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

1. Who Enrolls Through the Centralized Application?

2. *What do parents of young children look for in early childhood programs and elementary schools?*
   
   Authors: Alica Gerry, Olivia Carr, Lindsay Weixler, Monica Daniels

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?
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 second 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. For more background on New Orleans’ system, see Part 1 of the series. 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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CECR | How New Orleans Families Navigate Early Childhood and Kindergarten School Choices
Brief 2: What do parents of young children look for in early childhood programs and elementary schools?
INTRODUCTION

In this brief, we summarize answers from 100 parents who applied for or enrolled in a public school or early childhood education (ECE) program in 2020, about what they prioritized when selecting a program.

KEY FINDINGS

Overwhelmingly, parents selected programs based on their beliefs about the programs’ quality, combined with the convenience of the program’s location. However, families applying for kindergarten defined quality differently than families applying to ECE programs (ages 0-4). Parents looked for signals of academic rigor in elementary schools, but for ECE, they looked for a combination of factors, including academic quality, play-based curricula, and opportunities for socialization. Many ECE and kindergarten applicants also considered additional criteria, such as extra-curricular activities, demographic diversity, and personal connections to a program.

FINDING 1: PARENTS PRIORITIZE PROGRAM QUALITY, BUT KINDERGARTEN AND EARLY CHILDHOOD APPLICANTS DEFINE QUALITY DIFFERENTLY

KINDERGARTEN APPLICANTS

A majority of kindergarten applicants prioritized academic quality, though their indicators of quality varied. Most applicants considered 1) official indicators of program quality from the state or district, 2) broad signals of academic programming, such as a specific curriculum or academic focus, or 3) the program’s ability to support gifted and talented students or students with disabilities.

“I just mostly relied on the school rankings that are provided on EnrollNOLA”

(Kindergarten 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.

2 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.
Some parents heavily based their decisions on School Performance Scores, issued by the state and based primarily on test scores. “I just mostly relied on the school rankings that are provided on EnrollINOLA”, explained one kindergarten applicant. Families used these ratings not only as a measure of academic quality, but also as an “assurance that the school’s gonna be around” and will not be closed down due to poor academic performance (kindergarten applicant). However, some parents expressed hesitation about relying solely on the rankings, saying, for example, “I would say just talk to as many people as you can because I’m not necessarily sure that the school grades should be the end-all be-all when you’re making your decision. We know some people that go to [School Name], are really happy with it. That school got a C. I don’t know. It’s just complicated, and just try to do as much research as you can,” (Kindergarten applicant).

Some parents identified academic quality based on "a good curriculum" or a curricular focus advertised by the school, such as an arts-based, language immersion, or Montessori program. Other applicants wanted to balance academics with the broader student experience. “I don’t like schools that necessarily just teach to the test,” says one parent applying for a kindergarten seat for their child. The same parent continues, "I do realize that a lot of ’em do that for getting the A grade. It’s kinda finding that balance between is there a really high education standard but they’re not just forcing your child to perform for a standardized test.”

A small group of kindergarten applicants expressed a strong desire for a program that could academically support gifted and talented students or students with disabilities. This included routine gifted evaluations for students, as well as support staff and a history of effectively serving students with disabilities.
EARLY CHILDHOOD APPLICANTS (AGES 0-4)

Families applying for early childhood seats tended to prioritize different things, to some extent. Some ECE applicants did discuss academic quality in terms of state performance ratings, gathering information on ratings from state and district websites, but they often cited informal sources like friends or coworkers as well. Parents expressed familiarity with elementary school letter grades, but fewer parents specifically cited the ECE performance profile ratings, which are based on programs’ scores on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or CLASS. While some stated explicitly that they had “looked up the CLASS scores that the state publishes for ranking the different programs” (ECE applicant), most used more general language that included references to looking up “ratings,” “scores,” or “rankings,” which could indicate less familiarity with the ways in which early learning programs are evaluated.

"I don’t actually want ’em learning like A’s and B’s and stuff at that age. You just want them to play and be social with other kids."

(Early childhood applicant)

In contrast, several ECE applicants noted that the academic quality of a program was relatively unimportant due to their child’s young age, and preferred programs with a more play-based approach. One ECE parent articulated this sentiment by saying, “What you want from those earlier childhood programs and what you want in later school are very different, I think. You probably want more of a play-based thing...I don’t actually want ‘em learning like A’s and B’s and stuff at that age. You just want them to play and be social with other kids.” Another ECE applicant considered moving their child into a school-based pre-K program, not because it would offer “anything more than he’s learning at [his current program], to be quite honest. Rather, it was more trying to get him into [elementary] school,” as children are generally guaranteed kindergarten seats in schools where they attend pre-K. These applicants acknowledged that academic quality is an important piece of their child’s overall education but felt little pressure to select early learning programs based on that component relative to other considerations.
FINDING 2: PROGRAMS’ LOCATIONS ARE ALSO A MAJOR FACTOR FOR PARENTS

Most parents of both ECE and kindergarten applicants heavily prioritized programs located near home or work for a variety of reasons including shorter commutes, discomfort with putting a young child on a bus, and wanting to be close in case of emergencies. “We filtered some out just based on geography, so we were looking primarily at the schools that were closer to where we live,” explained one kindergarten applicant. Some parents identified programs that they felt would be a good fit for their child, and then used location to determine which additional programs to list on their application: “I just really knew about the first three that I picked, and the other ones I just went with what I thought maybe was good, a nice area where it wasn’t too far” (ECE applicant).

Parents struggled with the trade-off between long commute times and desired programs. One ECE parent said they had “come to terms with the fact that if you wanna go to the school you desire, odds are you won’t be living next to it unless you make a point to move towards it.” This sentiment was especially apparent for families living on the West Bank and in New Orleans East.

Only a small number of the parents who were interviewed thought the location of the program did not matter. As one ECE applicant explained, “That is one nice thing about New Orleans is you can go to school a little bit further from your home, and it’s not such a burden to drive.”
**FINDING 3: SOME PARENTS CONSIDERED OTHER FACTORS, LIKE SCHOOL CULTURE AND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS.**

When asked to describe good programs, parents consistently discussed programs’ demographic diversity, student-teacher interactions, the safety and cleanliness of the building and neighborhood, and extracurricular offerings. Parents used a variety of sources to get this information about programs, discussed in Brief 4. A few parents expressed a more general desire for their child to attend a program that was “a really good school that is fit for [their child’s] needs” (Kindergarten applicant). They wanted assurance that their child was going to have a positive experience in the program they chose. “I think that that is the number one thing that I cared about, was just that there is a positive feeling and attitude towards education, that there are teachers who cared about teaching, that there are students who are happy to be there,” explained one parent applying for a kindergarten placement.

"I went to [the school], my big sister, my little sister, all my other kids, so it was kind of a no-brainer that he would go there"

*(Kindergarten applicant)*

Several parents also relied on their personal connections to programs and schools, prioritizing places where they worked or volunteered, had family members who attended, or knew the teachers or leaders. These parents expressed a desire to “stick with familiar things” when choosing between programs. “Well, it used to be [School Name] before Katrina. [It] was a family school. I went to [the school], my big sister, my little sister, all my other kids, so it was kind of a no-brainer that he would go there,” explained one kindergarten applicant.
IMPLICATIONS

Unsurprisingly, parents want their children to attend “good” programs, defined a variety of ways, that are conveniently located near their home or work. Many parents, especially at kindergarten, relied on the state’s K-12 letter grades to assess schools’ academic quality. Early childhood applicants were less likely to mention the state’s ECE-specific rating system, indicating that parents are less aware of or less likely to prioritize those ratings when selecting ECE programs. If state or local agencies want parents to use these ratings, our results indicate a need for parents to be more informed about the ratings and why they may be a good reflection of what parents want in ECE programs.

NEXT IN SERIES

Can Parents Find, and Access, What They’re Looking For?

One advantage of New Orleans’ school landscape is the diversity of options, which can facilitate families’ ability to find programs that meet their particular preferences. But do families feel like those schools and programs are available to them?

Part 3 in the series will address whether families feel there are enough ‘good’ schools and ECE programs in the city, and how realistic they feel their chances are of getting into their desired programs.
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