How New Orleans Families Navigate Early Childhood and Kindergarten School Choice

Brief 1: Who Enrolls through the Centralized Application?

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A Research Brief Series by:
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LETTER FROM THE CO-DIRECTORS

The New Orleans Collaborative for Early Childhood Research (CECR) works to improve the lives of young children in New Orleans by studying policies and practices that support children and families. Our work spans multiple sectors affecting young children’s development, including education, health, and social services. Our work is grounded in four core areas: measuring the need for services and programs, increasing access to critical services, increasing the supply of services, and improving the quality of service delivery.

This series of research briefs, our partnership’s inaugural publication, examines access to public schools and early childhood programs in New Orleans. This brief is the first in a seven-part series examining how parents of young children in New Orleans navigate and perceive the school choice process. This project uses New Orleans public school application and enrollment records from the 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20 school years, and interviews with 100 parents conducted in 2020, to identify and understand patterns in early childhood and kindergarten applications in New Orleans’ centralized city-wide choice system. This project elevates the voices of families navigating the system, bringing their perspectives to the design of the New Orleans early childhood and school enrollment processes.

CECR was founded in 2019 with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences. CECR is a research-practice partnership – a model based in cross-sector collaboration among partners who share a vision for producing rigorous research for a common good. We are proud to come together to demonstrate this model that invites independent researchers to work alongside practitioners to inform the community’s understanding of programs and progress but also collectively strengthen our practices and policies.

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In the coming briefs, we'll explore the following questions:

1. **Who Enrolls Through the Centralized Application?**
   Authors: Lindsay Weixler and Cathy Balfe

2. What do parents of young children look for in early childhood programs and elementary schools?

3. Can parents find, and access, what they’re looking for?

4. How do parents learn about programs and the application process?

5. How well do parents understand the application and enrollment process?

6. How do parents approach the centralized application process?

7. How did COVID-19 affect parents’ schooling decisions?
INTRODUCTION

In this brief, we show results from our analysis of the application and enrollment records. All New Orleans parents\(^1\) must apply with the district to enroll in public early childhood programs and K-12 schools, as there are no neighborhood school assignments. The district opens a “Main Round” application, typically between November and January, for students to apply to their preferred programs. Students who miss the Main Round can apply through Round 2 (K-12 only) or use the later “Open Enrollment” process to enroll in an open seat or sign up for a waitlist.

"I believe that OneApp has made it to where parents can really advocate for a great education for their children. It’s just that it’s just their will to do so...I was really fighting because I really want them to have a great education, and experience things that I didn’t experience. Orleans Parish allows it to be where my economic status would not prevent my child from achieving that." (*Early childhood applicant*)

\(^1\) We use the term “parent” to refer to any primary caregiver, whether that be the child’s biological parent, adoptive parent, foster parent, grandparent, or other guardian responsible for the child’s welfare.
KEY FINDINGS

We find that only half of preschool (3- and 4-year-old) and kindergarten students are enrolled by the end of the district’s Main Round application, and nearly a third miss the OneApp all together, instead enrolling through the later “Open Enrollment” process. This high volume of late applications creates challenges for the district and for programs and schools, which need accurate enrollment counts to plan for staffing and space for the upcoming school year. Applying later also leaves families with fewer, and often lower-performing, programs to choose from. Finally, we also find that specific subgroups of kindergarten students are less likely to have applied in the Main Round: Asian and Native American students, students experiencing homelessness, English language learners, and students who did not attend any preschool program are all more likely to apply late, relative to their peers, which can leave them at a disadvantage in accessing their preferred programs.3

THE NEW ORLEANS APPLICATION PROCESS

For fifteen years, the New Orleans public school system has had widespread school choice, which is managed by a centralized enrollment process overseen by New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS). The centralized application (formerly called OneApp, now called the New Orleans Common Application Process, or NCAP) was designed to provide an efficient, equitable, and transparent way for families to select and access their preferred schools. However, for many families, navigating the application process can be confusing and overwhelming.

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2 We could not compare application rates by demographics for early childhood programs, as many of these programs’ enrollment data are not reported to the state and thus not part of the administrative data in our analysis.

3 We use “program” throughout to refer to both K-12 schools and early childhood education programs, which could be in a public school, private school, Head Start center, or private childcare center.

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Before the introduction of this system in 2011, families had to apply individually to each charter school, creating a large burden for both families and schools. In 2015, in response to state legislation, the application expanded to include publicly funded early childhood education (ECE) programs serving children from birth to age four, including Head Start programs, and publicly funded seats in private schools and childcare centers.

“Everything is gamified, and you have to—you’re expected to understand a very complex algorithm of how to increase your chances of getting into a better school.”
(\textit{Early childhood applicant})

Families apply through the first round (“Main Round”), a second round (K-12 families only), or a summer enrollment period (“Open Enrollment”). The online-only Main Round is open between November and January, and families can rank up to eight programs for early childhood or up to twelve programs for K-12. Early childhood applicants must also verify that they meet the eligibility requirements (e.g., residency, income limits) for their selected programs by bringing or uploading required documents before the end of the Main Round application window. Then NOLA-PS runs an algorithm, which uses family preferences, school admission priorities, and a random lottery number, to assign children to the available seats in each program.
After the Main Round, there is a second application window (“Round 2”) from April to May for K-12 families who missed the Main Round or were unsatisfied with their match. Any families that still need to enroll their child or switch programs after Main Round (for ECE) or Round 2 (for K-12) apply in Open Enrollment, which allows families to claim available seats on a first come, first served basis. Once students are enrolled in an ECE program, they often have the option to continue in the same program in the next year, or to continue in a public school from PK4 to kindergarten.

Applying in the Main Round is advantageous for both early childhood education and kindergarten families. In early childhood, seats are limited and not guaranteed. Roughly two-thirds of public ECE seats for three- and four-year-olds fill in the Main Round, and over 90% of infant and toddler seats fill, as there are currently few public seats for children under age 3 in New Orleans. Because nearly all infants and toddlers who miss the Main Round are waitlisted, the following analysis includes only three- and four-year-old students, referred to as “PK.” Though kindergarten seats are guaranteed for Orleans Parish residents, applying in the Main Round gives families the best chance of enrolling in their preferred school. Nearly all seats in schools with A or B ratings in the state’s School Performance Score system fill in the Main Round.

“I think it’s a good one because it gives everybody the opportunity to go to the best schools in the city. Yeah, I think it’s equal for everybody. The concept really is—I think it’s good for NOLA.”

(Early childhood applicant)
FINDING 1: NEARLY ONE THIRD OF PK AND KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN THE ONEAPP

“There was not a lot left over when we got to apply [in Open Enrollment], so I didn’t want to torture myself looking at schools that we couldn’t go to anyway.”

(Early childhood applicant)

In the figure below, we group enrolled PK3/PK4 and kindergarten students by their approach to the application. Our focus for this analysis is in understanding how enrolled students found their seat, so we do not include the roughly 2,500 students who applied each year for PK or K but did not ultimately enroll in a program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Do Public PK and Kindergarten Students in New Orleans Enroll in a Seat?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PK3 &amp; PK4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved up in same program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled through Main Round</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enrolled through Round 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participated in OneApp, did not match, &amp; enrolled through Open Enrollment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participated in OneApp, matched, &amp; switched through Open Enrollment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did not participate in OneApp, enrolled through Open Enrollment</td>
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Note: Figure reads: “18% of enrolled PK students moved up in the same program. 32% of enrolled PK students enrolled through a Main Round application.” Figure summarizes enrollment approaches for all students enrolled on October 1st in a public PK3, PK4, or kindergarten program in Orleans Parish, excluding a small number of elementary schools that were not participating in the centralized application at that time. PK data are from the fall of 2019; kindergarten data are averaged across the fall of 2017, 2018, and 2019. Round 2 is only available for kindergarten applicants because early childhood seats are not included in Round 2.
For both PK and kindergarten, roughly 20% of students enrolled in a guaranteed seat, meaning they were enrolled in the program in the prior year and continued to the next grade level. About 30% enrolled in a seat by applying and matching in the Main Round. As a result, after the Main Round, about half of PK and kindergarten students had the seat that they ultimately enrolled in in the fall. Kindergarten applicants also have the opportunity to apply in Round 2, but fewer than 10% of students enrolled in a seat through this round. About 20% of PK students and 10% of kindergarten students participated in Main Round or Round 2 but came back in Open Enrollment. At both PK and kindergarten, about 30% of students enrolled directly through the Open Enrollment period, skipping Main Round and Round 2 completely. In Brief 6 of this series, we’ll explore reasons that families missed the earlier rounds.

**FINDING 2: SOME GROUPS ARE LESS LIKELY TO PARTICIPATE IN THE KINDERGARTEN MAIN ROUND**

We have demographic information for kindergartners, so we were able to examine the likelihood of Main Round participation by students’ demographics.

Note: Figure reads: “63% of Black kindergartners enrolled in a New Orleans public school had submitted a Main Round application.” Figure summarizes enrollment approaches for all students enrolled on October 1st in a public kindergarten program in Orleans Parish, excluding a small number of elementary schools that were not participating in the centralized application at that time. Data are averaged across the fall of 2017, 2018, and 2019. Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander students are combined into one group because their patterns were similar, and there were very few (<30) Native American and Pacific Islander kindergartners enrolled in these years.
Overall, 64% of enrolled kindergartners in these years had participated in the Main Round. However, some groups of students participated at substantially higher or lower rates, defined as at least 5 percentage points above or below the district-wide rate of 64%. White and multiracial students were more likely to have participated in the Main Round, whereas Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander students were less likely to have participated. Students experiencing homelessness, those who did not attend any pre-K program, and those classified as English language learners were also significantly less likely to have participated. Some of the patterns we see here are not unique to New Orleans – for example, research from New York also finds lower kindergarten application rates for English language learners and students experiencing homelessness.

**IMPLICATIONS**

New Orleans’ centralized application system is designed to give families equitable access to their preferred programs, but equitable access in this system rests on the assumption that all families have equitable information and support to complete a timely application. Far too many families are missing the Main Round all together, putting strain on a system not designed for enrolling families one at a time, and leaving these families with limited options. Our findings indicate that the district should consider both ways to increase Main Round participation and ways to streamline the Open Enrollment process, which is currently serving nearly half of PK and kindergarten families in some way.

Our demographic analysis indicates that particular groups are most in-need of information and support for applying in the Main Round: Asian and Native American students, those experiencing homelessness, those who are not attending any center-based PK, and English-language learners. The district may want to consider partnering with community groups to reach these families and narrow the gaps we have identified here.
What do Parents of Young Children Look for in Early Childhood Programs and Elementary Schools?

To better understand these application patterns, and how families choose early childhood programs and elementary schools in this system, we partnered with NOLA-PS to interview 100 parents who applied for an early childhood or kindergarten seat for the 2020-21 school year. These applicants were asked a series of questions about their preferences for schools, how they approached the application, what challenges they faced, and how they could be better supported through the process. The upcoming briefs summarize the findings from these interviews. Coming next: What do parents of young children want in an early childhood program or school?
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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