In 2017, Texas lawmakers will convene the 85th Legislative Session, and representatives from around the state will vote on Senate Bill 3, which proposes to create a tax-credit scholarship program. Modeled after programs in Florida, Indiana, and Ohio, this bill would provide lower-income K-12 students with stipends that could be applied toward tuition at a private school. The scholarships would be funded by donations from private individuals and corporations, who would receive a tax credit from the state of Texas for the full amount of their donation.

Proponents of tax-credit scholarship programs argue that they provide two key benefits. The first is that students who leave the public schools for private schools will receive a superior education because of the inherent efficiencies of private organizations.

The second is that public schools will be compelled to compete with private schools for students and thus improve in quality. However, evidence from voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs in other states has shown neither substantial academic benefit to private school enrollees nor educationally meaningful improvement in the public schools.

This project examines the spatial distribution of private schools in the state’s largest city, Houston, in order to see how geography might mitigate the effectiveness of this policy on children living in neighborhoods with low levels of socioeconomic opportunity, and (2) black and Latino/a children. If access to private schools is spatially limited for these populations, it is reasonable to ask whether the policy can increase educational equity in Texas.

Additionally, it used diversitydatakids.org’s Child Opportunity Index (COI) to identify where Houston’s highest-need children live. The COI defines child opportunity as “the context of neighborhood-based opportunities that influence children’s health and development” and combines 18 measures related to educational opportunity, health and environmental factors, and social and economic conditions into a single index. The first analysis created a half-mile street network around each private school in Houston, in order to identify the census tracts that were in walking or short driving distance of each private school. The second analysis created a 3-mile street network around each private school, in order to identify the census tracts that were within a short drive of each private school.

Layering census tract-level ACS and COI data onto these network areas made it possible to answer the following questions:

• Are certain racial and ethnic groups over- or under-represented among the populations that live within walking or short driving distance of Houston’s private schools?

• What are the levels of socioeconomic opportunity among children who live within walking or short driving distance of Houston’s private schools?

In order to examine the question of how competition from private schools might impact the public schools, the second set of analyses identified the number of private schools that fall within a half-mile walking distance of a private school, 42% of the residents were white. In census tracts within a 3-mile driving distance, 39% of residents were white. These results suggest that residents who were closest to private schools were most likely to be white, and that they lived in high-opportunity areas, as compared to the average Houston resident. While 76% of Houston’s private schools had a bus stop within a half-mile walking street network, there is little theoretical or empirical reason to believe that this improves access for students who are not yet up high of school. Given these results, it is reasonable to ask how well this policy is poised to benefit highest-need students and black and Latino/a students, all of whom are underrepresented in areas where private schools are most accessible.

Houston Residents’ Proximity to Private Schools, By Race & Ethnicity

Policy advocates have consistently used the market fundamentalist logic of economist Milton Friedman to argue that privatizing public education market will generate competition and thus improve school quality. In the case of Houston, however, it is the highest performing public schools that have the highest proportions of private schools within a 3-mile radius. Schools given a provisional achievement grade of “A” in 2016 have, on average, 12 private schools within a 3-mile buffer, while schools with a rating of “F” have an average of 6. This suggests that Houston’s best public schools will be the most subject to competition from private schools. The city’s lowest performing schools—which ostensibly stand to “benefit” the most from competition—have far fewer private schools to compete with, on account of the inequitable spatial distribution of private schools across the city.

Average Number of Private Schools Within 3 Miles of a Public School, By 2016 Provisional Public School Proficiency Rating (A-F)

Public school

COI scores

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