

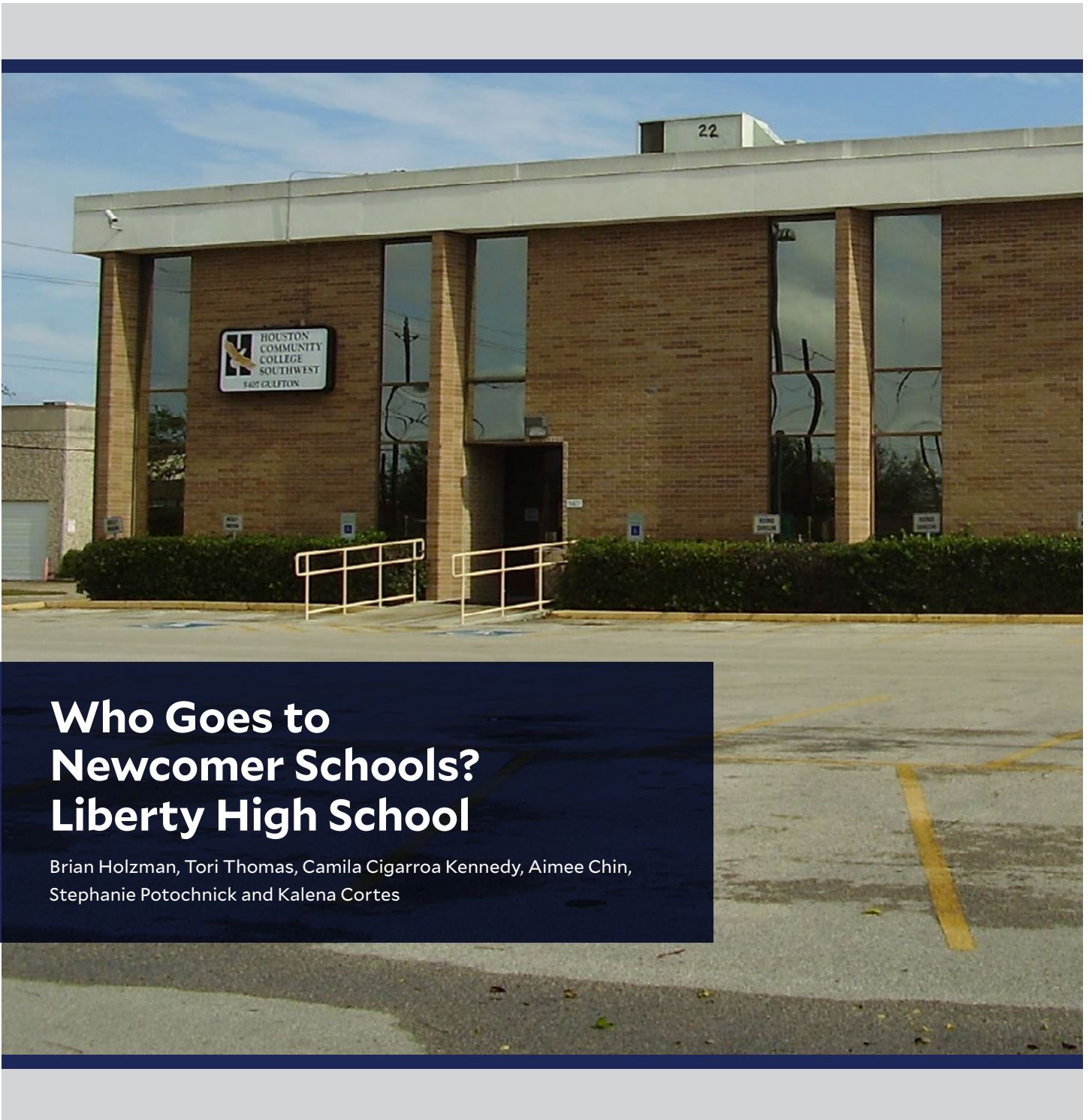


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Houston Education Research Consortium

Building Better Cities  
Building Better Lives



# Who Goes to Newcomer Schools? Liberty High School

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**Research Brief**

January 2024

**Suggested citation:** Holzman, B., Thomas, T., Kennedy, C. C., Chin, A., Potochnick, S. & Cortes, K. (2024). “Who Goes to Newcomer Schools? Liberty High School.” Houston, TX: Houston Education Research Consortium, Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Rice University.

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**About HERC.** Focusing on the most pressing challenges facing the region, the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC research is developed directly alongside district leaders with findings shared with decision-makers — culminating in long-term, equity-minded solutions, opportunities and growth for Houston and beyond.

DOI: [doi.org/10.25611/0HHY-7028](https://doi.org/10.25611/0HHY-7028)

## Research Brief

# Who Goes to Newcomer Schools? Liberty High School

**N**ewcomer programs support recent immigrant, English learner students beyond what is typically offered in the traditional English learner classroom by providing students with innovative teaching methods and nonacademic support. In Houston ISD, Liberty High School is a separate-site program that serves high school-aged and older newcomer and immigrant students. To accommodate older students' job schedules, Liberty offers both day and night programs in which students can earn their high school diploma. Given the growing number of adolescent newcomer students in Houston ISD, it is important to understand how recent immigrant, English learner students choose newcomer programs and schools. Using 12 years of administrative data, this research brief describes which student characteristics predict enrollment at Liberty High School. Results show that economically disadvantaged students, students from Central America and Mexico, students who lived closer to the school, and students who lived in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of immigrants were more likely to enroll.

## Key Findings

### Which student characteristics predicted Liberty High School enrollment?

1. **Economically disadvantaged** newcomer students were more likely to enroll at Liberty than non-economically disadvantaged newcomer students.
2. Newcomer students from **Central America and Mexico** were most likely to enroll at Liberty.
3. Liberty High School enrollment **did not vary by students' level of oral English proficiency**.
4. Newcomer students who **lived closer to Liberty High School** were more likely to enroll than newcomer students who lived farther away.

### How might Liberty's outreach and recruitment strategies be associated with enrollment?

5. Students who **lived in neighborhoods with higher shares of foreign-born residents** were more likely to enroll at Liberty.

# Background

## Who are newcomer students?

Newcomer students are very recent immigrants to the U.S. with limited English language proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Compared to English learner (EL) students born in the U.S., newcomers may require support beyond what is typically offered in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms (Custodio, 2011; Short & Boyson, 2004). Aside from their limited English language proficiency, many newcomer students arrive as refugees or asylees and have lived through traumatic events (Hos, 2020; Jaycox et al., 2002). They may also be classified as students with interrupted formal education (SIFE), which is when students have inconsistent schooling prior to immigration (Custodio & O’Loughlin, 2020; Short & Boyson, 2004). Because of these experiences, and their families’ unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system, newcomer students may face challenges achieving academic success (Potochnick, 2018).

## What are newcomer programs?

Newcomer programs support adolescent newcomer students’ adjustment to the U.S. educational system by addressing their unique needs. The goal of these programs is to accelerate English language acquisition and subject-area knowledge so students can smoothly transition into mainstream classrooms (Short & Boyson, 2012). Newcomer programs implement innovative teaching methods like sheltered instruction, which is when students learn grade-appropriate content while simultaneously developing English language skills (Short & Boyson, 2012). Aside from their focus on English, newcomer programs are holistic—they provide social and psychological supports to students and involve families (Short & Boyson, 2012).

## Newcomer students and programs in HISD

In 2019, more than one-tenth of HISD students were foreign-born. Since 2012, the number of high school-aged newcomer students in the district has more than doubled. Given the high and growing number of newcomer students, HISD has established two schools for recent immigrant, English learners: Las Americas Middle School, which enrolls students in grades 4 through 8, and Liberty High School, which enrolls high school-aged and older immigrant students.

### Liberty High School

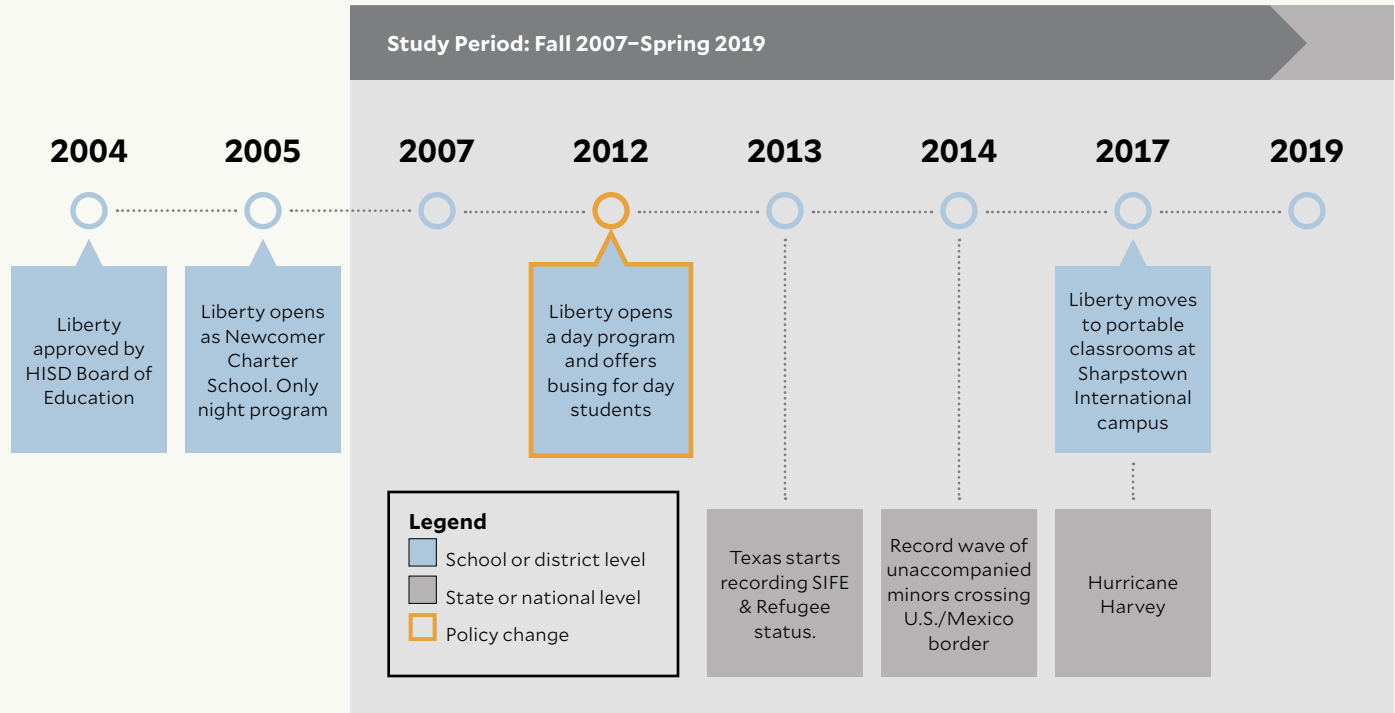
In 2005, Liberty High School (originally called Newcomer Charter High School) opened as a standalone campus serving over-age newcomer students.<sup>1</sup> Because it serves this unique student population, it teaches classes at night, offers flexible schedules to working students, and provides year-round instruction. In 2012, the school expanded to add a day program. While Liberty is considered an alternative school, it has a four-year curriculum and allows students to stay enrolled until graduation, regardless of how long that may take.

Liberty High School is a school of choice. This means that no HISD students are zoned to the school and that students and their families must choose to enroll. To recruit students, the school reaches out to families who live close by, focusing on neighborhoods with large immigrant populations. School leadership works with refugee resettlement agencies to tell people about the school and organize block-walking efforts in apart-

<sup>1</sup> Liberty High School was previously located at a shopping complex on Southwest Freeway off the Hillcroft Avenue exit of U.S. Highway 59. In fall 2017, Liberty relocated to the campus of Sharpstown International School in the Sharpstown neighborhood. Since 2022, the campus has been located at the Houston Community College - Gulfton Center campus.

FIGURE 1

## Timeline of Key Events at the School/District and State/National Levels



ment buildings known to house recent immigrants. According to school staff, there are no admission requirements—students who have high or low levels of English proficiency are welcome to enroll. In addition, while Liberty aims to serve recent immigrants, any student beyond their first year of U.S. schooling can attend.

### Research Questions

Newcomer students have lived experiences that may pose challenges to learning. Newcomer programs and schools are one way that districts can serve this unique population of students equitably and tailor support to their needs. Using HISD administrative data, this study asks the following:

1. Which student characteristics predicted Liberty High School enrollment?
2. How might Liberty's outreach and recruitment strategies be associated with enrollment?

To address these questions, this report examines 12 cohorts of HISD newcomer students from the 2007–2008 and 2018–2019 school years. Newcomers were defined as immigrant, EL students in their first year in the U.S. In all analyses, the outcome variable measured whether a student enrolled at Liberty High School upon arrival.

For research question 1, the sample included newcomer students in grades 9 through 12 ( $N = 9,792$ ). The second research question was limited to students who lived within a 20-minute drive from the school and excluded a small number of over-age high school students<sup>2</sup> ( $N = 6,725$ ). Details on the data, sample, and analytic strategies are available from the authors upon request.

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, this analysis excluded students aged 20 years and older.

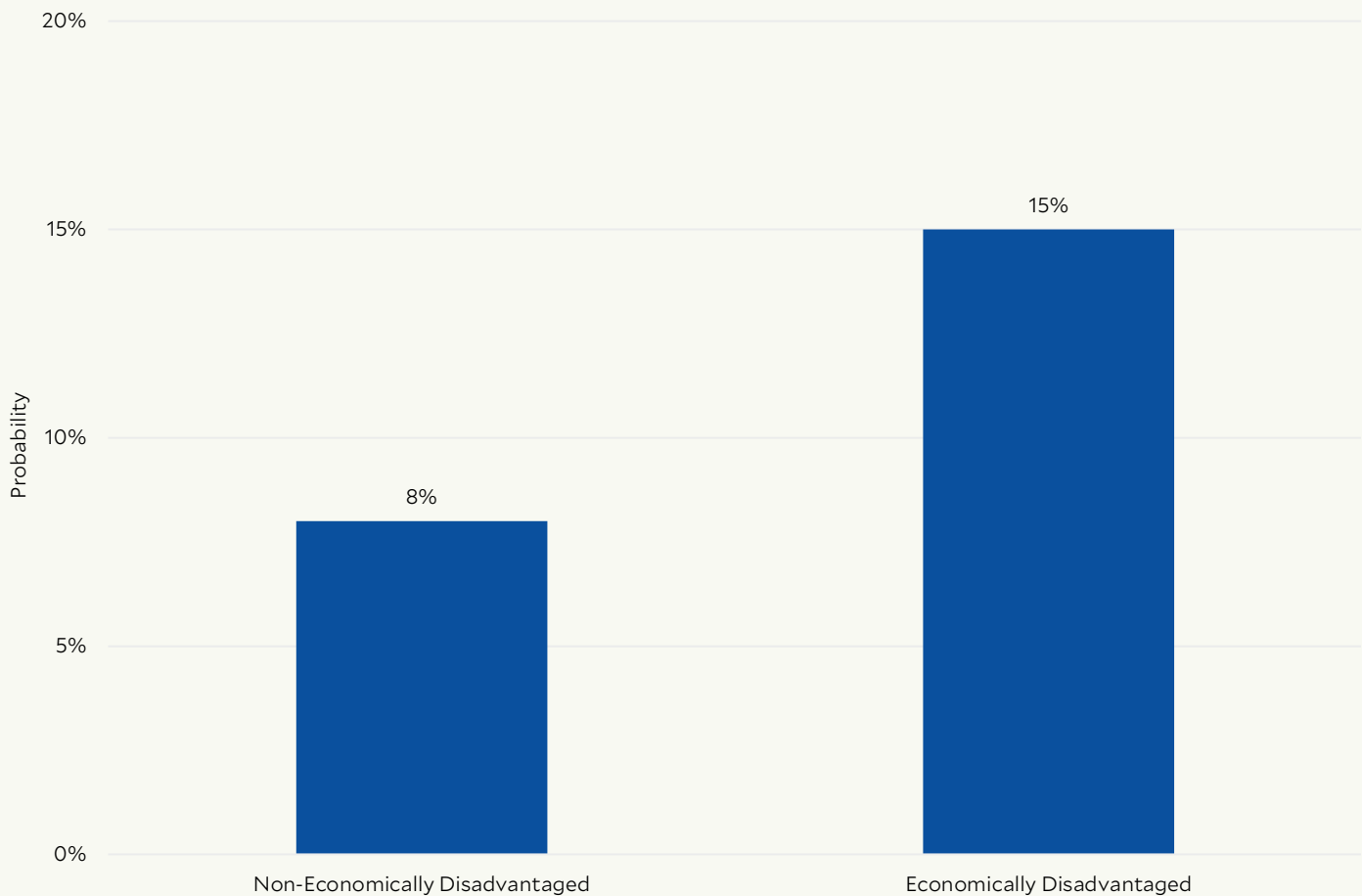
# Key Findings

## 1 Economically disadvantaged newcomer students were more likely to enroll at Liberty than non-economically disadvantaged newcomer students.

Figure 2 shows how economic disadvantage predicted enrollment at Liberty High School. Accounting for background characteristics, 15% of newcomer students who were economically disadvantaged and 8%

of students who were not economically disadvantaged enrolled at Liberty instead of other HISD high schools.

FIGURE 2 Probability of Liberty High School Enrollment by Economic Disadvantage

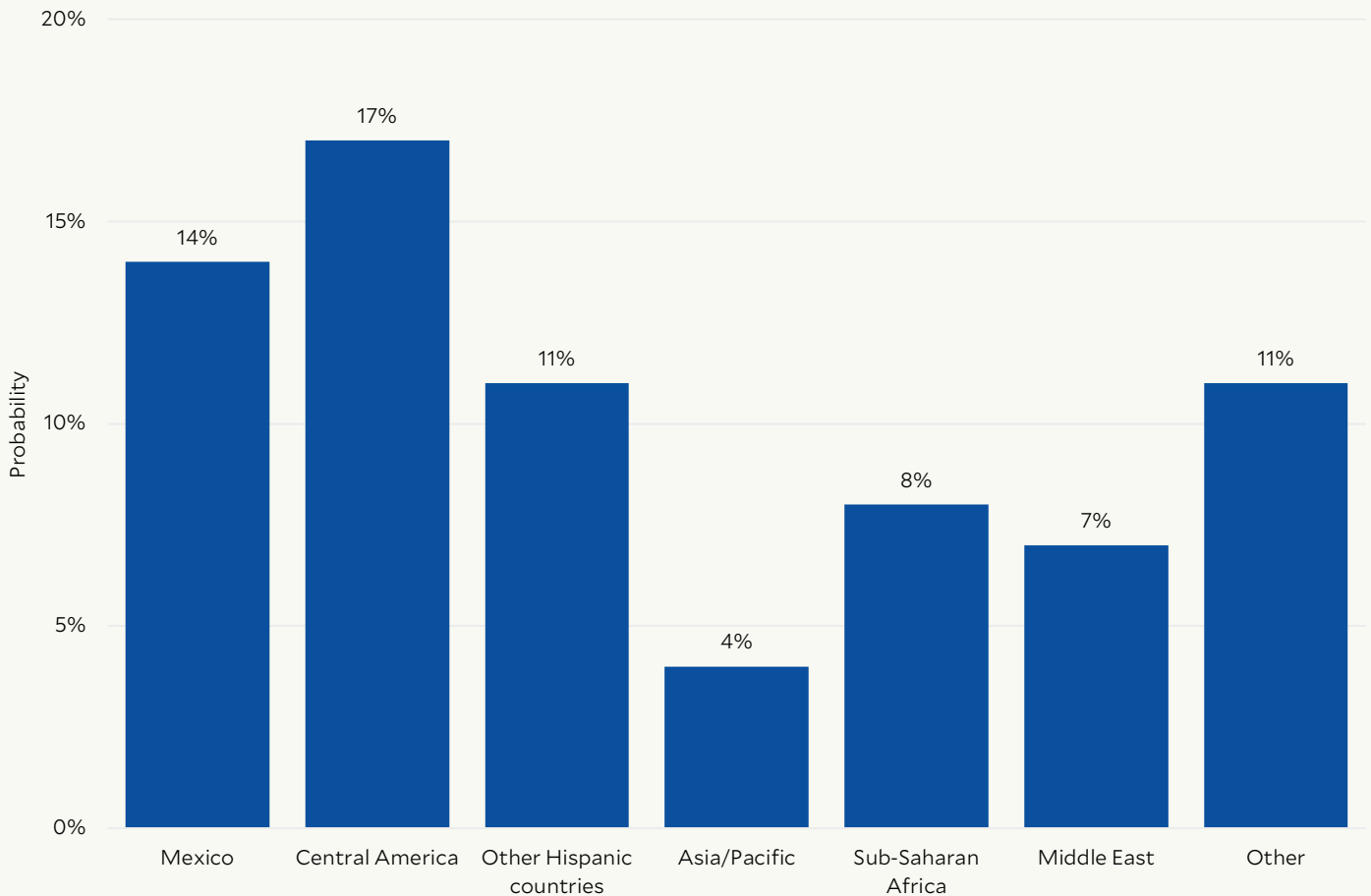


## 2 Newcomer students from Central America and Mexico were most likely to enroll at Liberty.

Newcomer students' country of origin predicted their likelihood of enrollment at Liberty High School. Figure 3 shows that 17% of newcomer students from Central America and 14% of newcomer students from Mexico chose to enroll at Liberty versus other HISD high schools. Compared to these two country-of-origin groups, students from other parts of the world were less likely to enroll at Liberty than other HISD high schools.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The "other" category includes cases in which students did not specify a birth country or countries represented by too few students (i.e., the data were suppressed to adhere to the Kinder Institute's privacy guidelines).

**FIGURE 3** Probability of Liberty High School Enrollment by Country of Origin



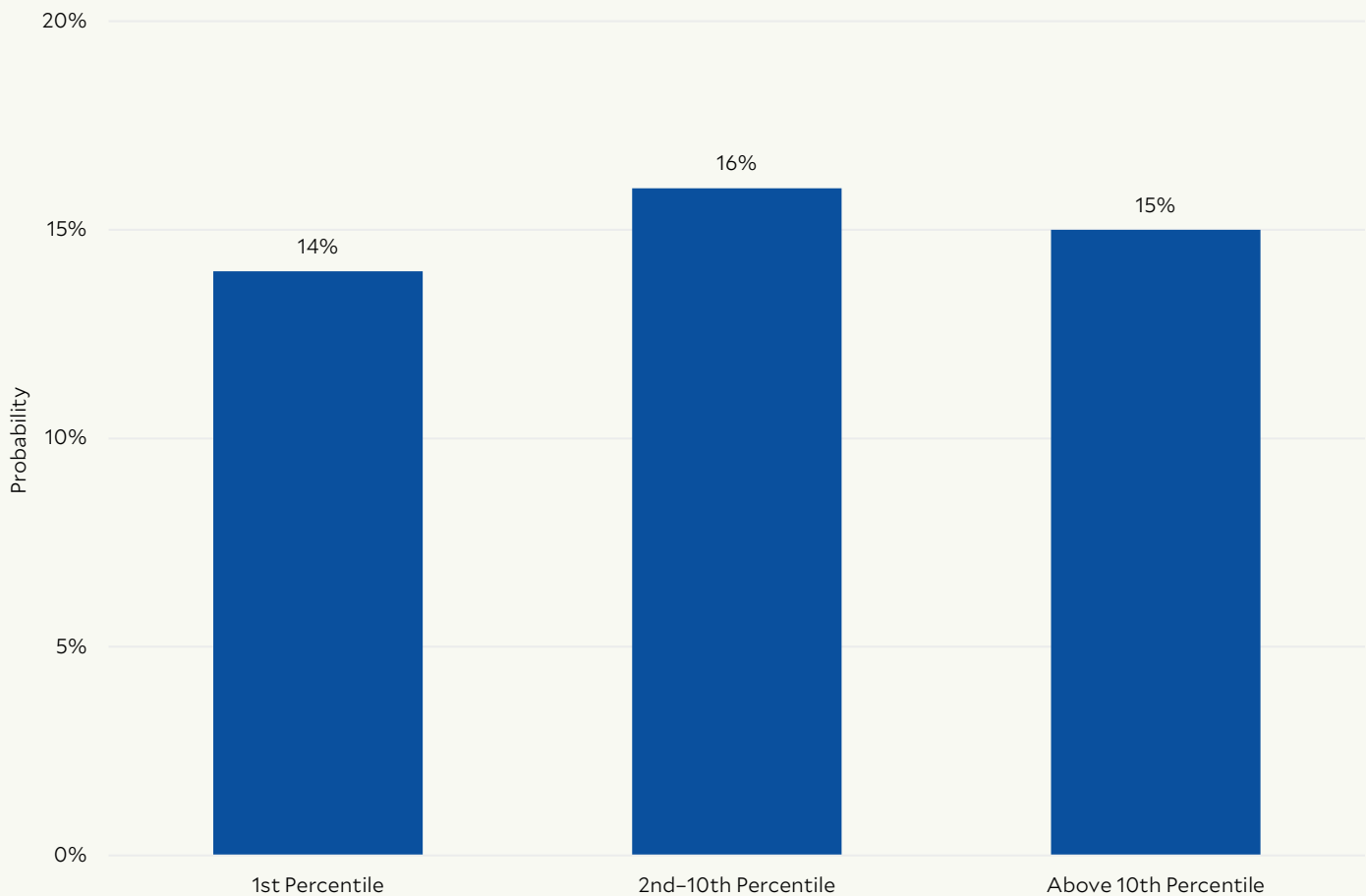


### 3 Liberty High School enrollment did not vary by students' level of oral English proficiency.

Upon arrival in the district, newcomer students took a language test that measured their oral English proficiency.<sup>4</sup> Figure 4 graphs newcomer students' likelihood of enrolling at Liberty by their level of oral English proficiency, net of background characteristics. Regardless of students' proficiency level, students enrolled at Liberty at similar rates: 14% of students in the 1st percentile of the oral English proficiency test (the lowest scorers), 16% of students in the 2nd-10th percentiles, and 15% of students who scored above the 10th percentile enrolled at Liberty versus other high schools in HISD.

<sup>4</sup> The oral English proficiency exam used during the study period was the IDEA Proficiency Test (IPT). Since then, HISD has switched to the LAS Links Placement Test and no longer uses the IPT.

**FIGURE 4** Probability of Liberty Enrollment by Oral English Proficiency





## 4 Newcomer students who lived closer to Liberty High School were more likely to enroll than newcomer students who lived farther away.

The maps in Figure 5 illustrate that newcomer students who lived closer to Liberty were more likely to enroll at the school. The map on the left shows the total number of comparison newcomer students (i.e., between 13 and 19 years old) in HISD from the 2007–2008 to 2018–2019 school year by Census tract. The map on the right shows the total number of Liberty enrollees within the same period by Census tract. The dark blue Census tracts highlight areas in which there were more comparison newcomer students or students enrolling at Liberty. Lighter blue Census tracts highlight areas where there were fewer comparison newcomers or Liberty enrollees. The tracts in gray are areas in which the data were suppressed—too few comparison newcomers or Liberty enrollees resided in the tract. The red dot marks Liberty High School’s old campus location (before fall 2017), while the green dot marks its more recent location (from 2017 to 2022).

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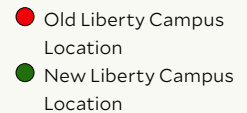
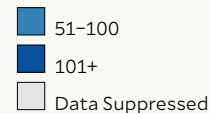
The map on the left shows that adolescent newcomers lived in neighborhoods throughout HISD. Of course, there were clusters of newcomers, such as Southwest Houston, which is where Liberty High School is located. However, the map on the right shows that Liberty students were concentrated in the neighborhoods closest to the school. Overall, the analyses indicated that distance was a strong predictor of Liberty enrollment: students who lived more than a 20-minute drive away had a low likelihood of enrollment.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> These results are available from the authors upon request.

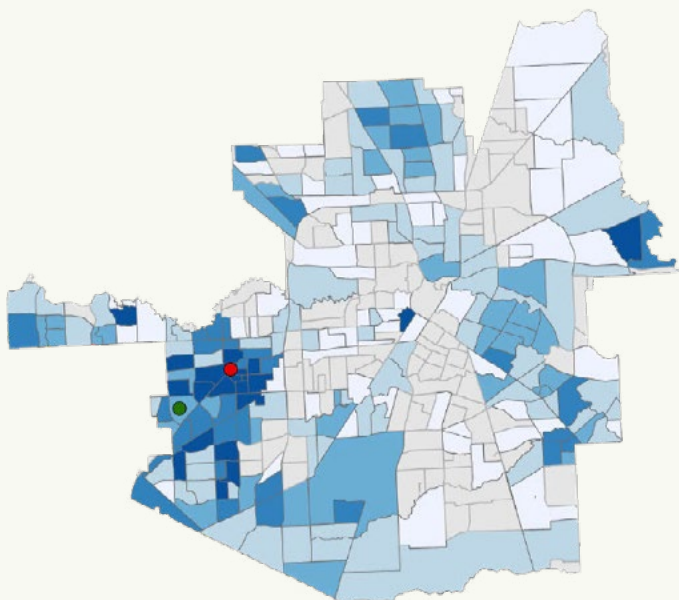
**FIGURE 5** Maps of Comparison Newcomer Students and Liberty High School Enrollees

### Legend

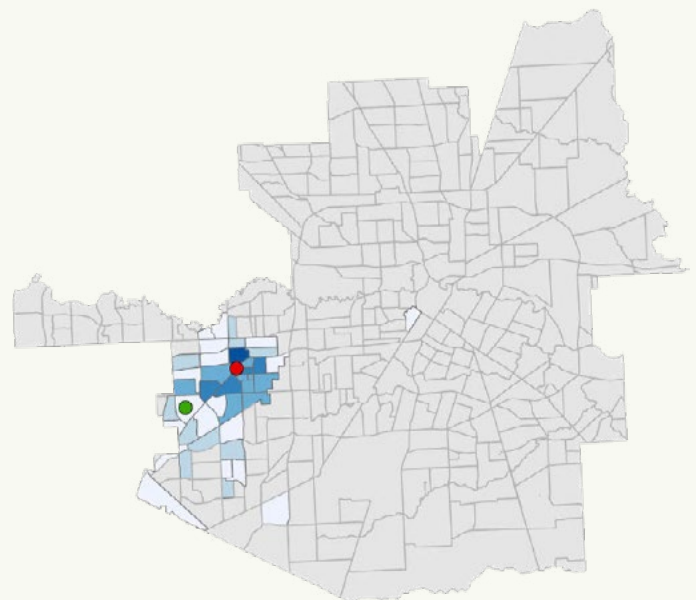
Total Liberty High School Enrollees & Comparison Newcomer Students, 2007–2008 to 2018–2019



### Comparison Newcomer Students



### Liberty High School Enrollees



## 5 Students who lived in neighborhoods with higher shares of foreign-born residents were more likely to enroll at Liberty.

To recruit students to enroll at the school, Liberty High School administrators reached out to newcomer students and families who lived in nearby neighborhoods with high percentages of foreign-born residents.

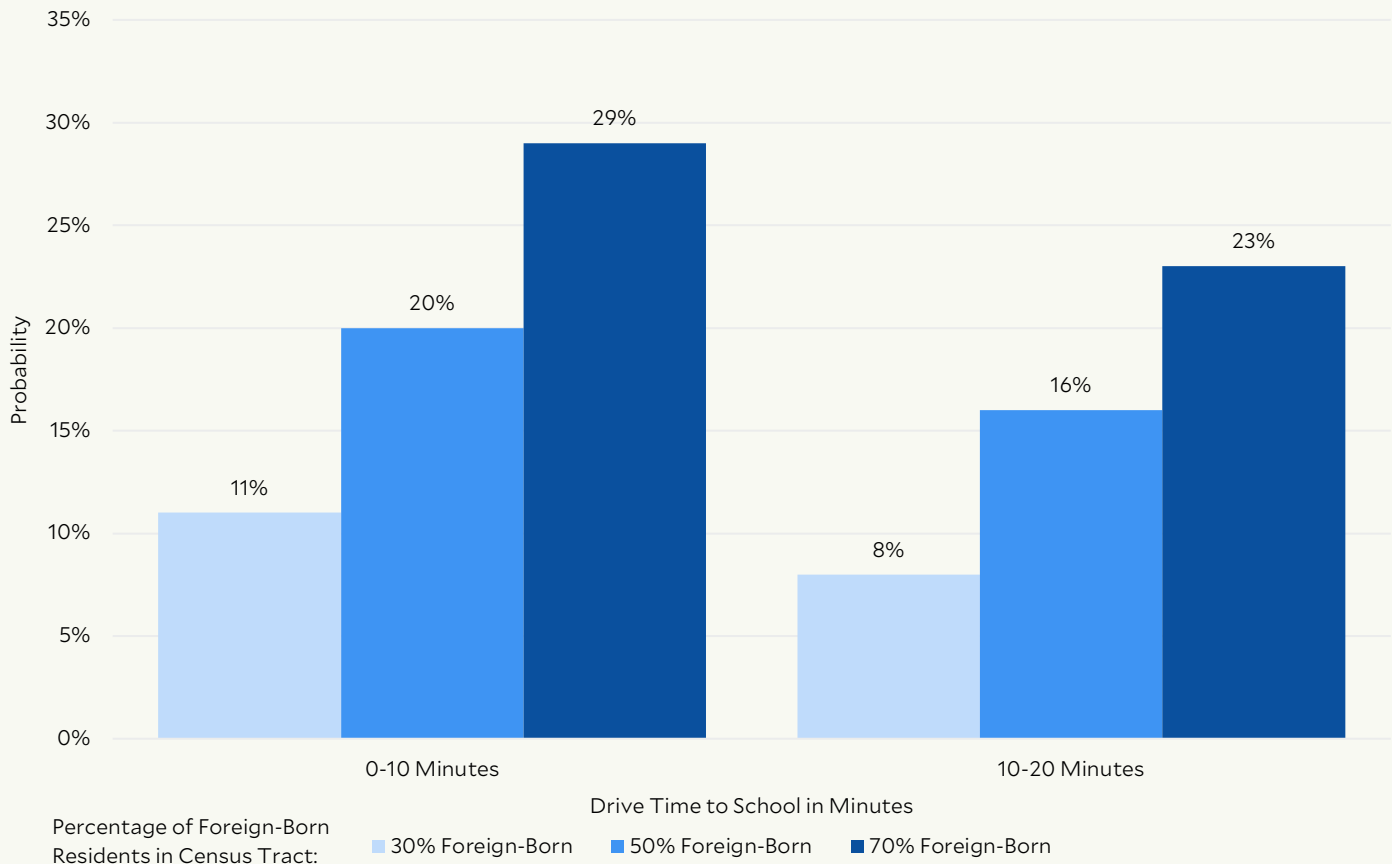
Figure 6 graphs the likelihood of enrolling at Liberty by how far newcomer students lived from the school (measured as the drive time in minutes) and the percentage of foreign-born residents in a student's Census tract. Regardless of distance from the school, the percentage of foreign-born residents predicted enrollment. For example, among students within a 10-minute drive from the school, newcomers who came from neighborhoods in which 30% of residents were immigrants had an 11 percentage point likelihood of enrolling at Liberty. In contrast, newcomers who came from neighborhoods in

which 50% or 70% of residents were immigrants had higher likelihoods of enrollment.

The graph focuses on newcomers within a 20-minute drive from Liberty. Distance did not appear to be a strong predictor of enrollment within that radius. However, the maps shown earlier, as well as additional analyses conducted by the research team, indicate that students who lived beyond a 20-minute drive from Liberty were unlikely to enroll at the school.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> These analyses are available from the authors upon request.

**FIGURE 6** Probability of Liberty Enrollment by Drive Time to the School and Percentage of Foreign-Born Residents in Census Tract

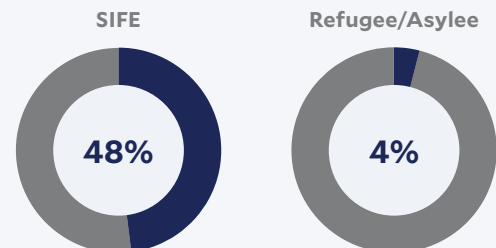




## Spotlight on students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) and refugee/asylee status

**D**ata on SIFE and refugee/asylee status, two non-mutually exclusive statuses, were not collected by HISD until the 2014–2015 school year. Therefore, these characteristics were not included in the primary analyses described in this research brief. In additional analyses focused on the 2014–2015 school year and after, SIFE status did predict Liberty High School enrollment but refugee/asylee status did not. SIFE status was one of the strongest predictors of enrolling at Liberty.

- Close to half of Liberty students experienced interrupted formal education in their home countries (48%), while 4% were refugees or asylees.
- SIFE students were 23 percentage points more likely to enroll at Liberty than other comparison newcomer students, while refugee/asylee students were not more likely to enroll.
- Most SIFE students came from Guatemala (33%), El Salvador (26%), and Honduras (24%), while most refugee/asylees came from Congo (23%), Honduras (18%), Iraq (18%), and El Salvador (19%).





## Changes to Liberty's student body after adding the day program

**D**uring the 2012-13 school year, Liberty High School expanded to include a day program for students who might benefit from intensive English language support but did not need the flexibility the night program offered. According to school personnel, the day program more closely resembles the traditional high school experience and reaches a different population of students. Although district data do not distinguish day program students from night program students, statistical analyses can reveal how the student body changed after Liberty added the day program. This may provide insight into how day and night program students differ.

The addition of the day program was associated with...

- A 1.5-year decrease in the average age of students enrolling at Liberty.
- An 11 percentage point increase in female student enrollment.
- No change in the share of students classified as economically disadvantaged but a decrease in the average neighborhood socioeconomic status among enrollees (i.e., more students coming from low-socioeconomic areas).
- A 15 percentage point decrease in Central American student enrollment but increases in enrollment among students from other Hispanic countries (2 percentage points) and Asia and the Pacific (9 percentage points).
- A 12 percentage point increase in the share of students who scored in the 2nd-10th percentiles on the oral English proficiency test.
- An increase in the average neighborhood share of foreign-born residents (i.e., more students coming from high-immigrant areas).
- No change in the distance between a student's home and the Liberty campus.



# Conclusions

## Summary and Discussion

This brief showed how sociodemographic characteristics were associated with Liberty High School choice among adolescent newcomer students. Newcomers who were economically disadvantaged were more likely to enroll at Liberty than non-economically disadvantaged students. Students born in Central America and Mexico were more likely to enroll at Liberty than students born in other parts of the world. While oral English proficiency test scores did not predict Liberty enrollment, the analyses showed that distance affected enrollment: Liberty enrollees tended to live in Southwest Houston, which is where the school was located.

The study found that living in a Census tract with higher shares of foreign-born residents positively predicted Liberty High School choice. However, this relationship did not depend on distance from the school. Analyses not shown suggest that while there might not be much of a difference in enrollment rates between immigrant neighborhoods 0-10 minutes from the school and 10-20 minutes from the school, both groups were more likely to enroll at Liberty than students in immigrant neighborhoods 20 or more minutes from the school.<sup>7</sup> Thus, there might be some evidence that the school's outreach and recruitment strategies influenced enrollment.

The analyses in this report showed that distance was a barrier to Liberty High School choice. It is possible that adolescent newcomer students are more willing and able to travel farther distances to attend school than younger newcomer students. Therefore, if the school and district hope to broaden access to Liberty, they might consider recruiting students a bit farther away. They could also establish newcomer programs or services in other areas of the district.

<sup>7</sup> These analyses are available from the authors upon request.

## Recommendations

- **Continue recruiting newcomer students from neighborhoods with higher percentages of foreign-born residents, regardless of how far they live from Liberty.** The study found that living in a neighborhood with higher shares of immigrant residents was an important predictor of Liberty enrollment. However, students in immigrant neighborhoods 0-10 minutes from the school and 10-20 minutes from the school had similar likelihoods of enrollment. Adolescent newcomer students, particularly those living in immigrant neighborhoods, may be less sensitive to distance and more willing to travel to the school.

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The Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC) is a research-practice partnership between the Kinder Institute for Urban Research and 11 Houston-area school districts. HERC aims to improve the connection between education research and decision making for the purpose of equalizing outcomes by race, ethnicity, economic status, and other factors associated with inequitable educational opportunities.



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