



## PPHA 34330: Attaining Equity in K-12: Theory and Practice

Harris School of Public Policy  
University of Chicago  
Spring 2020

Matt Niksch  
[matt@mattniksch.com](mailto:matt@mattniksch.com)  
773-510-2879

**Course Description:** Nelson Mandela is quoted as saying, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." **Under what conditions is this statement true?** The purpose of this course will be to investigate practices for creating equity for disadvantaged students. Despite nearly half a century of "school reform", troubling gaps in educational attainment persist between white & Asian and underrepresented minority students. Similarly, one of the surest predictors of educational outcomes is family income. What solutions are proven to reverse these inequities? The course will begin by using national and state data to understand the scope of the achievement, or opportunity, gap. We will then consider a framework for understanding why many promising reforms fail to result in improvement. After developing this framework, we will look at evidence behind a number of popular approaches, including standards based accountability, intentional racial and socioeconomic integration, and charter schools. Finally, we will look at detailed data behind case studies in Chicago area school districts.

### **Course objectives:**

1. Students will be able to interpret data related to school outcomes from system and statewide perspectives. Particular emphasis will be placed on the treatment of outlier data and evaluating claims from research and policy proposals.
2. Students will be able to identify the key challenges facing urban schools, and will develop a model to understand why any particular policy intervention might or might not prove effective in addressing its intended effect.
3. Students will develop practice debating the practical and moral challenges associated with various approaches to reforming schools. Particular attention will be paid to how these challenges constrain policy choices in a political context along with how the trust of serving "other people's children" drives behavior.

**Prerequisites:** There are no formal prerequisites for this class. Students should have a foundation in statistical data analysis to the level covered in Statistics for Data Analysis I.

**Class meetings:** Class meets Wednesdays in TBD, 3:30-6:20.

**Teaching assistants:** TBD

**Office Hours:** TBD

**Expectations for communication:** I will respond to all course emails within 24 hours of receipt. I will try to be extra responsive the day before any assignment is due, but cannot commit to responding with greater frequency, so please plan ahead. Email or interaction through the course site are the preferred means of communication.



**Grading:** Grades will be based on problem sets (40%), a midterm exam (25%), and a final project (35%.) The midterm exam is scheduled for TBD. In lieu of a final exam, the final project will consist of the submission of a policy proposal designed to address a problem in one of multiple scenarios that will be posed to the class.

**Readings:** Two texts are required for the class: *So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools* by Charles M. Payne (Harvard Education Press, 2008) and *How The Other Half Learns: Equality, Excellence, and the Battle over School Choice* by Robert Pondiscio (Penguin Random House, 2019.) Other readings will be assigned during the course of the term.

**ADA student accommodations:** Any student who believes they may need assistance should inform the Harris Dean of Students office by the end of the first week of class. The Dean of Students office will coordinate any student accommodations with Harris instructors.

**Academic Dishonesty statement and penalties:**

*All University of Chicago students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Among other things, this means that students shall not represent another's work as their own, use un-allowed materials during exams, or otherwise gain unfair academic advantage. All students suspected of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Harris Dean of Students for investigation and adjudication. The disciplinary process can result in sanctions up to and including suspension or expulsion from the University. In addition to disciplinary sanctions, I will impose a grade penalty of "F" for students who have committed academic dishonesty. The Harris policy and procedures related to academic integrity can be found at <https://harris.uchicago.edu/gateways/current-students/policies>. The University of Chicago Policy on Academic Honesty & Plagiarism can be found at <https://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/academic-policies/academic-honesty-plagiarism/>*

**Weekly schedule of readings and topics:**

TBD