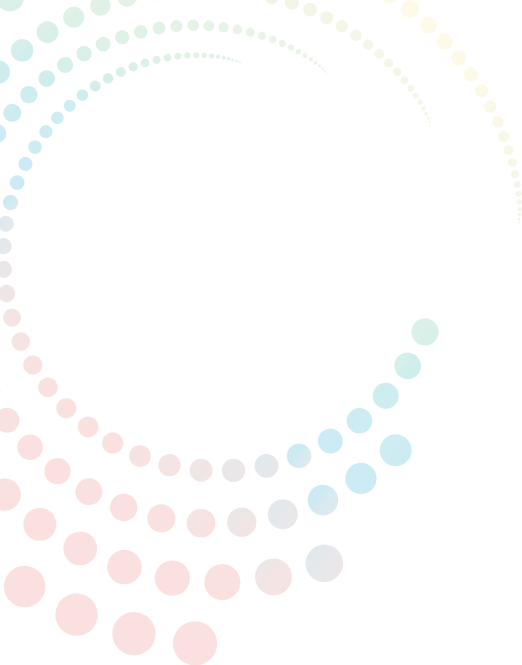
—Boyle Heights principal with experience at both magnet and traditional district schools

“[Enrollment] is like jumping through hurdles. I still believe it can and should be a lot simpler. I know there are a lot of families that just settle for the easiest route, which may not be the best for their child.”

—South Los Angeles mother



Boyle Heights Student Demographics 2016-2017						
	Roosevelt 9th Graders		Hollenbeck 6th Graders		Stevenson 6th Graders	
	Magnet	Main	Magnet	Main	Magnet	Main
<b>Total students</b>						
Enrollment	152	324	62	78	51	316
<b>Ethnicity</b>						
Hispanic	99%	98%	97%	96%	94%	99%
<b>English Learners</b>						
LTEL & LEP (Long-term English learner and students with limited English proficiency)	7%	18%	16%	38%	6%	25%
<b>Disability</b>						
SDP (Special-day program)	0%	5%	2%	9%	0%	10%
<b>Gifted</b>						
GATE (Gifted & talented education)	37%	10%	24%	1%	49%	7%
<b>SBAC ELA in previous year (2015-16)</b>						
Met or exceeds standards on Smarter Balanced English language arts assessment	45%	21%	44%	13%	57%	21%
<b>SBAC Math in previous year (2015-16)</b>						
Met or exceeds standards on Smarter Balanced math assessment	35%	10%	26%	8%	47%	8%




The unequal access to school options can be attributed to current system complexity. LA Unified enrollment currently offers numerous programs that fall within different enrollment timelines and require separate application processes. As a parent or student, the experience can be daunting to navigate. The first challenge is simply understanding which options are available. The second challenge is finding information about these options, to be able to compare and make decisions about which to pursue. The third challenge is completing all the application requirements, each of which take time and run on a separate calendar. Added all together, this sets up systemic barriers to families understanding and accessing their options.

This complexity can also contribute to a number of undesirable secondary outcomes on schools and the greater education system. The fragmented enrollment timeline often leads to inaccurate enrollment projections as many students receive multiple school offers from different school options. With multiple

Los Angeles Unified School District School Options and Timelines (2017-2018 Timeline)			
Choice Programs	Application Timeline	Placements Announced	Deadline to Accept or Decline Placement
Zones of choice: specific to high school students	Feb 1– Feb 28	Mar 15 – 31	Apr 17– May 12
Magnet schools	Oct 4 – Nov 10	March	April
Schools for advanced studies	Year round		
Dual-immersion programs	Year round		
Inter-district permits: Incoming and outgoing students	Feb 1 – Apr 30	30 days after application	No deadline listed
Open enrollment	May	Early to mid-June	No deadline listed
Charter schools	Varies by school. Application deadlines range from Feb – Jan		

*The chart above documents the upcoming 2017-2018 school year choices and enrollment calendar.*





deadlines and without a clear process for communicating enrollment decisions across school systems, **schools often do not know true enrollment numbers until the first day of school. This leaves schools unable to plan because they do not know what students they are truly serving.** Without adequate time to prepare, schools are unable to plan out budgets, facilities, staffing or instruction. Inaccurate budget determinations can compound the resource difficulties for schools that already experience declining enrollment and the resulting declines in funding.

A cumbersome system may also contribute to the ongoing decline in district enrollment. Difficulty navigating the system can push a family to enroll outside the district. For example, one student in Boyle Heights told us he decided to enroll in a charter school because he found the district’s enrollment process so frustrating. As he described it, “I spent many hours trying to figure out the system—it is a very complicated process.” More broadly, traditional neighborhood schools often struggle to market themselves to families exercising choice because there either is no clear process, or (in the case of zones of choice) the process comes after magnets and charters have already enrolled students.

## POLICY GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

This policy brief explores potential remedies to these challenges and argues that **LA Unified faces an equity imperative: to provide and regulate school options so:**

- 1) all families have equitable access to a high quality education; and**
- 2) all schools operate on a level playing field with common requirements for access.**

The Partnership strongly supports Superintendent Michelle King’s commitment to implement a unified enrollment system as it represents a critical opportunity for LA Unified to fulfill this equity imperative.



The overall policy goal for unified enrollment should be to increase equity and access to a quality education for all Los Angeles families. This goal should guide implementation and design element decisions. More specifically, we can use the following objectives to assess the success of unified enrollment in achieving the policy goal:


- Increase socio-economic and sub-group diversity in schools
- Increase percentage of low-income families utilizing school choice
- Increase percentage of students who attend their first-choice school
- Increase student and parent satisfaction with school assignment

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

As LA Unified designs a unified enrollment system, the Partnership recommends it use the following principles to guide system design and ultimately achieve the goals and objectives outlined above. Using these principles will help ensure that families have an equal opportunity to exercise choice and send their student to a school that fits their unique needs.

### Guiding Principle 1: Include all schools

The Partnership believes it is important to include all publicly funded school programs in unified enrollment: magnets, dual language immersion, early education, advanced placement schools and charters. We recognize that in our current context integrating all schools may not be feasible in the short-term. However, there is significant value in including all school options in unified enrollment, and we believe that the district should plan for the eventual inclusion of charters even as it embarks on a district-only system in the short-term.

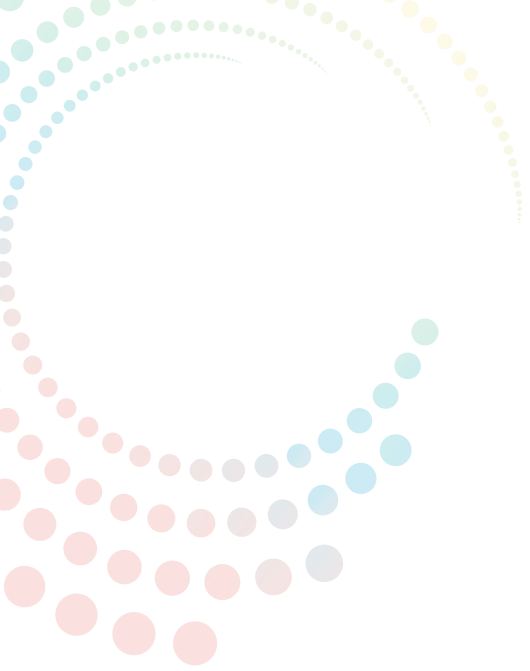


Full participation across school options will increase families' access to information and opportunities for their students. Instead of navigating multiple processes, timelines, and sources of information, they will be able to learn about and access their options in one place. Furthermore, **including all school options will level the playing field between schools.** By unifying the enrollment processes and rules, no particular school type will be advantaged or disadvantaged by the timeline and processes, since all schools will participate in the same system. Since more students with higher needs will be able to participate in a unified enrollment system, this should decrease the concentration of need in traditional neighborhood schools, as more students access other school types. Additionally, by incorporating all public schools, all schools will have a more accurate prediction of total school enrollment for the upcoming school year and can plan and allocate resources accordingly. Lastly, including all school options will help the district plan and better understand what families care about and are looking for in a school, which can inform school management decisions.

### Guiding Principle 2: Make the system simple and user-friendly

To encourage broader and more equitable access to enrollment options, it is important to structure a simple and user-friendly application and enrollment process. LA Unified can achieve this principle through implementation of an easily navigable online platform (with access points for those without home computers), clear explanation of student assignment and application rules, and easy processes to apply and enroll students.

To achieve simplicity, we encourage **one application with one timeline, and the same application requirements across all district-offered school programs.** These components will allow



families to easily navigate the application process and encourage access to all available school options.

Families should be able to easily understand what schools their students can apply to and how student assignments are determined. Most school districts with unified enrollment systems offer a variety of ways families can apply: online, in person at schools, in person at a district parent center, or over the phone. We recommend that any online process be mobile phone compatible. Schools, parent centers and district offices should also be equipped and prepared to support parents with computer access, paper forms and personnel who can support the process. In addition, we encourage notification of student assignment through the online system or by mail if the family elects this option on their application. It is important to offer both options to account for family preference and access.

**Guiding Principle 3: Make important school information accessible and comparable**

**Families need access to high-quality information about school options that they can use to compare schools.**

This should include quantitative and qualitative information on school culture, academics, socio-emotional indicators, programs, themes, location and public transportation options, so families can make informed choices about the school they want to attend. For academic indicators, we believe it is important to include academic growth measures. Families should also be able to easily access and compare state accountability ratings for each school. We recommend providing a variety of ways for families to access information on schools: in-person through fairs and family centers, online

through school search tools, and in print through a school information guide. Within these modes, all information should be translated into languages widely used in Los Angeles.

**Guiding Principle 4: Offer equal opportunity for all students to attend high-quality schools**

The unified enrollment system should be designed to give all families the opportunity to attend high-quality schools. Across school systems, there are many different ways to design student assignment determinations. In order to avoid unfair assignments, we recommend consistent district-wide established policies. We also believe policies should encourage greater access to high-quality schools for high-need students. For example, assignments can take into account students' socio-economic status in order to combat concentration of need in a subset of schools.

For students not in transition years, it is important to allow students to stay in their school if they choose. However, for transition years we recommend requiring all families to fill out an application even if they want their neighborhood school option. This will give families greater exposure to all options. It also will help the school district track student assignments and family motivations for applying to schools.

As part of implementing unified enrollment, we recommend developing a systematic approach to determining when new options are needed for a neighborhood, whether there are too many options and when additional resources are needed to improve existing options. Unified enrollment should inform district management of all school options in order to





provide high quality school options across all neighborhoods.

### Guiding Principle 5: Engage stakeholders

At all stages of design and implementation, we encourage extensive engagement with relevant stakeholders. In particular, we recommend continual engagement with Los Angeles families and school entities, who will be impacted most strongly by the change.

Parent opinions are important to ensure that the implementation of this system will achieve the above guiding principles. When CRPE surveyed Denver and New Orleans families, parents revealed that they felt the new system lacked personalization and felt that an online system (not the family) chose their student's school assignment.<sup>3</sup> **Widespread engagement and information is needed on how the process works.** In order for families to feel ownership and investment in the enrollment process, it is also important to allow for transparent communication on student assignment processes so that parent expectations are realistic. While unified enrollment can increase access to choice, it does not change the number of quality schools that families have in close proximity to them. Therefore, it is crucial to be transparent about this reality to parents and important to use this system to help determine where families may need more options and where there is excess capacity.

It is also important to engage individuals and organizations working with public schools and who have interacted with the school choice landscape. In addition to establishing a diverse taskforce to help design unified enrollment, it is important to consider who will give oversight to the process. Examples from other contexts include the district, city government, and separate non-profits.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The Partnership recommends the following action steps as LA Unified designs and implements its enrollment system:

- Bring together a diverse taskforce of school operators and community partners to help guide enrollment process decisions and parent outreach efforts.
- Examine current school options, boundaries and zones of choice and determine if they encourage diversity and equal access to high-quality school options.
- Determine standard student enrollment criteria and priorities that encourage widespread access to all enrollment options.
- Engage family focus groups to design the system: What information is meaningful to Los Angeles parents when enrolling their student? What will make the process more simple and accessible?
- Design a comprehensive school search tool that identifies which school students' qualify for.
- Provide in-person and online opportunities for families to learn about school options.
- Disseminate information on school culture, academic growth, socio-emotional indicators, programs, themes, demographics, distance, and public transportation options.





# APPENDIX

## LEARNING FROM OTHER CITIES

**Boston**  
[discoverbps.org/](https://discoverbps.org/)  
[bostoncompact.org/wp-content/uploads/EnrollBostonProposal.pdf](https://bostoncompact.org/wp-content/uploads/EnrollBostonProposal.pdf)

Boston’s system is notable for its appealing user interface and for its ongoing evolution. Its current enrollment system was created in 2013 to make enrollment easy, accessible and equitable for all families in Boston. Boston Public Schools’ (BPS) system allows families to use a discovery tool to determine the schools they qualify for by entering in their address, the grade their child is entering, and if there are other children in the family who already attend a BPS school. After entering in this information, the online tool displays the family’s customized list, which they then can sort. The current BPS system does not include charters, but the mayor’s office is actively pursuing a new system that would bring together charters and districts school into one unified system:

Please enter your student's name, address and sibling school information to see schools.

First Name	Last Name	Grade ▾
Street Number	Street Name	ZIP

Enter sibling's school (optional) + Add another child

**Next**

**Denver**  
[schoolchoice.dpsk12.org/](https://schoolchoice.dpsk12.org/)

Denver’s enrollment system is notable for how it manages all schools in a portfolio model. The system is operated by the district, guided by an independent SchoolChoice Transparency Committee, and includes charter schools.







## Newark [newarkenrolls.org/](http://newarkenrolls.org/)

Newark's system is notable for how it gives enrollment preference to students in need of additional support: students living in extreme poverty, students with disabilities, English language learners, and over-age and under-credited students. They also give priority based on sibling status and proximity to neighborhood schools. These enrollment preferences are intended to support more equitable access to school choices, including the most competitive magnets and charter schools.



## Washington, DC [myschooldc.org/](http://myschooldc.org/)

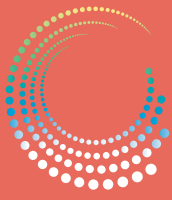
Washington, DC's system is notable for its simple, user-friendly online platform. On its homepage, the user immediately sees links for "learn," "apply," and "enroll." This allows a family to quickly access the information they are interested in. This along with a menu above travels with the user allowing them to navigate successful throughout their visit.

The My School DC website also includes tips highlighted throughout the website to ensure parents know the best way to utilize the system. Additionally, the website offers animation videos to explain the application process and how enrollment placements are assigned. There is also a link for those that missed the deadline on the first page. D.C. also provides a comprehensive, easily navigable school comparison tool pictured below. Families are able to filter through distance, in-boundary school, grade level and if the school offers special programs, sports, uniforms, before or after school care. From there, parents are given basic comparable information. They can see more comprehensive information on each schools individual page. The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education oversees MySchool DC staff. They are governed by a Common Lottery Board, which has representation from both DC Public Schools and participating public charter schools. They also have Parent Advisory Council and committees of participating local education agencies that provide input to the board on how to design the process and determine their parent outreach efforts.



#### References

- <sup>1</sup> "How realistic is L.A. Unified's common enrollment application plan?" *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 2016. "How the relationship between L.A. Unified and charter schools is 'like a middle school dance'." *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 2016.
- <sup>2</sup> DeArmond, Jochim, and Lake. "Making School Choice Work" Center on Reinventing Public Education. 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> Gross, Betheny, Michael Dearmond, and Patrick Denice. "Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice: Early Evidence from Denver and New Orleans." Center on Reinventing Public Education (2015). May 2015. Web.
- <sup>4</sup> [schoolchoice.dpsk12.org/schoolchoice/](http://schoolchoice.dpsk12.org/schoolchoice/)
- <sup>5</sup> [planning.dpsk12.org/enrollment-reports/strategic-regional-analysis](http://planning.dpsk12.org/enrollment-reports/strategic-regional-analysis)



# PARTNERSHIP FOR LOS ANGELES SCHOOLS

20th Street Elementary School • 99th St. Elementary • 107th Street Elementary School • Carver Middle School • Figueroa Elementary • Gompers Middle School Grape Street Elementary School • Griffith Joyner Elementary • Hollenbeck Middle School • Huerta Elementary • Jordan High School • Markham Middle School • Math, Science & Technology Magnet Academy at Roosevelt • Mendez High School • Ritter Elementary School • Roosevelt Senior High School Santee Education Complex • Stevenson Middle School • Sunrise Elementary

1055 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 1850 | Los Angeles, CA 90017 | 213-201-2000 | [partnershipla.org](http://partnershipla.org)

