INCREASING ACCESS TO HEAD START THROUGH TEXT MESSAGES

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Overview

Eligibility for publicly funded early childhood education (ECE) programs in the United States is often limited by family income. Though the use of income thresholds is important for targeting limited resources to those most in need, the processing for verifying income is sometimes complex and

burdensome for families with limited means. In 2016, for example, one quarter of families applying for a spot in a public early childhood program through New Orleans' centralized enrollment system, OneApp, did not complete this verification step. To address the challenges associated with eligibility verification, we partnered with NOLA Public Schools to conduct a series of studies about the potential of weekly text messages to help families complete the process. Findings from the first of our two text messaging projects are detailed in a previously released ERA-New Orleans brief.

In this follow-up study, we revised the text message program to be more effective for Head Start families. Parents who applied for Head Start in the 2019-20 OneApp were randomly assigned to receive formal text message reminders, personalized text message reminders, or no reminders. Our main findings from this study are summarized below:

- Head Start applicants who received text reminders, either formal or personalized, verified eligibility at significantly higher rates (58.2% and 57.1%, respectively) than parents who did not receive texts (48.6%).

- Two-thirds of Head Start applicants who received personalized text messages responded (67.4%), indicating a desire to engage with NOLA Public Schools (NOLA-PS) staff for help.

- Even with text message reminders, Head Start applicants still verified at significantly lower rates than applicants to school-based pre-K programs. Sixty-eight percent of school-based pre-K applicants receiving formal text reminders ultimately verified, compared with only 58% of Head Start applicants receiving those same communications.

This study provides compelling evidence that simple, low-cost text supports, paired with clear, accessible resources, can help families navigate the early childhood enrollment process and increase their likelihood of successfully enrolling their child in their desired seat.

> " *Simple, low-cost text supports, paired with clear, accessible resources, can help families navigate the early childhood enrollment process.* "

Background

The Federal Head Start Program

Head Start is a federal program, initially launched in 1965. It provides grant funding, oversight, and support services to Head Start agencies around the country. The Head Start model emphasizes the development of the whole child, promoting school readiness, health, and family well-being through early learning and wraparound services. Annually, this program serves nearly one million children under the age of five from economically disadvantaged families.

Though there is some debate about the long-term academic benefits of Head Start, studies have shown that access to Head Start can have meaningful impacts for children—both in the short term and into adulthood—as well as for their families. Studies show that access to Head Start programming has a positive impact on short-term cognitive outcomes like language and literacy development. However, evidence also indicates that families need help accessing these programs. For example, prior research has found that children from the most disadvantaged families are less likely to attend Head Start programs. For this reason, identifying and addressing possible enrollment barriers has the potential to increase the equity of access to these programs.

Income Verification for Publicly Funded Programs

Publicly funded ECE programs like Head Start are often restricted to low-income families. This restriction adds an additional step to the application process and may act as a barrier for applicants, especially those with the most limited access to resources.

A body of research focusing on access to child care subsidies categorizes barriers that families face into two categories: (1) structural, or practical, barriers including issues like access to transportation or working hours that conflict with verification center hours, and (2) behavioral barriers such as limited access to information and potential stigma associated with accessing publicly funded programs.

Policy Context in New Orleans

In New Orleans, families apply for publicly funded ECE seats through a centralized enrollment system called OneApp. After submitting an application online, ECE applicants must provide supporting documentation, in person, verifying their

eligibility for these programs. All applicants must provide the child's birth certificate and proof of residence in Orleans Parish, and almost all applicants must provide proof of income, as Head Start and Louisiana's state-funded pre-K are limited to children from low-income families. Only applicants to gifted or tuition-based programs are exempt from the income documentation requirement.

Notably the eligibility verification requirements for Head Start seats are different from the requirements for school-based pre-K seats. First, Head Start applicants cannot complete verification at one of the three well-known Family Resource Centers located throughout the city that are open during standard business hours. Families must instead visit one of 17 Head Start Centers to complete an interview required by federal Head Start guidelines, and interview hours are limited and vary across these centers. Additionally, Head Start requires additional documents for income verification, beyond what the state requires for school-based pre-K. Finally, the separate processes require that families have an understanding of the two different program types in order to determine which verification process they must complete.

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Families who do not complete the verification step are not eligible to receive a Head Start seat. Our aim throughout this series of studies was to better understand how the local agency, NOLA-PS, could help applicants to complete this process.

How Did We Develop the Follow-up Study?

The original text messaging study was motivated by data that indicated the verification step poses a barrier to ECE program enrollment. In the 2017-18 application year, more than one quarter of applicants who applied for a public ECE program (either Head Start or pre-K) through the OneApp never completed the verification step for their child. That resulted in approximately 1,000 children who applied but were ultimately unable to receive a seat. To improve access to programs, it is important to understand who these families are and why, after taking the time to complete an application, they ultimately do not complete the steps required to enroll their child.

In the fall of 2017, our research team worked with the EnrollNOLA office, which was then housed within the state-run Recovery School District, to test the effects of text message supports on completion of the verification step among ECE applicants. Beginning four weeks after the application period opened, unverified applicants were randomly assigned to receive (1) no text messages; (2) automated one-way text reminders about the verification step; or (3) personalized texts with an invitation to respond to an EnrollNOLA staff member. For more details on this study, see the prior brief.

In this prior study, text message supports helped parents overcome the verification barrier in the ECE enrollment process, but only for parents applying for school-based pre-K. Text message supports did not significantly increase verification rates for the subset of parents applying to Head Start programs. We wanted to better understand why the text messages did not work well for this group of applicants. Upon further analysis of the text messages themselves, we found that Head Start parents were confused about where to go and what documentation was required to complete verification.

A key component of the follow-up study was to provide clearer guidance to Head Start applicants about where to go and what documentation was required. We identified simple revisions to the text messages that could help clarify the process. For example, text communications in the previous study directed families to a document that explained the verification process for pre-K at the top of the page. Families applying for Head Start seats had to first recognize that two different verification processes exist, and second, locate and identify the relevant information for Head Start applicants at the bottom of the document.

Prior to this follow-up study, we presented recommendations to NOLA-PS, which now manages the enrollment process, aimed at addressing these specific barriers. We suggested several revisions to the online resources that provide parents with information on the verification process. In response, NOLA-PS combined information on how and where to complete the verification step into one document, to limit the amount of navigation required to find relevant information. They also reformatted the document to more clearly differentiate the pre-K and Head Start verification processes.

How Did We Test the Effects of Text Message Support on Head Start Verification Rates?

The district usually communicates with families throughout the verification process via formal, weekly email reminders to verify eligibility. In the follow-up study, some parents were included in a baseline comparison group who received only these typical communications. To understand the effects of additional text message supports, we had a second group of parents who received the same communications plus weekly non-personalized text messages, also formal in tone. We call this the "formal reminder group." A final group of parents received personalized reminders that were more casual in tone and encouraged two-way communication with a named member of the district's staff. We call this the "personalized reminder group."

We conducted this follow-up study to test text message supports with revised online resources tailored to Head Start applicants. This study was structured identically to the initial study but included only those applying to at least one Head Start program. A total of 2,282 parents applied to Head Start programs in the 2019-20 OneApp. We included only the subset of parents applying for Head Start seats who either (1) applied before January 8 but had not yet completed verification on that date, or (2) applied after January 8 and did not complete the verification step within the same week as their application. Text messages were sent to 1,730 parents applying on behalf of 2,155 children.

WHAT REMINDERS DID DIFFERENT GROUPS RECEIVE?

The **Baseline Comparison Group** received weekly email reminders to verify eligibility. Some also received one text message about a Saturday verification event in their neighborhood. (598 parents / 743 children)

The **Formal Reminder Group** received the same communications as the baseline group plus up to 8 weekly non-personalized text messages. (553 parents / 694 children)

Sample Formal Reminder

> Your child's OneApp is incomplete. To be considered for OneApp, you have to complete two steps. 1.Submit choices (DONE!). 2.Verify eligibility (NOT DONE!). Please review the following link for help finishing your OneApp: https://enrollnola.org/events/

The **Personalized Reminder Group** received the same communications as the baseline group plus up to 8 personalized reminders that were more casual in tone and encouraged two-way communication with a named member of the district's staff. (579 parents / 718 children)

Sample Personalized Reminder

> Hi [Parent First Name], it's Ashley again! To be considered for OneApp, you have to complete two steps. 1.Submit choices (DONE!). 2.Verify eligibility (NOT DONE!). Can I help with #2?

At the beginning of each week, unverified Head Start applicants who had not yet received a group assignment were randomly assigned to one of the three study groups. Applicants would receive text communications based on group assignment through the end of the verification window, or until they successfully completed the verification process. Random assignment ensures that differences in the outcome (percent of families completing the verification step) are attributable to the intervention. Parents submitting applications for more than one child received the same type of text communications for each child.

What Effect Did Text Message Support Have on Verification Rates for Head Start Families?

With the revised website materials and text language, we found that text message communications were effective for this group of applicants. As shown in Figure 1, parents who received text reminders, whether formal or personalized, verified eligibility at significantly higher rates than parents who did not receive texts. Head Start applicants who received supplemental text reminders of either type were approximately 10 percentage points more likely to verify than those who received only the baseline communications.

Figure 1: Text message supports increased verification rates for Head Start applicants.
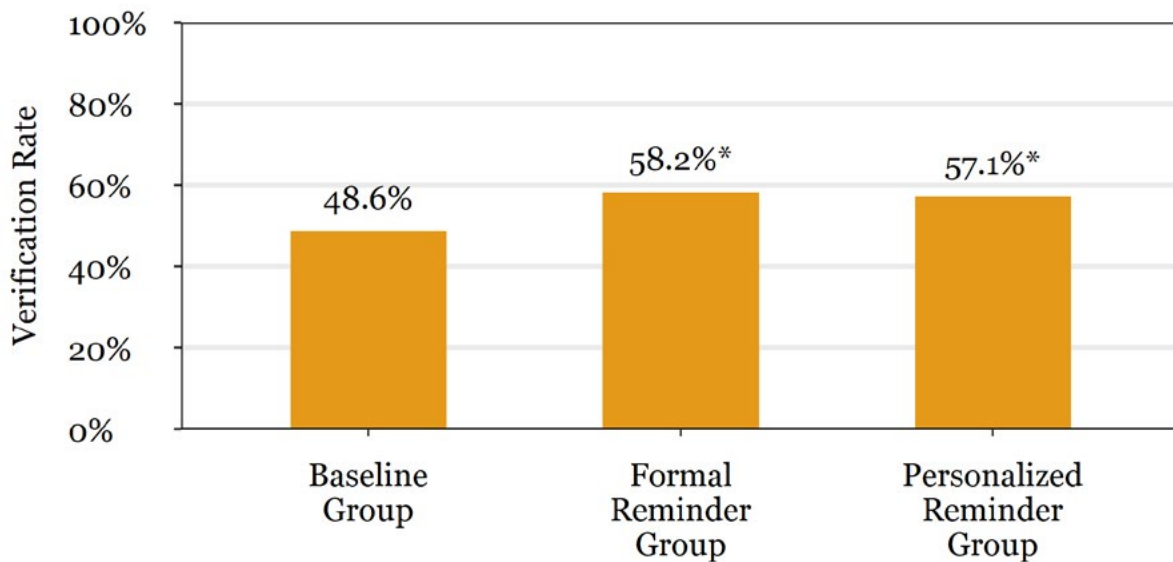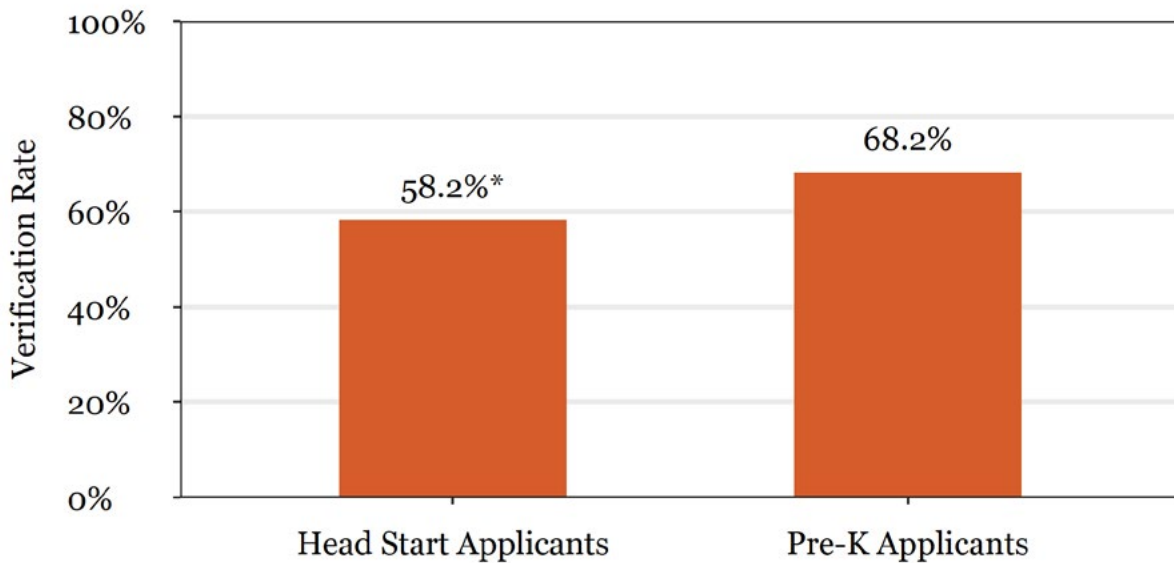

Notes: Asterisks indicate that the rate for a given group is statistically significantly different than that of the baseline comparison group. Our sample excludes families who verified prior to January 8th or within a week of submitting their application.

Even with text message supports and revised website materials, Head Start families still verified at lower rates when compared to school-based pre-K applicants receiving the same formal text reminders (Figure 2, next page). These results, paired with the findings from the prior study, indicate that clear communication about the process can significantly improve parents' likelihood of completing ECE applications.

However, additional supports may still be required for Head Start families navigating this complex process. A phone interview could significantly ease the burden on Head Start families applying for ECE programs, as could methods of automatically verifying income eligibility through other state records like SNAP participation.

Figure 2: Head Start applicants receiving formal text reminders still verified at lower rates than pre–K applicants receiving those same communications.

Notes: The asterisk indicates that the rate for the Head Start group is statistically significantly different than that of the Pre-K group.

However, short of long-term policy changes, we are optimistic that there are shorter-term solutions, such as text interventions, that can increase access to information and reduce some of the practical barriers that low-income families face in accessing ECE programs.

Discussion

Taken together, our findings from both studies of text messaging support point to two key takeaways. First, given the differences in outcomes for Head Start applicants between the first study and the second study, it is clear that the logistically confusing verification process is hindering program access among the most disadvantaged applicants. By clarifying instructions and sending text messages directing families to updated resources, NOLA-PS was able to increase applicants' likelihood of completing the verification step.

> " *The logistically confusing verification process is hindering program access among the most disadvantaged applicants.* "

Second, this work highlights a key challenge for local agencies: the burden placed on them to streamline application processes across different programs and funding sources, and also to clearly communicate differing program requirements to applicants. It is critical for local agencies to be aware of the difficulties that families face during the application process in order to provide necessary supports for applicants.

How is this Research Related to Other ERA-New Orleans Studies?

This research builds upon previous ERA-New Orleans studies that examine early childhood education in New Orleans:

In *Can Text Messages Help Families Applying for Early Childhood Education Programs?*, Lindsay Weixler, Jon Valant, Daphna Bassok, Justin B. Doromal, and Alica Gerry test whether text communications can increase verification rates for families applying to early childhood programs in New Orleans. Their report is part one of the study that is continued in this brief. The authors find that low-cost supports can help parents complete this multistep process, a crucial step in enrolling their child in an early learning program. However, effects were small and non-significant for Head Start applicants.

In *How Have New Orleans' Charter-Based School Reforms Affected Pre-Kindergarten?*, Lindsay Weixler, Jane Arnold Lincove, and Alica Gerry examine how the growth of charter schools in New Orleans affected pre-K program offerings as the school system transitioned from a centralized school system to an almost-all-charter district. The study found that the number of seats available in school-based pre-K programs dropped. However, in the years since this study, centralized oversight of ECE program offerings and enrollment, required by state legislation, has ensured that enough pre-K seats are available for all eligible families who apply.

ERA-New Orleans has also established the New Orleans Early Education Research Alliance (NOEERA). In partnership with key stakeholders in New Orleans' early learning space, we are developing a research agenda intended to better understand the experiences of families with young children, and ultimately help improve access for these families to their desired early learning programs.

About the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans

The mission of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans) is to produce rigorous, objective, and useful research to understand the post-Katrina school reforms and their long-term effects on all students. Based at Tulane University, ERA-New Orleans is a partnership between university-based researchers and a broad spectrum of local education groups. Our Advisory Board includes (in alphabetical order): the Louisiana Association of Educators, the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, the Louisiana Recovery School District, New Schools for New Orleans, the Orleans Parish School Board, the Orleans Public Education Network, and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. For more information, please visit the organization's website.

EducationResearchAllianceNOLA.org

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