

How Has **Centralized Enrollment** Affected New Orleans Schools?

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Overview

In cities across America, a wave of school choice policies have given parents a wide array of publicly funded schools from which to pick. Charter schools, magnet schools, and open enrollment programs are centerpieces of today's urban school systems. However, increased choice in a decentralized system also can increase complexity. For families, this includes gathering information about schools, navigating a maze of application requirements and deadlines, and securing transportation to and from school. This can create barriers that keep families from accessing the schools they want. Often, these barriers pose the greatest challenges to the most disadvantaged families.

Enrollment systems can be one such barrier. With decentralized enrollment, families apply to each school individually, and schools manage their own application and enrollment processes. Many cities also now have unified enrollment (UE) systems that centralize the application and assignment processes. New Orleans became an early adopter of UE systems when it introduced OneApp in 2012 (now called the NOLA-PS Common Application Process, or NCAP). Families submit a single application that ranks their preferred schools, and then the system uses a computer algorithm to place students in schools based on families' requests, seat capacity, and schools' admissions priorities.

The placement algorithms used by systems like NCAP are backed by [research from economics](#), showing that well-designed algorithms can efficiently match students to schools. However, less research examines the equity implications of moving from decentralized enrollment to UE systems. For example, one key question for school choice settings is whether all schools are genuinely accessible to disadvantaged and marginalized populations. This issue has arisen amid concerns about an assortment of barriers that may keep certain families from applying to or enrolling in some schools. In New Orleans, one persistent concern has been the accessibility of a small number of charter schools that have, for many years, enrolled a highly disproportionate share of the city's population of white and wealthier students. Some of these schools resisted entry to NCAP until they were compelled to participate.

This study explores how school demographics and outcomes changed as schools moved from decentralized enrollment to a UE system in New Orleans. We focus especially on the small group of schools that enrolled over 95% of the public schools' white students before these schools entered NCAP.



The Key Findings are as follows:

- » Entering a centralized enrollment system was associated with a steady increase in Black and total nonwhite enrollment over time at schools that had previously enrolled disproportionately large numbers of white students, with the largest immediate effects in elementary school entry grades.
- » We find no evidence of corresponding declines in white enrollment in these schools from either exit or reduced demand among new families. Instead, these schools increased total enrollment after entering centralized enrollment, allowing them to enroll more nonwhite students while increasing persistence among already-enrolled white and nonwhite students.
- » These enrollment changes occurred without significant changes to these schools' state accountability scores, value-added test performance, student or teacher mobility, or student discipline rates.

Background

As a city, New Orleans is racially, ethnically, and economically diverse. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 60% of residents are Black, 34% white, 6% are Hispanic or Latino, 3% are Asian, 2% are of two or more races, and 24% of residents live in poverty. However, with many of the city's white and wealthier families [enrolling in private schools](#), the public school population in New Orleans does not reflect this diversity. As of 2021, 91% of public school students in New Orleans were students of color, and 83% were identified as economically disadvantaged.

To the extent that white students do attend public schools, they have long been heavily concentrated in a small number of schools, with most public schools enrolling very few or no white students at all. In New Orleans, like the rest of the country, schools of many different demographic profiles thrive. However, the high concentration of historically advantaged groups in a small number of New Orleans public schools raises two important concerns. The first is that the public school system is highly segregated, and research indicates that [segregation undermines](#) students' outcomes and opportunities. The second is that the schools that have enrolled such highly disproportionate shares of white students may not be equally accessible to students of color. If many marginalized families want to enroll their children in these schools but confront barriers, then New Orleans does not provide equitable access to schools.

Notably, several schools that enroll a disproportionate number of white students resisted entry to NCAP even when nearly all other public schools were participating in the city's UE system. This raised concerns about equitable access. When schools are available in UE systems, families can request those schools as part of the same application that they use for other schools. This reduces the need to navigate many school-specific application processes, deadlines, and requirements. Schools that run their own enrollment processes outside of NCAP also might lack transparency and oversight in how the schools are determining which students are offered seats.



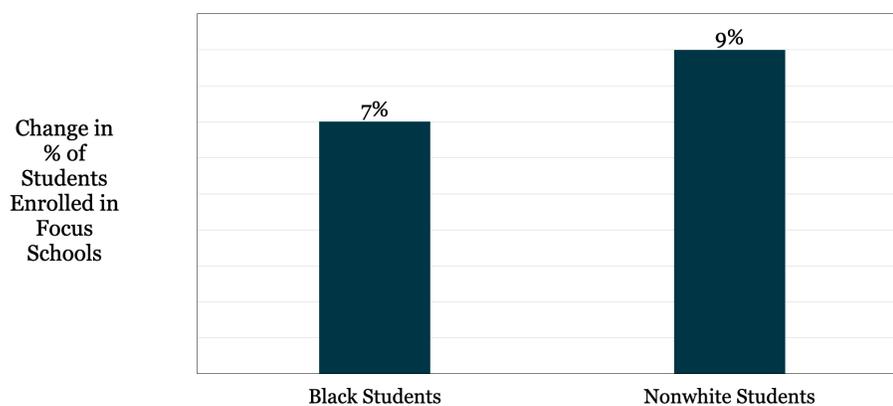
UE systems are not a surefire solution to equity and transparency problems, but they can be designed in ways that help. For example, burdensome application processes tend to create particular challenges for disadvantaged groups. UE systems can substantially reduce those burdens by eliminating the need for families to research each school’s requirements and then travel around town to drop off applications during very specific application windows. With NCAP, families can apply to many schools with a single online application simply by ranking those schools on the NCAP website. Still, barriers to access can remain. For example, UE systems generally use placement algorithms that give **priority to certain groups of students over others**. This could include priorities such as neighborhood preferences that tend to favor students from historically advantaged groups. Schools may also use selective admissions practices that benefit students with more resources and opportunities available to them.

New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS) is the only U.S. public school system with 100% charter schools where participation in school choice is required for enrollment at all grade levels. For most families, this has involved requesting schools through NCAP or the school-specific application processes for schools not available in NCAP. Over time, more schools have entered NCAP. This is partly because of policy changes that required, first, schools with publicly funded pre-K programs to join NCAP and, a few years later, charter schools that still were not participating to join NCAP when their contracts with their authorizers were renewed. Still, some local stakeholders feared that changes to application and admissions processes would create challenges or cause current students to exit, which produced tension between systemwide equity goals and internal school priorities. Since this is a **common tension** in cities that are exploring more equitable access to more segregated elite schools, we examine how schools in New Orleans changed in their demographic composition, student persistence, and school outcomes after entering centralized enrollment.

Overall Findings

DID SCHOOLS’ ENTRANCE INTO THE CENTRALIZED ENROLLMENT SYSTEM EXPAND ACCESS FOR BLACK STUDENTS AND OTHER STUDENTS OF COLOR?

We examined enrollment patterns at the small number of New Orleans schools that accounted for a highly disproportionate share of white students in the public school system. We call these “focus schools” because they are the focus of our analysis.



This figure displays the change in student enrollment in entry grades immediately following entry into NCAP. Nonwhite students include those identified as Black, Hispanic, Asian, and two or more races.



Focus schools' entry into NCAP was associated with a steady increase in Black and total nonwhite (including students identified as Black, Hispanic, Asian, and two or more races) enrollment over time. Immediately after entering NCAP, focus schools saw the biggest increase in Black and nonwhite enrollment in entry grades, mostly in pre-K and Kindergarten.

DID WHITE STUDENTS ABANDON THESE SCHOOLS AFTER THE SCHOOLS ENTERED THE CENTRALIZED ENROLLMENT SYSTEM?

We find no evidence of corresponding declines in white enrollment in these schools from either exit or reduced demand among new families. Instead, the schools increased total enrollment after entering centralized enrollment, allowing them to enroll more nonwhite students while increasing persistence among already-enrolled white and nonwhite students.

DID ENTERING THE CENTRALIZED ENROLLMENT SYSTEM CHANGE SCHOOLS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, STUDENT OR TEACHER MOBILITY, OR DISCIPLINE RATES?

While some school leaders expressed concerns about possible adverse impacts on school performance if they joined NCAP, our research did not find evidence of these impacts. The enrollment changes that we observed occurred without substantial changes to schools' state accountability scores, value-added test performance, student or teacher mobility, or student discipline rates.

How Did We Carry Out This Analysis?

Using restricted, student-level administrative data provided by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) for all publicly funded schools in New Orleans from the 2007-08 through 2019-20 school years, we aggregated the data to the school-by-grade-by-year level for our analyses.

We use a comparative interrupted time series (CITS) design to isolate the effects of centralized enrollment on NOLA-PS schools as they incrementally joined over time while identifying differential effects for the subset of schools we focused on.

As a group, we identified ten schools that enrolled over 95% of the system's white students. Each school offered a particular focus (Montessori, language immersion, arts, etc.), and some included gifted programs with academic admissions requirements. Our analysis focused on how these schools experienced demographic and other school-wide changes after entering centralized enrollment.

Full details of the study's methodology can be found in the [Technical Report](#)



Conclusions and Discussion

Our findings are consistent with claims that centralized enrollment systems, compared to decentralized processes, can improve access to high-demand schools for marginalized communities. In schools that had enrolled disproportionately large numbers of white students, we find that the enrollment of nonwhite students increased after schools joined a unified enrollment system. It could be that centralized enrollment entry made these schools more visible or otherwise reduced the barriers to applying. The enrollment effects were too modest in size, at least in the short run, to markedly change the degree of school segregation. Still, the presence of immediate effects suggest that **many nonwhite families want seats in these schools.**

We see increasing numbers and shares of nonwhite/Black students enrolled in the years after schools enter NCAP. Over the long run, as more students of color enroll in these schools, more families might see these schools as welcoming options for their own children. In addition, there could be a multiplier effect from sibling preference, where admitting more nonwhite students in one year leads schools to admit more nonwhite children from the same families in subsequent years. Still, changes in school demographics come slowly after a school joins NCAP. Most students enter a school in an entry grade. For a school with many grade levels, it would take several years for students in each grade to have entered via centralized enrollment.

We find little evidence that entering a centralized enrollment system is a sure path to improved school performance or immediate racial integration—neither for schools that had been disproportionately white nor other schools. On the other hand, **centralized enrollment systems can create more opportunities for students of color in disproportionately white schools.** These opportunities can arise without triggering the white flight or undermining school performance.

Our results suggest that policy design matters. Under certain conditions, it is possible to expand access to highly sought-after schools without limiting access to other students or sacrificing school performance.

How Does This Relate to Other REACH Research?

This study is one component of an extensive research series on unified enrollment, including a guide on [how the centralized enrollment system works in New Orleans](#) and an analysis of the [impacts of priority categories on equity in school placement](#).

THESE RESULTS ALSO RELATE TO PRIOR WORK CONDUCTED BY ERA AND REACH:

REACH and ERA-New Orleans have released other studies on centralized enrollment. Douglas Harris and Jon Valant have provided [a brief introduction to centralized enrollment systems and their pros and cons](#).

Other research by Valant and Lindsay Bell Weixler [addresses the role that information plays in how families rank schools](#).

Valant has also studied efforts to [shape the schools that families request--specifically, the effects of giving families access to resources from a program called Ed Navigator](#).



About the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH)

Founded in 2018, REACH provides objective, rigorous, and applicable research that informs and improves school choice policy design and implementation to increase opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged students.

REACH is housed at Tulane University with an Executive Committee that includes researchers from Tulane, Michigan State University, Syracuse University, and the University of Southern California. The research reported here was exclusively funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305C180025 to The Administrators of the Tulane Educational Fund. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

About the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans

The Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans) is a research center that collaborates with local education stakeholders to produce objective, rigorous, and useful research to inform the community's understanding of how to improve students' experiences in schools and beyond. For more information, please visit the organization's website.

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