

How to Rank Schools for the Seattle Public Schools Choice Process for 2010-2011

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<http://www.teriyakidonut.com/schools/choice-2010-2011.html>

<http://www.teriyakidonut.com/schools/choice-2010-2011.pdf>

Seattle Public Schools are implementing a New Student Assignment Plan (NSAP) for assigning students to schools. Enrollment for the 2010-2011 school year includes only some features of the final NSAP. The best strategy for ranking applications to option schools is different this year than it has been before. It will change again when the NSAP is complete.

This document gives a brief overview of the best ranking strategy for families who:

- are enrolling child(ren) at school entry grade(s)
- to enter school in September 2010,
- are considering option schools, and
- have children who can be served at any school.

Families who have a Kindergartener entering SPS in the fall with siblings grandfathered at an elementary school other than their current attendance area school should not use this document. Refer instead to the SPS “Transition Enrollment Quick Facts” document referenced at the end of this document. Not doing so could result in losing your chance to have your children placed together.

To the best of my knowledge, this document is accurate and current as of the date above. I have provided some references. Since I may have made mistakes and the district's documents may change, you should refer to the SPS website as your most trusted source of information. If you are aware of a documented change in SPS policy, notice an error or omission in this document, or have further questions, please contact me at eaw.sap@gmail.com.

About Option Schools

The NSAP has several ways of classifying schools. One of the most important is the distinction between **attendance area schools** and **option schools**.

Attendance area schools are schools to which default assignments are made for enrolling students. Every Seattle address has an attendance area school for each of elementary, middle, and high school. Each has programs and traditions distinguishing it from other schools, but all would be considered traditional, mainstream schools by most parents and educators.

Option schools are schools to which you must apply for admission via lottery. Some would be considered traditional, mainstream schools. Others are founded on educational or socialization models which differ substantially from attendance area schools. Additionally, many serve grades K-8 as a single community.

Recommended Ranking Steps

Here are my recommendations for ranking schools during Open Enrollment for 2010-2011. They can be summarized with two simple points:

- only list schools you prefer to your attendance area school, and
- list schools in your true order of preference.

Know your attendance area school

Even if you are only interested in option schools, you still need to know your attendance area school in order to rank option schools.

If your child is currently enrolled in the Seattle Public Schools or if you completed paperwork for Early Registration, you should have received an assignment letter, mailed Friday, Feb 26, announcing your default attendance area school assignment. Are you delighted with this assignment? Congratulations! You are done. There is no need to participate in the SPS choice process.

If you have not yet enrolled for an elementary, middle, or high school, you should participate in Open Enrollment (March 1-31, 2010). Entry grade students are guaranteed a spot in your attendance area for the 2010-2011 school year. Determine the attendance area schools for your address here:

<http://www.seattleschools.org/area/newassign/address.xml>

As part of the NSAP, the district has announced plans to open several schools. Your attendance area school may not yet be open for the 2010-2011 school year. If so, the result of your address lookup should tell you when your school is scheduled to open and what the interim plan is.

Gather the information you will use to make your choice(s)

Families use many criteria to decide which schools they prefer. Popular information sources include

- school tours and open houses,
- test scores and annual reports from the SPS web site,
- local magazine and newspaper articles,
- speaking with friends and acquaintances whose child(ren) attend(ed) the school, and
- whether transportation is available.

Gather information for each option school you are considering and for your attendance area school.

Rank schools in the order you prefer them

Once you have gathered your data and impressions, make a ranked list of the schools you are considering. Use your own piece of paper, not the School Choice Worksheet – you want to see them in list order. Include your attendance area school in your ranking. Do not re-arrange your order to based on your perceived chances of getting into a school.

Fill out the School Choice form and turn it in on time

School choice forms are now available on the website listed below. There are different forms for different grade levels. Note that the Kindergarten form is different than the form for other elementary students.

<http://www.seattleschools.org/area/eso/forms/enroll1011.html>

Fill out your form using your ranked list from the step above. Don't list your attendance area school. List only those schools you prefer to your attendance area school. List your favorite school first, your next favorite second, etc.

Open Enrollment closes at 8:00pm on Wednesday, March 31st. Don't wait until the last minute, and do get verification it was received. Instructions on how to do this are on the website listed above. Take the time to read the checklist and make sure you have all forms you need.

Watch for your assignment letter

Assignment letters will be mailed at the end of May. If you don't receive one, consult the Enrollment Services website to determine whether letters have been sent and whom you should contact to report yours missing.

Questions and Answers

I heard you have to make a really long list or you might get assigned to a school you don't want. Is this true?

It depends.

In previous years, the assignment process gave enrollment priority to students living closest to each attendance area school. This resulted in some students living in a “dead zone” from which it was often impossible to get an assignment to a nearby school. Families living in these areas often listed all nearby schools they liked.

New for the 2010-2011 school year, all entry-grade students are guaranteed a space in their attendance area school. This does away with the dead zones, and therefore the need for most families to list many schools. However, if you don't care for your attendance area school, you should still list as many schools you prefer to it as you can evaluate, rank, and list on your form.

My true first choice option school is very popular and hard to get in to. If I list it first on my School Choice form, am I throwing away my chances of getting in?

For the 2010-2011 school year, you would not be throwing away your chances.

This year the district is using what it refers to it as the Barnhart/Waldman processing algorithm, named after the school board members who suggested it. It is more properly called the Gale/Shapley “Stable Marriage” algorithm. This algorithm is well studied and understood by computer scientists and mathematicians. It has been specially designed so that there is never an advantage to listing your school choices in any order other than your true preference. The Gale-Shapley paper referenced below is highly recommended. It is well written and does not require special software or mathematics skills to understand. In addition to being used for school assignments in many districts, a variation of this algorithm is used for the yearly matching of graduating medical students to residency programs.

Note that this will change when the NSAP is complete. The final plan calls for using a simpler algorithm in which families who list a school as their first choice have priority over families who list the school second choice or later. This can result in cases where your best chance for getting into one of your choices is to “lie” and list your second choice first.

I have children already enrolled in a school which is not our new attendance area school. How can I get their sibling into the same school for Kindergarten?

The NSAP transition plan does not provide a guarantee that the entry-grade sibling will be placed at the older sibling's current school, but they do provide a way to get the students assigned to the same school.

Use the Kindergarten School Choice form and list the older sibling's current school as the only choice on the form. If your Kindergartener is not assigned to the older sibling's current school, you may request that they be assigned together. See the Transition Enrollment Quick Facts document referenced below and the School Choice form specifically for Kindergarteners.

Can I choose an attendance area school on my School Choice form?

Yes. While this document assumes you are considering option schools, you may also list any attendance area school on your form. Currently 10% of attendance area high school seats are being set aside for applicants using the choice process.

How should I fill out my School Choice form for non-entry grade students?

The basic procedure for non-entry grade students is similar. If you are currently enrolled or completed the early registration process, use the procedure above, listing only those schools you like better than the school listed on your assignment letter (whether it is your attendance area school or not). Families who are new to the district and simultaneously applying for enrollment and school choice should list only schools they like better than their attendance area school – they are guaranteed a spot at their attendance area school, assuming their child(ren) can be served there.

Key Documents and References

Enrollment Services' Main Page

<http://www.seattleschools.org/area/eso/story.dxml>

This is your best source for verifying dates for Open Enrollment. Many of the pages linked from here are quite useful.

Transition Enrollment Quick Facts

http://www.seattleschools.org/area/eso/transition_enrollment_quickfacts.pdf

Includes brief information on how to assure incoming Kindergarteners are assigned to the same school as grandfathered older siblings.

Information on Schools to be Opened

http://www.seattleschools.org/area/newassign/faq_open.html

The Gale-Shapley Stable Marriage Algorithm

College Admissions and the Stability of Marriage, D. Gale and L. S. Shapley, *The American Mathematical Monthly*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (Jan., 1962), pp. 9-15 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2312726>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stable_marriage_problem

Use of the Gale-Shapley Algorithm in the Seattle Public Schools

The REAL Truth About Seattle Public Schools Kindergarten Assignments, Chris MacGregor
<http://www.cybermato.com/projects/school-assignments/>

Parent Chris MacGregor was granted permission to examine the code SPS uses to make assignments. Note that since his original writeup, the distance-based priority has been removed from the system.

New Student Assignment Transition Plan, presented to the School Board at the January, 2010 School Board Meeting <http://www.seattleschools.org/area/board/09-10agendas/010610agenda/nsaptransitionattachment.pdf>

This documents that the Gale-Shapley (AKA Barnhart/Waldman) processing algorithm is to be used for the 2010-2011 enrollment process.