



NO VELVET ROPES

How NYC Charter Schools Make Opportunity Accessible



APRIL 2014

It's about great public schools.

Executive Summary

As New York City begins a new educational era, news accounts still divide our public schools into two categories: charter schools and traditional public schools. Charter schools' critics claim the difference is in the selectivity of "elite charter schools," in contrast to "public schools, which take all comers."¹ Yet parents, and particularly low-income parents, know the truth: not all district-run schools are equally accessible to the public. Between formally selective admissions policies and the economically segregating effect of the private housing market, many district public schools are effectively off-limits to hundreds of thousands of families—as if surrounded by invisible velvet ropes.

Working within this selectively public system, public charter schools play a critical and genuinely *progressive* role: providing disadvantaged families some of the city's most accessible and high-quality school options.

An analysis of publicly available data shows:

- Approximately **one third (32%) of the city's middle and high school seats are filled by students who applied through a selective admissions process.** These schools enroll a disproportionately low number of students who are Black, Hispanic, or from low-income families.
- Most traditional district elementary schools admit students who live in a geographic "zone," but **school zones reflect the same dramatic inequalities of access as the housing market itself, and residents of affluent neighborhoods treat public school assignment as part of their private housing investment.** Many other elementary schools and programs are designated for Gifted & Talented students, as judged by test scores.
- **Charter schools enroll students by random lottery,** without regard to academic record. Most charter schools operate in one of three lower-income areas of New York City: Harlem, Central Brooklyn, and the South Bronx. **In these areas, charter elementary schools were twice as likely as district schools to earn an "A" in Student Progress, an indication of students making academic gains over time,** on the 2012-13 NYC Progress Reports (34% vs. 17%).
- Charter schools also offer accessible opportunity in middle school and high school, when students are more likely to travel from their local neighborhoods. Charter middle and high schools citywide were **more likely to earn an "A" in Student Progress than every type of district school except the most selective,** which admit students strictly by test.

Introduction

“Who’s really leaving children behind? Is it public schools, which take all comers — and get blasted when their test scores aren’t up to par? Or elite charter schools...?”

NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION NEWSPAPER NEA TODAY²

“Applicants will be screened based on their academic record, performance on the most recent State Math and ELA tests, results of a math and writing exam at ESMS, and a short interview with a faculty member.”

ADMISSIONS WEB PAGE FOR A DISTRICT PUBLIC SCHOOL ON MANHATTAN’S UPPER EAST SIDE³

As New York City begins a new educational era, news accounts still divide our public schools into two categories: charter schools and “traditional” public schools. Charter school critics claim the difference is in the selectivity of “elite charter schools,” in contrast to “public schools, which take all comers.”⁴ Yet parents, and particularly low-income parents, know the truth: not all district-run schools are equally accessible to the public. Between formally selective admissions policies and the economically segregating effect of the private housing market, many district public schools are effectively off-limits to hundreds of thousands of families —as if surrounded by invisible velvet ropes.

New York City’s public charter schools, by contrast, are legally required enroll students by random lottery. While the question of whether charter schools enroll a wide enough cross-section of students is an important one, charter critics’ favored talking point that district schools are “open to all” is simply not true.

In fact, analysis of enrollment policies and achievement data shows that New York City’s public charter schools play a critical and genuinely progressive role: providing disadvantaged families some of the city’s most accessible *and* high-quality school options. Accessibility is critical because not every family can afford to live in an affluent school zone, and not all students qualify for admission to a selective public school.

Yet access is only part of the story; what parents really want is access to an *effective* school.

This paper uses data from the New York City Department of Education to describe the accessibility and academic impact of New York City’s system of public schools, district and charter.

We first describe how New York City’s public school choices and admissions policies fall on a spectrum on which charter schools are among the most accessible to the general public. We use data from the Department of Education *Enrollment Guides* to describe the range of formal admissions policies in district middle and high schools, comparing them to charter school lottery rules. We then explore the realities of school accessibility in expensive neighborhoods, where geographic enrollment zones make the cost of housing just as prohibitive as private school tuition.

We then analyze data from New York City’s School Progress Reports, which make it possible to evaluate the academic progress individual schools’ students make each year, compared to other students with similar test scores the year before. The data show that, for families who reside in low-income neighborhoods and do not have access to selective public schools, a charter school is often their child’s best bet to move toward proficiency, college readiness, and full participation in civic and economic life.

Enrollment Accessibility at District Middle and High Schools

IN NEW YORK CITY'S DISTRICT MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS, ONE IN THREE SEATS IS ONLY AVAILABLE BY SELECTIVE ADMISSION.



A review of the admissions policies of New York City's public middle and high schools reveals a wide spectrum of accessibility, with charter schools among the more accessible.

The New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) publishes *Enrollment Guides* listing all of its schools and school programs, as well as their respective admissions requirements. Because these *Guides* have been available publicly only in document (.pdf) form, we manually converted selected fields into a database format. By tabulating the schools in each of NYC DOE's admissions categories, we can see the shape of public school selectivity in New York City.⁵ The spectrum of admissions requirements at New York City public schools, district and charter, is summarized in Table 1.

The spectrum is strikingly wide. At the middle school and high school levels, 20 percent of seats are in "Screened" admissions programs, which require minimum test scores and/or grades, and may also require a record of attendance, a work sample, a student interview, a "qualifying assessment," or an "admission activity." Additional selective seats are at schools that admit students by Audition (3% of all seats), by Test (6%), or by a screening policy that includes language spoken and academic record (3%).

Altogether, approximately one third (32%) of all public school seats in middle and high schools are in schools with some level of selective admissions. (A majority of screened middle schools also employ geographic preferences for students who reside in the local Community School District or neighborhood school zone, which adds an additional element of selectivity.)

In addition to the selective-admission schools, 21 percent of middle and high school seats have an admissions preference for students who attend an information session. Unscreened schools, the least selective, offer 10 percent of seats, while an additional 22 percent of seats are in schools that are zoned by residential location.

As a consequence of their admissions policies, selective district middle and high schools also enroll a disproportionately low number of students who are Black or Hispanic (28% vs. 68% in district schools citywide); or eligible for the Free or Reduced-Price Lunch program (57% vs. 72% citywide).

Table 1: THE PUBLIC SCHOOL ADMISSIONS SPECTRUM

New York City public schools are not equally open to all students.

SCHOOL TYPES:	Open		Interest Required			Selective	Most Selective	
	Unscreened Schools	Zoned Schools*	Charter Schools	Limited Unscreened Schools	EdOpt Schools	Screened Schools	Audition Schools	Test Schools
% of Citywide Seats in Middle/High School	9%	22%	5%	21%	11%	23%	3%	6%
ADMISSION BY:								
Random selection 	x	x	x	x				
Indication of Interest 			Apply to lottery***	Attend info session**	Rank choices****	Rank choices****		
Balance Factors 			At-risk preference [optional]		Seats distributed by reading level			
Geographic Residence 		Zone preference	CSD preference	x		x		CSD or Boro preference
Attendance 						x	x	
Reading Scores 					x	x	x	
Math Scores 						x	x	
Grades 						x	x	
Interview, Essay, Other 						x		
Specialized Screen 							Audition	G&T or Specialized HS Exam

X = all schools in category **x** = some schools in category *Excludes D75, D79, Screened Language programs. Sibling preferences not listed.*

*Zoned-enrollment schools may be more or less accessible, depending on popularity and affordability of housing in the zone.

**Sign-in required. Info sessions include open houses and schools' tables at school choice fairs.

***Charter schools conduct random admission lotteries each April and may not ask for, or consider, academic qualifications.

****Screened middle schools may consider students' ranked choices. Students are matched to screened and EdOpt high schools through mutual rankings.

Source: NYC Department of Education Enrollment Handbooks, Charter Center analysis

Enrollment Accessibility at District Elementary Schools

**ZONED-ENROLLMENT
“NEIGHBORHOOD” SCHOOLS ARE
ONLY AS ACCESSIBLE AS THE
NEIGHBORHOOD.**



Admission to public elementary schools follows two different patterns—geographic zoned enrollment, plus test-based Gifted & Talented programs—but both can pose serious barriers to admission for many families of limited means.

At the elementary school level, most enrolled seats are in schools that are fully zoned (78%), while many more are in zoned schools that also contained non-zoned programs (14%). Far fewer seats are at coveted citywide Gifted and Talented schools (1%). Unfortunately, seat counts are not available by program.⁶ Zoned schools, sometimes called “neighborhood schools,” are not formally selective—but the private housing market is a powerful screening mechanism. As a result, the selectivity of zoned schools varies as widely as the “affordability” of housing.

In Manhattan, for example, the lowest-income residential ZIP code is area 10035 in East Harlem. Its nearly 33,000 residents have a median family income of \$14,896.⁷ At the other end of Manhattan, literally and figuratively, is the highest-income ZIP code: 10007, in Tribeca, where the median family income is \$112,947—over seven times higher. Indeed, since that figure includes longtime residents whose income would not allow them to move to the neighborhood today, the real economic divide is even wider. A search of real estate prices in ZIP code 10007 yields few below one million dollars. At Independence Plaza North, a large complex in the neighborhood, rents start at \$2,550 per month—for a studio.

The zoned elementary school for ZIP code 10007 is P.S. 234. In 2010, when NYC DOE proposed a change to that school’s zone boundaries, residents voiced fierce opposition (see table 2: Zone Defense). Having a home in the zone is perceived as a valuable (private) amenity; as one doctor told *New York Magazine* at the time, “We could send the twins

to private school, but for the 60 or 70 thousand dollars that costs there’s [P.S.] 234 instead.”⁸ In other words, the housing prices that are required to live in such zones acts as a *de facto* form of school tuition.

When living in a high-income neighborhood is not financially possible, the local zoned elementary school can only be admired from afar. In that sense, the zoned schools in East Harlem and Tribeca—all of them *public*—might as well be on two different continents.

Physically, such contrasting zoned schools can be very close together. In Brooklyn, for example, 96 percent of students are eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL) at PS 67, a zoned elementary school. (Dasani Coates, the homeless student featured in a recent *New York Times* series, once attended this school.) Just over a mile away is another zoned elementary school, PS 8, where only 18 percent are eligible.

Outside of zoned schools, the most common type of non-zoned school or program is Gifted & Talented, an educational option that is offered at the Community School District (CSD), borough, and citywide levels. Gifted & Talented schools and programs select their students based on test scores, but since many more students qualify than there are seats available, lotteries and sibling preferences are used to choose among qualifying students.

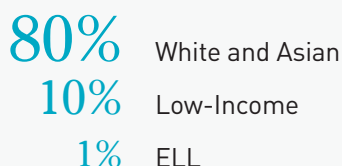
The *New York Times* reports that Gifted & Talented schools “tend to be in wealthier districts,”⁹ and the rates at which eligible students take the Gifted & Talented test vary widely—from as high as 70 percent in one CSD, to as low as seven percent in another. When they do take the test, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to pass it.¹⁰

ZONE DEFENSE

What is the private value of a public school enrollment zone? To find out, just try changing it. In affluent areas of NYC, local parents' objections to the idea of re-zoning show an uncomfortable truth: schools with geographic enrollment are only as accessible as the housing market itself.¹¹

P.S. 321 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (PARK SLOPE, BROOKLYN): ZONED ENROLLMENT

Students:



Threat: In 2012, NYC DOE proposed reducing the PS 321 zone, to reduce crowding and balance enrollment with a new school. **Reaction:**

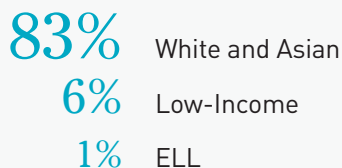
*“My family bought a place in what we thought was PS. 321. Now we’d be put into a new school. **We played by the rules; we bought in zone because we want to be in that zone.**” ~Parent*

*“We were looking for [PS.] 321 — and **it’s priced into the real estate around here.**” ~Parent*

Source: New York Times¹²

P.S. 234 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (TRIBECA, MANHATTAN): ZONED ENROLLMENT

Students:



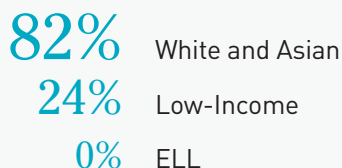
Threat: In 2010, NYC DOE proposed reducing the PS 234 zone, after new residential developments led to waiting lists for the school. **Reaction:**

*“I deliberately moved into high-tax Tribeca, where I pay \$25,000 a year in property taxes, because **I wanted the amenities of the historic district — and PS 234.**” ~Loft owner*

Source: New York Post¹³

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT HS (UPPER E. SIDE, MANHATTAN): SCREENED ENROLLMENT + DISTRICT PRIORITY

Students:



Threat: Some parents oppose the unusual preference for district residents at many high schools in CSD 2—a “legacy issue” to NYC DOE. **Reaction:**

*“Yes, we’re fortunate in District 2 because **we do have more affluent families** and we do have some of the political powerhouses here. But nonetheless if parents get together and push for change, **I don’t see why we couldn’t create district priority schools in other districts.**”*

~District 2 Community Education Council president Shino Tanikawa

Source: WNYC [emphasis added]¹⁴

Enrollment Accessibility at Charter Schools

CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE ON THE MORE *ACCESSIBLE* END OF THE ENROLLMENT SPECTRUM.



CHARTER TERRITORY

Seven in ten (68%) of NYC charter school students attend schools in three of the city's lower-income areas: Harlem, Central Brooklyn, or the South Bronx.¹⁵ In district schools, the rate is one in four (24%).

CSD	Median Income ¹⁶	Big 3 Area
2	\$104,000	
3	84,800	
26	78,800	
15	71,300	
29	70,600	
31	70,600	
13	63,700	C. Brooklyn
25	63,600	
28	60,200	
22	60,100	
27	59,200	
18	54,700	C. Brooklyn
30	52,500	
11	52,000	
24	51,500	
1	49,700	
20	47,000	
8	44,100	South Bronx
14	42,100	C. Brooklyn
21	41,800	
16	39,200	C. Brooklyn
17	38,200	C. Brooklyn
6	37,900	
19	37,000	C. Brooklyn
10	36,800	
5	34,600	Harlem
23	33,400	C. Brooklyn
4	33,200	Harlem
32	32,400	C. Brooklyn
12	29,300	
9	26,800	South Bronx
7	26,500	South Bronx

Enrollment at a charter school is always by choice, never by assignment. Charter schools may not consider students' academic qualifications for any admissions purpose—except if they offer an approved preference for students whose past struggles leave them “at-risk for academic failure.”

Instead of screening, charter school enrollment is by random lottery, with a preference for students who live in the local Community School District—a much wider area than a neighborhood school enrollment zone—as well as siblings of enrolled students. (In the rare instance that a charter school is not oversubscribed, enrollment is on a first-come, first-served basis.)

Where do charter schools fit on the spectrum of public school admissions policies? Because they require a proactive application, charter school enrollment is effectively less accessible than most unscreened and zoned schools in affordable areas. Immigrant students who arrive in the middle of the school year, for example, are unlikely to gain admission to a charter school whose lottery was held the previous April.

The minimal effort involved in a charter school application is less intensive, however, than the Limited Unscreended district schools' requirement to attend an in-person information session. (For a large majority of charter schools, an application can be completed in a few minutes online.) Charter schools are also more accessible than many zoned schools where residence is prohibitively expensive.

Accessibility and Academic Growth in Elementary School

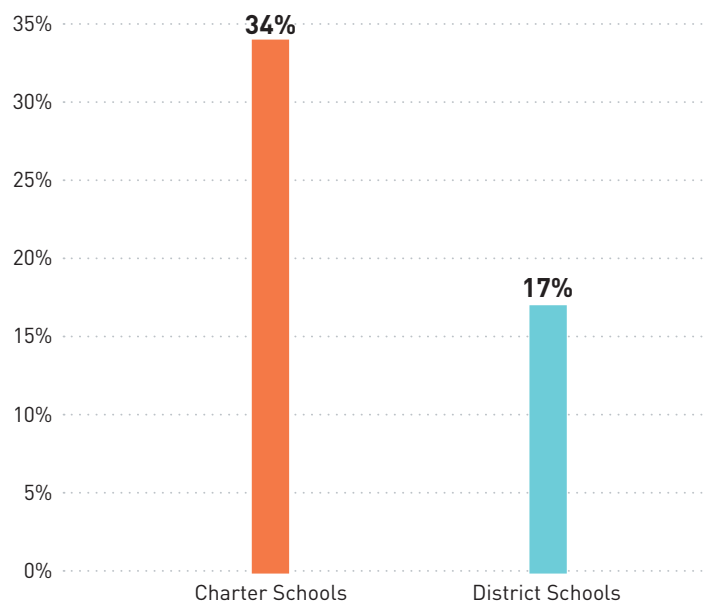
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHOICE HAPPENS LOCALLY. IN THE “BIG 3” CHARTER SCHOOL AREAS, CHARTER ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS WERE TWICE AS LIKELY TO EARN AN “A” IN STUDENT PROGRESS THAN DISTRICT SCHOOLS.



Accessibility is not all parents care about; they want access to *high-quality schools*. NYC DOE’s annual Progress Reports offer a measure of academic growth that is common across district and charter schools; this measure is based on state tests in Math and English Language Arts and relative to similar schools and students. Since test proficiency is correlated with student characteristics, schools’ letter grades in Student Growth are one useful way to look at the distribution of school quality across a diverse city.

Charter school growth is concentrated in three areas of New York City—Harlem, Central Brooklyn, and the South Bronx—which include six of the eight lowest-income school districts in the city. For elementary school students who would live in these areas and would typically be assigned to the local zoned schools, charter schools offer a vital path to academic achievement. Charter schools in these three areas are twice as likely as other public schools to earn an “A” in Student Progress on the NYC Progress Reports (34% vs. 17%).

STUDENT PROGRESS BY SCHOOL TYPE:
Percentage of Schools with “A” Grades for Student Progress in Harlem, Central Brooklyn, and the South Bronx, 2012-13¹⁷



Accessibility and Academic Growth in Middle and High School

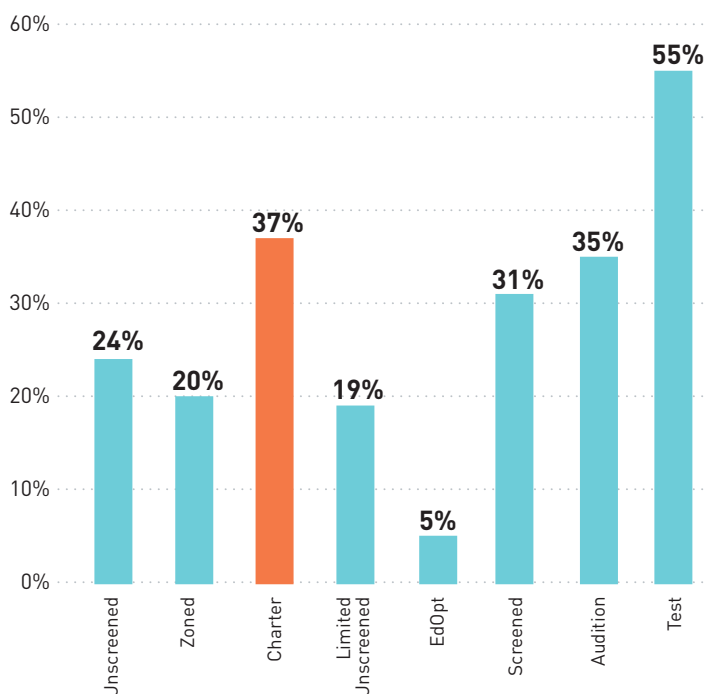
CHARTER MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS EARNED A'S IN STUDENT PROGRESS MORE OFTEN THAN EVERY OTHER TYPE OF PUBLIC SCHOOL EXCEPT TEST-IN SCHOOLS.



In middle school and high school, students are more likely to travel from their local neighborhoods and admissions policies include fewer geographic restrictions. Here, too, charter schools offer accessible opportunity. Charter middle and high schools citywide were more likely to earn an “A” in Student Progress than every type of district school except the most selective, which admit students strictly by test.

Such category-level comparisons do not represent every individual school, of course. There are district schools that are widely accessible and highly effective, and there are charter schools that risk being closed by their authorizers if they do not show academic improvement. Still, a pattern is clear: when selective district schools are not available, the school most likely to earn an “A” in Student Progress is a charter school.

STUDENT PROGRESS BY ENROLLMENT SELECTIVITY: Percentage of Seats in Middle and High Schools with “A” Grades for Student Progress, 2012–13¹⁸



Note: To best mimic parents’ available choices, middle and high schools are defined as schools with starting grade 5 or later. Schools that admit students in earlier grades, and are unlikely to have open seats in older grades, are excluded.

Conclusion

NYC CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE PROVIDING SOME OF THE MOST ACCESSIBLE, HIGHEST-QUALITY SCHOOLS THAT MANY FAMILIES HAVE AVAILABLE.



New York is a capital city for public school diversity and choice, always balancing values of choice and equity, differentiation and integration. All New Yorkers hope for a day when every public school offers every student a high chance of academic success.

In the meantime, families have to choose public schools for their children. For those with access to selective public schools, or “neighborhood” schools in affluent neighborhoods, choosing a traditional public school is often an easy decision. This sort of selectivity is traditional, after all. It has allowed excellent schools to flourish, but is a far cry from the “taking all comers” ideal to which charter schools are often compared.

For families without access to these options—especially in the city’s most impoverished neighborhoods—the landscape is different. To them, charter schools are some of the most accessible, highest-quality public schools available. This is a progressive, public mission that can make New Yorkers proud.

NOTES

- ¹ Fishman, Steve. "Tribeca Parents Square Off Over P.S. 234." New York Magazine web site. 3 Jan 2010. Web. 26 Feb 2014. http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2010/01/tribeca_parents_square_off_ove.html
- ² Jehlen, *Ibid.*
- ³ East Side Middle School web site. Web. 26 Feb 2013. http://www.esms.org/site_res_view_template.aspx?id=973aba25-14e1-40a7-9851-77658e877c0a
- ⁴ Jehlen, *Ibid.*
- ⁵ Enrollment Guides for high schools and middle schools, respectively, are available online at <http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/Middle/Resources/default.htm> and <http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/High/Resources/default.htm>. District 75, District D79, and Screened Language programs were excluded, as were two comparable charter schools (New York Center for Autism Charter School and J.V.L. Wildcat Academy Charter School). In cases where Zoned schools did not have seat values listed in the directory, the number of seats available was estimated from the 2012-13 Preliminary BEDS day enrollment data. Schools that did not have enrollment numbers in the 2012-13 school year, or did not receive a Progress Report, were also excluded from the analysis.
- ⁶ In elementary grades, "seat" counts are enrollment totals from New York State Education Department preliminary State Report Card data for 2012-13.
- ⁷ ZipAtlas: New York, NY report. Web. 26 Feb 2013. <http://zipatlas.com/us/ny/new-york/zip-code-comparison/median-household-income.htm>
- ⁸ Fishman, Steve. "Tribeca Parents Square Off Over P.S. 234." New York Magazine web site. 3 Jan 2010. Web. 26 Feb 2014. http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2010/01/tribeca_parents_square_off_ove.html
- ⁹ Baker, Al. "Gifted, Talented and Separated: In One School, Students Are Divided by Gifted Label — and Race." *The New York Times*. 12 Jan 2013. Web. 26 Feb 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/education/in-one-school-students-are-divided-by-gifted-label-and-race.html?_r=0&pagewanted=all
- ¹⁰ Holzman, Michael. "A Rotting Apple: Education Redlining in New York City." Schott Foundation for Public Education. 17 April 2012. Web. 26 Feb 2014. <http://schottfoundation.org/drupal/docs/redlining-full-report.pdf>
- ¹¹ Not all parents take this view. Some have sought to emulate the model of a Brooklyn middle school that promotes socioeconomic integration by drawing from two different CSDs.
- ¹² Harris, Elizabeth A. "Anxious Brooklyn Parents See Proposed Redrawn School Boundaries." *The New York Times*. 18 Oct 2012. Web. 26 Feb 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/16/nyregion/proposed-change-to-school-zones-in-park-slope-and-washington-heights-alarm-parents.html>
- ¹³ Vitullo-Martin, Julia. "Tribeca's Civil War Over PS 234." New York Post. 13 Jan 2010. Web. 26 Feb 2014. <http://nypost.com/2010/01/13/tribecas-civil-war-over-ps-234/>
- ¹⁴ Fertig, Beth. "In Era of High School Choice, One District Retains Elite Status." WNYC web site audio. 20 Nov 2013. Web. 26 Feb 2014. <http://www.wnyc.org/story/era-high-school-choice-manhattan-district-retains-elite-status/>
- ¹⁵ New York State Education Department, 2012-13 preliminary enrollment figures by request; and Charter Center analysis.
- ¹⁶ Median Household Income, from Charter Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2005-2009 5-Year Summary Files; New York City Department of Planning shapefile data for school districts; and Charter Center analysis.
- ¹⁷ Charter Center analysis of New York City Department of Education Progress Report data.
- ¹⁸ Charter Center analysis of New York City Department of Education Progress Report and Enrollment Guide data.



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