

Transition to High School: Renovating the Application Experience

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The High School Application Process

An important factor in Philadelphia's graduation rates is the high school the student attends. In Philadelphia, eighth-grade students select up to five high schools that they wish to attend through an application process that just became exclusively online as of fall 2014 (SDP, 2014). The three types of high schools are neighborhood, citywide admissions and special admissions. To be admitted into the citywide and special admissions high schools, a student must apply online and meet the qualifications needed, which may involve Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) scores, school grades, attendance, behavior and tardiness (SDP, 2014).

Students who are in the feeder area of a neighborhood school are automatically accepted to that school whether they apply or not. Neighborhood schools have developed a negative connotation because of their reputation as "default schools" and because they have the highest rates of dropouts and lowest graduation rates (Gold et al., 2010). In Philadelphia, over half of ninth-graders attend a

high school they did not prefer or choose (Gold et al., 2010). If a student attends a school that has a low-achieving environment, like most neighborhood schools do, and has minimal interest in attending, the student is more likely to be less motivated in his or her work and to drop out (Gold et al., 2010).

Philadelphia Students Are Not Ultimately Choosing Their High Schools

With the introduction of the online application, the number of students applying to high schools has increased (Benshoff, 2014). However, this does not translate to more students enrolling in a school of their choice that is the right fit for them. The majority of eighth-grade students in Philadelphia try to select a school other than their neighborhood school, but fewer than half who go through the application process end up in one of their choices (Gold et al., 2010). Roughly 5% of students in the district meet the criteria of even the least selective special admissions high schools, yet over 60% still apply (Gold et al., 2010).

Ideally, students would receive plentiful support and assistance from their school's guidance counselors. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts, the number of counselors in SDP is so low that students are not receiving the attention they need to avoid mistakes on their applications. Schools must have at least 600

students enrolled to have a counselor assigned to them (Lee, 2013).

Because the students have no assistance at school, they often make mistakes on their applications. Meanwhile, charter schools require a separate application, but some students include them on the SDP high school application, which then forfeits one of their selections (Gold et al., 2010). Many students and parents are not aware that how they rank the schools on their applications impacts their admissions chances (Gold et al., 2010).

Resources Available to Assist Students and Their Families

Currently, there are some resources available to guide parents and students through the application process. SDP releases an online high school directory each year with information about each school that students can apply to through the application process. With this year being the first time that the application was exclusively online, the district partnered with Great Philly Schools and the Free Library of Philadelphia to host an event in December that helped families with last-minute questions (Benshoff, 2014).

Workshops and guidebooks on the application process and decision making were offered this past fall by Philadelphia School Partnership, a nonprofit organization. How I Decide and After-School All-Stars are two nonprofit

organizations that have partnered to develop a decision skills program focused on helping middle school students choose a high school; the program just launched in Philadelphia this past fall. At Morton McMichael Elementary School, Stepping Stone creates profiles for each student to help break down their viable options, and the school has seen an increase in the diversity of choices that students apply for.

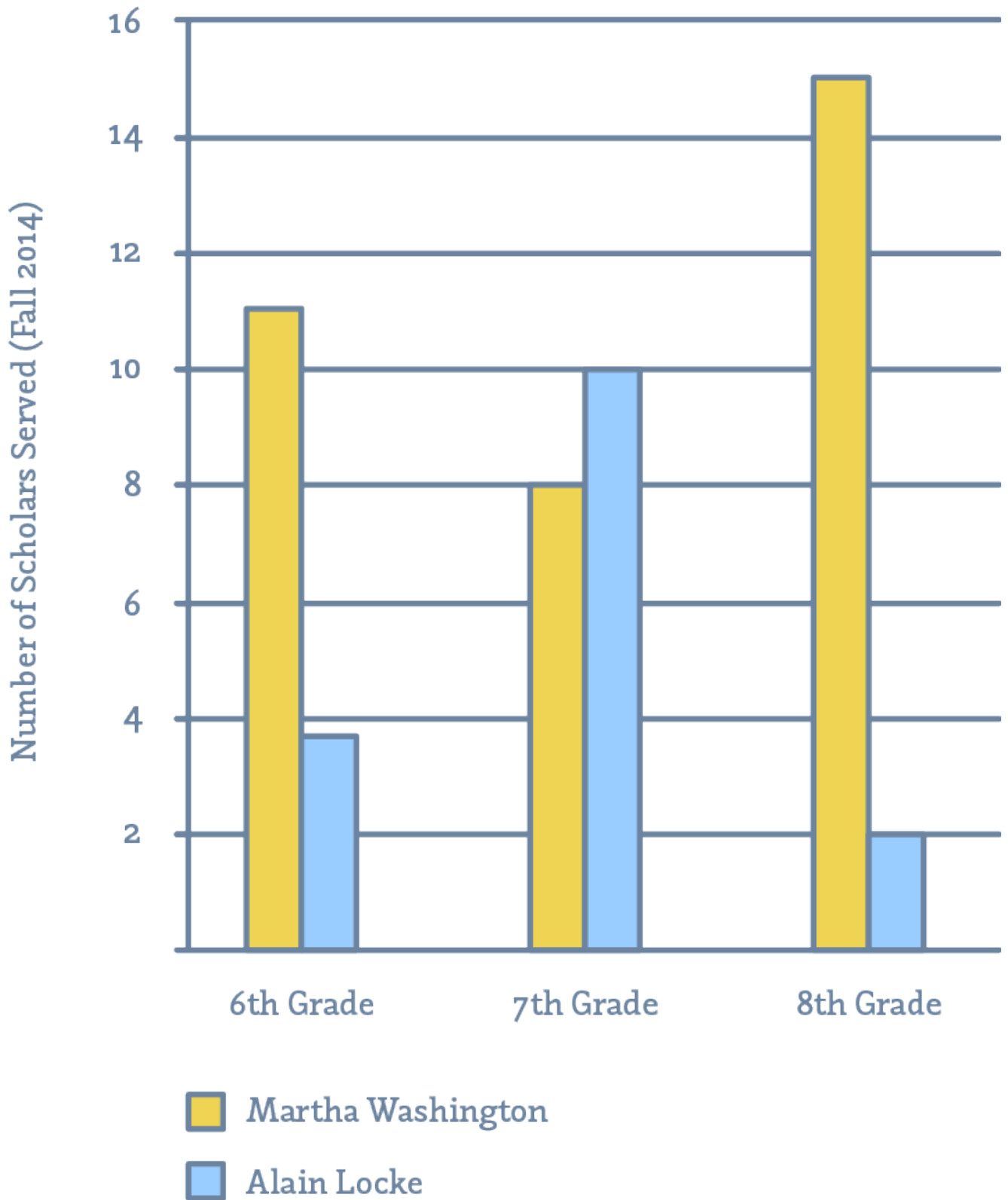
The VISTA Project at Drexel University

I am currently serving in the first year of a three-year VISTA project through Pennsylvania Campus Compact. In conjunction with the Lindy Center for Civic Engagement at Drexel University, I help run the Lindy Scholars Program, which is an after-school program that serves sixth-through eighth-graders (referred to as scholars) twice a week at Alain Locke Elementary School and Martha Washington Elementary School. Additionally, scholars are brought to Drexel University on Saturdays during the term for fun and engaging activities. Drexel students are recruited and trained as advisors to support our scholars.

This past fall, I implemented a high school readiness curriculum that utilized the College Board's CollegeEd materials for middle school students. We spent the after-school space focusing on skills to better their middle school experiences and transitions to high school. These skills included gaining greater awareness of their interests, goal setting, identifying and understanding how

to utilize their support networks, sharing best practices of organization skills, discovering their learning styles and learning how to best support their communities. All of these skills were connected back to being successful in middle school and high school.

During our first Saturday session, the high school expo took place on Drexel's campus. The scholars spent the morning preparing with stations that involved brainstorming what aspects were important to them when looking at a high school, such as size, extracurricular activities and admissions criteria. In addition, they created résumés for themselves of all of their accomplishments and wrote down what questions they would want to ask the representatives at the expo. We spent the rest of the day at the expo with Drexel advisors and scholars in small groups. Figure 1 shows the numbers of students who were served during the fall 2014 Lindy Scholars efforts.



Students served during fall 2014 through the Lindy Scholars program

Formalizing a High School Transition Counseling System

Great strides have been made this year with my VISTA

project to support our Lindy Scholars with the transition to high school. Next year will continue the work by developing a formal system for our scholars. The system will start by creating a profile of each scholar that includes their grades and standardized test scores, attendance history, and behavior history. From there, Drexel advisors will meet with scholars and their parents to go over the data as well as to set SMART goals.

Through all of that, VISTA volunteers will connect scholars and parents with resources to better understand the application process and the many different types of high schools available. Developing a network of all the workshops, guidebooks and resources that are already provided by nonprofit organizations and schools in Philadelphia will be innovative because such a compiled resource does not currently exist.

Additionally, the project involves educating scholars on the importance of middle school and the high school application process in the sixth grade. Currently, guidance is primarily provided in the fall of eighth grade, but the most important year for a student for admission into a high school is seventh grade. By their being educated about the importance of the sixth and seventh grades, it is more likely that scholars will try harder during their middle school years and have the ability to better control their status for high school admission.

During the Saturday programming, structured time will be

set aside to progress monitor scholars' goals and transitions to high school. Advisors will be able to bring their laptops to allow scholars to access the application and conduct research on high schools. After the eighth-graders are admitted to high schools, the advisors will follow up to ensure that the scholars are satisfied with their selections. Whether the school was their top choice or their neighborhood school, conveying the positives and strengths will hopefully encourage the scholars to be excited for the ninth grade.

The Impact

What this solution does is put the power in the hands of the scholars and parents as opposed to the high schools. Currently, there may be resources available to assist in the application process, as was discussed earlier, but it is difficult to navigate and locate what is available. Not enough attention is currently provided for sixth- and seventh-grade students who are still in a position to improve their credentials. It is known that the majority of students will not be admitted into a school of their preference, yet no formal support is provided to make sure that they are in a place, mentally, to succeed. One guidance counselor shares duties at both Alain Locke and Martha Washington Elementary School. She, on her own, cannot provide the individualized attention needed for students to confidently navigate the application process. The VISTA project will break new ground in its work with

the Lindy Scholars.

This model could be easily replicated in multiple schools in different forms. There could be school-based VISTA projects in which the VISTA volunteer would be tasked with connecting an elementary or middle school with resources, workshops and open houses that are already being held in addition to supporting a guidance counselors with advising parents and students. A project could be location-based, so that the volunteer would work with multiple nearby schools to share best practices and allocate resources. Additionally, multiple volunteers could partner with the Mayor's Office of Civic Engagement to develop a citywide database of all resources that are available to help students successfully transition to high school. The need for greater support with the high school application process is there in Philadelphia, and with VISTA projects at the forefront, innovative change is imminent.

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Author Biography

Riccardo Purita proudly serves this year as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer at Drexel University, working with the Lindy Scholars program within the

Center for Civic Engagement. Last year, he served as a corps member with City Year Milwaukee. Mr. Purita graduated from Gettysburg College in 2013 with a bachelor's degree in psychology.