How New Orleans Families Navigate Early Childhood and Kindergarten School Choice

BRIEF 6: HOW WELL DO PARENTS UNDERSTAND THE ENROLLMENT PROCESS?

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A Research Brief Series by:
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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?

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?**
   Authors: Alica Gerry, Olivia Carr, Monica Daniels, & Lindsay Weixler

7. What challenges do parents face when verifying eligibility for early childhood programs?
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 sixth 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 6: How well do parents understand the enrollment process?
INTRODUCTION

In this brief, we summarize answers from 100 parents who applied for or enrolled in a public kindergarten or early childhood education (ECE) program in New Orleans in 2020, about how well parents felt they understood the application and enrollment process.

KEY FINDINGS

Interviewed parents understood broadly how the application process works, and generally followed the guidance provided on the application. “Once you get to the applications, it’s kinda spelled out for you. You just filled it out,” said one kindergarten applicant. Parents were also aware of the “random” or “lottery” component of the district’s match algorithm that assigns students to schools. However, many parents were uncertain about how exactly this algorithm works, and these misunderstandings, in some cases, led parents to fill out their applications in ways that hurt their chances of getting into their top choices. Through these interviews, we identified four common, and incorrect, myths about the match process: (1) listing more programs hurts your chances at your higher-ranked choices; (2) district staff make decisions about school assignments; (3) ranking a popular program first hurts your chances at getting your second choice; and (4) applying as soon as the application opens helps your chances. As described in Valant (2023), using strategies based on these myths can backfire.

“I know that the selection is random, but I would like to know a little more detail, like, how do you select who goes to what school? How do you select which children are placed at certain places?”

(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.

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.
MANY PARENTS ARE CONFUSED ABOUT HOW STUDENTS ARE MATCHED TO SCHOOLS.

Some respondents felt knowledgeable about the match process, usually from looking through the district website, but many were confused. Parent respondents often emphasized the word “random,” with varying degrees of understanding. Some parents (correctly) understood that their children receive a random lottery number and that their chance of placement is affected by a priority system: “I know that the selection is random, but I would like to know a little more detail, like, how do you select who goes to what school? How do you select which children are placed at certain places?” (early childhood applicant).

Some parents thought the whole process was random or followed the whims of individual people making the matches. One early childhood parent said, “I think they put names in a hat and pull them out and say, ‘okay, this child going to this school.’” Another early childhood applicant requested that they “don’t just throw our child in any school that y’all feel like that’s open.” This perception that “there’s no methodology into how children are placed and who goes to what [school]” (kindergarten applicant) has caused both misconceptions and distrust in the match process.

“Nobody knows how they do the selection and why they do the selection how they do...When I went ahead to do the OneApp, it was like, okay, well, at this point, it’s just a random selection that they’re gonna do. You’re gonna pick the school that I really want him to go to or it’s gonna pick the school that I don’t want him to go to... a lotta people was saying how frustrating it is because you’ll put the schools on there, and then they’ll randomly select a school.”

(Early childhood applicant)
Myth 1: Listing more programs hurts your chances at your higher-ranked choices.

One group of parents listed a limited set of schools because they did not trust the lottery process to place them in a preferred school. “I know it’s all over the website, but I think there is this thing where it’s like, if you put multiple choices, you’re more likely to get matched at a school that you might not want. I know it’s all over the website that it’s not—that’s not true, but at the same time, I think the community really does not necessarily believe that,” one kindergarten applicant said. The parent continued, “If you put all your choices down, you’re gonna just get matched to something that you might not necessarily want.”

However, the choices that are listed lower on an application have no effect on whether an applicant matches to a higher-ranked program. If an applicant matches to their fifth-ranked choice, for example, that means that the first four programs on their list did not have space for them. If they had only listed those four programs, they would not have matched at all.

Truth: The algorithm gives you the highest choice on your list that has space for your child, no matter how many choices you list. Listing more programs never hurts your chances at a higher-ranked school.

“If you put all your choices down, you’re gonna just get matched to something that you might not necessarily want.” (Kindergarten applicant)
Truth: *District staff do not influence the outcome of the match process – the match algorithm gives students a seat at their highest-ranked choice that has space for them.*

**Myth 2:** *District staff make decisions about school assignments.*

Some parents believed district staff could influence their placement. For example, one early childhood applicant described only applying to one school because they thought it would show the district that they were “really interested in attending that particular school.” However, this does not affect the likelihood of being placed at your top choice, and only listing one choice can result in getting no match at all. For early childhood applicants, not getting a match can mean not getting a public ECE seat at all, as there are not enough ECE seats for all eligible children in the city.

Relatedly, some parents incorrectly interpreted their match results as having been influenced by district staff. One early childhood parent said, “I selected three schools last year for my daughter.” Then they “ignored all three schools and sent her back” to her current school. This can happen when all of a parent’s choices do not have available space – the student will be reassigned to their current program so that they do not lose their spot. However, if a parent submits an application to switch schools, and they are matched to a new program, they will lose their spot at the current school.
New Orleans’ algorithm matches students to their highest-ranked school that has availability, based on student and school priority groups and students’ lottery numbers. Because the system matches students to their highest possible choice on the application, families should rank programs in order of their true preferences, rather than trying to strategically list lower-demand programs first. Parents largely acknowledged that this was clearly conveyed on the application website, and some parents did follow that advice:

“The actual OneApp website is what helped me figure out that I should put number ones first ‘cause there was people saying, because it’s so difficult to get into [school name], maybe you shouldn’t put that as your number one. It’ll ruin your chances to get into your number two.”

(Early childhood applicant)

However, parents had varying levels of trust in that guidance. One early childhood applicant who worked in a middle school felt that it was very unlikely to get accepted into their top-ranked school: “I’ve seen kids put their top school on there, and then...about 90 percent of the time never get that first option.” A few parents claimed that you should not rank popular schools as your first choice because you will not be accepted:

“You don’t want to pick a school that is too desirable as your number one because you probably won’t get it. You want your first choice to be like your third choice because whatever you pick as your number one, you have a higher chance in that school’s lottery system. That is what I understand, but basically, you don’t know.” (Early childhood applicant)
As described in Part 5, most parents know that applying in the Main Round is advantageous. However, some parents mistakenly believed that applying earlier in the application cycle meant they would get placed before families applying later in the same application round: “Soon as it open up, get it done, ‘cause the spots go quick,” one early childhood applicant said. Those who believed this could become disappointed when it did not help their chances. Applying early can be helpful, as it gives ECE applicants more time to submit their verification paperwork and ensures parents don’t miss the deadline. However, it does not affect how applicants are matched to schools.

“Soon as it open up, get it done, ‘cause the spots go quick,”
(Early childhood applicant)
Overall, the parents we interviewed had a general understanding of the application process and knew that the match process involves a random lottery number. However, distrust, misconceptions, and uncertainty distorted how some parents approached the application, which in some cases worked against them in their efforts to get their child into their most-preferred school. When parents attempt to “game the system,” their strategies fail because they aren’t clear on the rules of the game. We recommend that other local organizations promote the message that parents should rank as many choices as possible, in their true order of preference. Some parents are following this guidance in the application, but other parents disregard it because they do not trust the district as a source of information.

NEXT IN SERIES

What Challenges Do Parents Face When Verifying Eligibility For Early Childhood Programs?

Applicants to early childhood programs have an additional step to complete after submitting their application: they must submit documents to the district to verify their eligibility for the programs they have listed. In part 7, we examine what keeps parents from completing this process.
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