How New Orleans Families Navigate Early Childhood and Kindergarten School Choice

BRIEF 7: WHAT CHALLENGES DO PARENTS FACE WHEN VERIFYING ELIGIBILITY FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS?

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NEW ORLEANS COLLABORATIVE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH
CECR

A Research Brief Series by:
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SERIES

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?
7. ***What challenges do parents face when verifying eligibility for early childhood programs?***
   Authors: Alica Gerry, Olivia Carr, Monica Daniels, & Lindsay Weixler

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 seventh 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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INTRODUCTION

In this brief, we explore parents' experiences with the early childhood verification process. To successfully verify, applicants must provide documents to determine their eligibility for publicly funded programs, as required by federal and state regulations. This step, though necessary for ensuring that families are eligible for publicly funded programs, presents a significant barrier for parents. Every year, roughly one third of parents do not successfully complete the process. This brief summarizes the experiences of 35 New Orleans parents who applied in the 2020 Main Round for a public early childhood program. Twenty of these applicants completed the process in time for the Main Round lottery, and fifteen did not. Their experiences point to the complexities families face when completing this process, including producing the correct documentation and understanding their verification status.

Prior to the COVID-19-related shutdown of schools and offices, which was announced on March 13, 2020, applicants were required to bring documentation in person to a district Family Resource Center (FRC) or Head Start (HS), located throughout Orleans Parish. Many applicants had verified prior to this date. However, as the deadline had not yet passed, a subset of ECE applicants experienced a new online verification process instead of the prior in-person process. Because applicant experiences differed based on whether they verified before or after the COVID shutdown, this brief will discuss challenges related to both in-person and online verification. The district now offers both an online and an in-person option: parents can choose to visit an FRC in-person to submit their documentation, but now have the additional option to submit documents directly to an online portal.

KEY FINDINGS

Prior research has shown the ways in which the verification process poses a barrier to some families completing the ECE application process. Through interviews with families, we found first that, though some families found the process to be easy, many noted challenges, particularly with producing the correct documents. As shown in Figure 1 below, and supplemented by the Appendix, the list of eligibility documents is long and complicated. Second, families who thought they were eligible, but were not marked as verified, most often said they were confused and thought their application was complete. In light of these findings, we recommend that state and federal policymakers work to streamline document requirements, requiring the same set of documentation across all publicly-funded ECE programs, and that district staff continue the ongoing effort to improve communication with applicants.

FIGURE 1. EXAMPLES OF VERIFICATION DOCUMENTATION REQUIRED BY THE NOLA-PS COMMON APPLICATION (NCAP)

Eligibility requirement	Description	Allowable Documents	
Age	Applicant child needs **one** of the following to prove age eligibility	Primary	• Birth certificate
		Alternate	• Current passport / visa
Custody	Applicant needs **one** of the following to prove custody	Primary	• Birth certificate, with parent or guardian submitting the NCAP listed
		Alternate	• Court-issued custodian affidavit • Child Placement Agreement from DCFS
Residency	Applicant needs **two** proofs of residency	Primary	• Louisiana drivers license / state-issued ID card • Utility bills • Lease agreement
		Alternate	• Letter / statement of living arrangements signed by the owner of the dwelling with two of the above residency documents in the owner's name
Income	Applicant needs **two** consecutive pay statements for each parent/guardian and adult included in the household number for the current year (within 2 months from the date of filling out the application)	Primary	• Pay statements

		Alternate	• Declaration of no income
			• Letter from employer stating all of the following:
			  ◦ place of employment
			  ◦ work hours
			  ◦ rate of pay
			  ◦ start date of employment,
			  ◦ signed and dated by the employer

** This is not a comprehensive list of allowable documentation. It is only intended to give examples of the documents that may be required of families applying for the NCAP. A more comprehensive list of documentation requirements is included in the Appendix.

THOUGH SOME FAMILIES FOUND THE PROCESS TO BE EASY, MANY NOTED CHALLENGES, PARTICULARLY WITH PRODUCING THE CORRECT DOCUMENTS.

For some applicants, navigating the verification process was relatively straightforward. Many families who completed verification were satisfied with their interactions with FRC staff, describing them as 'helpful' and 'friendly', and a few gave specific examples of FRC staff working with them to ensure that correct documentation was submitted after initially producing an incomplete set of documents.

However, even for those who verified successfully, the process was not entirely issue-free. In person applicants found that inconvenient FRC hours that can conflict with work hours, and long wait times, made the process challenging. "There's always a line. People are always waiting. It's not the most convenient," said one parent about the in-person experience (unverified ECE applicant).

Some parents voiced their difficulty obtaining the right documentation, which may have resulted in parents not completing the process. Sometimes this was attributed to a lack of clarity about what documentation was acceptable, but others had difficulty actually obtaining the necessary documentation. "[The verification process] was clear, but I didn't have most of it… I think it was something about some rent papers or something" (unverified ECE applicant). Parents who specifically named the documentation they were struggling to produce listed proof of residence and income most frequently.

"Once you submit the OneApp, then you have a certain number of days where you have to show up, and you have to bring the documentation. There's all of these documents that you have to provide in order to prove it so I came with a folder of that, and I was still missing multiple documents. Then I would also have to submit further documentation about the income." (unverified ECE applicant).

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The most common issue raised by parents verifying in person was having to make additional trips to complete the process due to missing or insufficient documentation. One parent described the "rollercoaster" of bringing documentation in multiple times: "They'll turn around and say, 'Oh, this is not proper documentation. We need you to bring something else.' I had to do that two or three times before they said, 'Okay, well, everything is processed now" (verified ECE applicant).

Another group of families ultimately decided, or were told, that they were ineligible for free programs. "I think it was sayin' I didn't qualify for any of the [programs]" explained one unverified applicant. These applicants generally seemed to think that they would be eligible for free seats, and appeared to have completed the application process before realizing they were not. One unverified applicant explicitly expressed their lack of clarity around the income requirements, saying that "they don't really tell you what your income needs to be". They continued, explaining, "To qualify for Early Head Start, your income has to be very, very low, not just poverty level but well below that. I remember I showed up with him to a school and found out that he didn't qualify for Early Head Start".

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UNVERIFIED FAMILIES OFTEN SAID THAT THEY WERE CONFUSED AND THOUGHT THEIR APPLICATION WAS COMPLETE.

Many unverified applicants we interviewed were unsure of their verification status, often thinking that they had submitted everything correctly. “I went to the office and verified. This lady got all our copies. I don't know what she did with it because they kept saying we never verified,” explained one parent who was marked as unverified despite feeling confident that they had submitted the required documentation (unverified ECE applicant).

This frustration with understanding verification status became more acute for families verifying online, because there wasn’t real-time feedback that many applicants who verified in-person received. Some parents verifying in-person relied heavily on FRC staff in “making sure I have the right paperwork” (verified ECE applicant). Parents submitting online voiced having trouble determining whether or not they’d verified correctly and feeling frustrated with communication about whether their documents had been properly processed.

“I was asked to submit the verification document for her eligibility. Since all of the family resource centers are closed, it was being submitted online. I guess someone was supposed to verify it on their end, but it’s been probably two or three months that it’s still listed as “pending verification” for eligibility. I tried calling and also sent an email to follow-up, but I never heard anything back from anyone” (unverified ECE applicant).

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(*Unverified ECE applicant*)

Many parents didn’t recall receiving a confirmation email, and desired clearer communication about the status of their document submission.

IMPLICATIONS

The COVID shutdown required NOLA-PS to rapidly shift verification to a fully online process, which eliminated barriers like inconvenient hours, long lines, and transportation limitations.

At the same time, the online process, which for the period following the COVID shutdown was the only way to complete verification, introduced other issues. File upload limits and delays in review and feedback were particular points of frustration for applicants. This feedback delay, in combination with the complicated list of documents required by state and federal regulations, appears to be the biggest challenge to verification. Many parents we spoke to attempted to complete the process, but were either unable to gather everything or unaware that the district did not consider their application complete.

In the spring of 2023, NOLA-PS introduced a new online application designed to make applying and verifying eligibility easier for parents. The document upload process is built into the application, and parents can check their account any time to see the status of their application. If NOLA-PS needs additional documentation, parents receive a text or email letting them know. However, childcare center directors report that families still struggle to complete the process and often seem unaware that their application is not considered complete, despite the new system's improvements. Both center directors and NOLA-PS staff have voiced a need for additional training on the system in order to make the best use of its features.

With limited funding, government agencies understandably work to ensure that the neediest children are served first. However, with a slew of required, often difficult to obtain documents, and inconsistent eligibility guidelines, the process has been made more difficult than it needs to be. Our findings highlight two immediate improvements that could enable low-income children to more easily access early education: (1) simplify the set of eligibility requirements by aligning them across programs and shortening the list of required documents; and (2) improve the clarity and timeliness of communication with applicants. The district is now set up to continuously improve communication by utilizing the tools available in the new application system. However, eligibility and document requirements are set by state and federal agencies and legislation. We recommend that advocates lobby state and federal policymakers to simplify this process as soon as possible.

In the long term, data system improvements, and combined benefits applications, could drastically improve the process both for families and for agencies. For example, over 95% of eligible families with young children participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and SNAP participants are automatically eligible for most public ECE programs. NOLA-PS staff are currently able to query the SNAP database to search for ECE applicants, but often are not able to identify a match in the record system. Improving these data linkages would enable the district to automatically verify income eligibility for the majority of applicants. Additionally, combined benefits applications, in which parents can apply once for multiple programs (e.g., SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, and ECE), would make significant strides in reducing administrative burden and increasing participation in critical family-supporting programs.

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