

# White and higher income students are more likely to benefit from OneApp's half-mile admissions priority

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This Research Snapshot was initiated by the ERA-New Orleans Advisory Board as part of its annual research agenda.

## Overview

We examine which families applying to Kindergarten through the OneApp, New Orleans' centralized enrollment system, benefit from a new policy that prioritizes admission at most elementary schools for applicants who live within a half mile of the school. Specifically, we analyze Kindergarten applications for the 2019-20 school year to determine whether students with different demographic characteristics are more likely to receive this priority for high-demand schools. We focus on high-demand schools where students' admission priorities play a role in determining which applicants are admitted, as there are not enough seats for all who apply.

Having this half-mile priority ultimately increases the likelihood that an applicant will secure a seat at a high-demand school, and **we find that this policy is more likely to benefit White and higher income students than students of color and lower income students, respectively:**

- Higher income Kindergarten applicants were 6 percentage points more likely to live within a half mile of a high-demand school than low-income applicants.
- White Kindergarten applicants were 6 percentage points more likely to live within a half mile of a high-demand school than applicants of color.
- All nine high-demand elementary schools that give half-mile priority to applicants are located in zip codes with income levels above the city average.

In 2019-20, 4,131 families applied to Kindergarten seats in the OneApp. Of these, 1,368 are pre-K students who received guaranteed seats in their current schools. Only 11% of the remaining 2,763 applicants lived within a half-mile of a high-demand school offering the priority. Two-thirds of those with the half-mile priority (7% of all applicants) chose to apply to nearby high-demand schools, and when they did apply, they were likely to be admitted.

Excluding those who matched to a school higher on their list, 65% of applicants to a high-demand school were admitted if they had the half-mile priority, compared with an average match rate of 28% for all applicants to these schools. Ultimately, roughly 70 students, representing about 2.5% of all Kindergarten applicants, were admitted to a high-demand school through the half-mile priority.

In other words, there are a small number of students who benefit from this policy, but the benefit to those students is substantial. Local policymakers and stakeholders should consider the potential equity implications of admissions priorities and the privileges they may grant to certain student groups, especially as they affect students' access to high-demand schools.

## Background

New Orleans' families apply to their preferred schools through a centralized enrollment system called the OneApp, and applicants are assigned to a school based on a lottery process. The lottery factors in both families' school rankings and program-specific admissions priorities (e.g., siblings of current students are admitted first). These priorities are important, as applicants who have a priority are considered for placement before those who do not have a priority. If there are more students within a priority group than the school has seats for, seats are awarded by random lottery. On the next page, we show a hypothetical example of how an elementary school's seats *might* be allocated, following a commonly used set of priorities.

Most elementary schools have always had (and continue to offer) a broader geographic priority; the city is broken up into seven geographic zones, and students receive priority admission to schools located in their zone. Beginning with applications for the 2019-20 school year, NOLA-PS implemented a "half-mile" priority as part of the OneApp's geographic priority. As a result, a subset of geographic priority seats are reserved for applicants who live within a half mile of the school. All elementary schools have geographic priority with the exception of schools that have academic admissions criteria and those authorized by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. Because many more students have geographic priority than have half-mile priority, the geographic priority does not provide as strong an advantage. Only 51% of Kindergarten applicants live within a half-mile of an elementary school.

In this analysis, we examine Kindergarten applications to those schools that (1) participate in the OneApp, (2) offer the half-mile priority, and (3) meet our definition of "high demand," meaning they fill all available seats during the OneApp's first round. In the 2019-20 application cycle, 9 of the 13 high-demand elementary schools in the OneApp offered the half-mile priority. Note that our analysis does not include schools that *do not* participate in the OneApp, many of which have selective admissions and are likely high demand.

We use data from application and enrollment records for the 2019-20 school year to examine how the race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status of Kindergarten applicants are associated with their likelihood of having a half-mile priority to a high-demand school. However, these data can only tell us about the families who *submitted an application* in one given year, not all children living in the neighborhood who could have applied. To examine this, we also identify poverty rates and demographic composition for each school's neighborhood, which provides insight into the demographic characteristics of families who *could* benefit from the half-mile priority if they were to apply.

# How Do OneApp Priorities Work?

In this example, there are 12 students applying to a high-demand school with 8 available seats. Not all applicants will get a seat at the school.

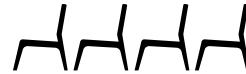
## Eight Available Seats:

4 reserved for applicants with Geographic Priorities



The first two seats are reserved for applicants with **Half-Mile Priority**. The remaining seats are reserved for applicants with **Geographic Zone Priority**.\*

4 open for all remaining applicants after priority seats fill



These seats are open to all applicants regardless of priorities.

## Twelve Applicants:

4 with **Sibling Priority** and varying Geographic Priorities



2 with **Half-Mile Priority**



2 with **Geographic Zone Priority**



4 with **No Priority**



## How Applicants with Priorities are Seated:

**Siblings** are seated first.



Then, any remaining **Geographic Zone** or **Half-Mile** seats are filled by applicants with those priorities, in order of lottery number.

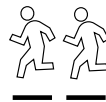


If **Sibling** applicants have a **Geographic Zone Priority** or **Half-Mile Priority**, they fill a seat for that priority.

All seats reserved for students with priorities are now full. In this example, 2 out of 8 applicants with a priority did not get a seat and are now eligible for any remaining seats based on their lottery number.

## How All Remaining Seats are Filled:

Remaining seats are filled by unseated applicants, regardless of applicants' priorities, in order of lottery number.



An applicant with no priorities may be seated ahead of one with priorities if their lottery number is higher.

All seats are now full. In this example, 4 out of 12 applicants did not get a seat:



1 with **Half-Mile Priority**



1 with **Geographic Zone Priority**

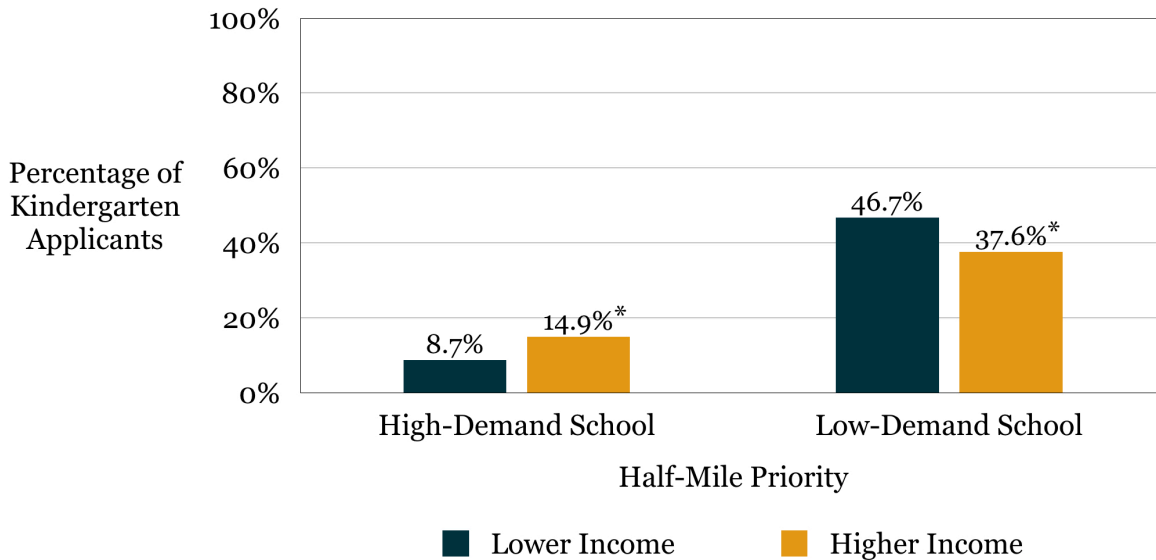


2 with **No Priority**

\*Note: Applicants with **Half-Mile Priority** almost always have the **Geographic Zone Priority** also.

## Key Finding #1

**Higher income Kindergarten applicants were 6 percentage points more likely to have a half-mile priority for a high-demand school than lower income students in the 2019-20 school year.**



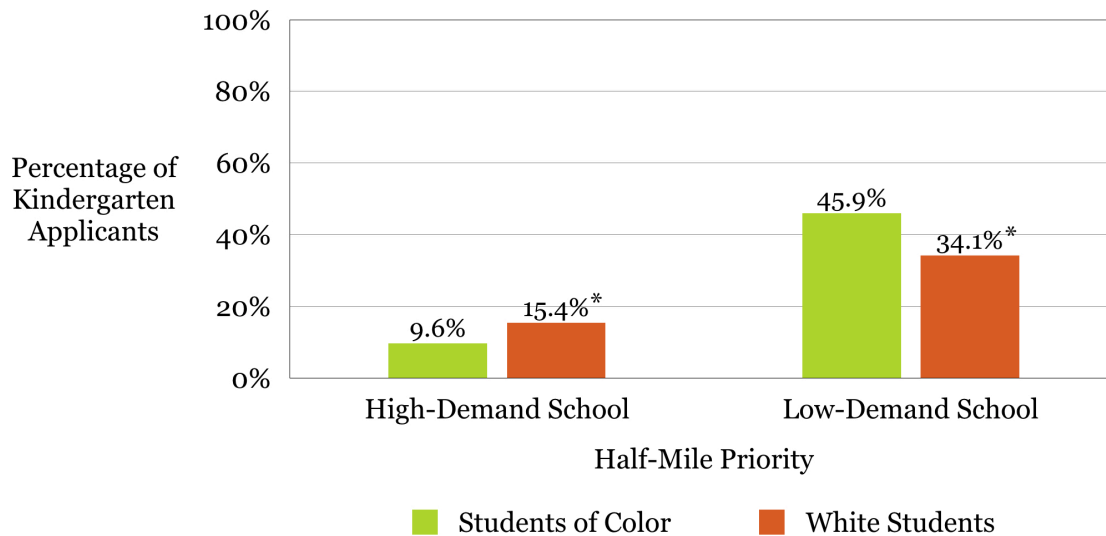
*Note: A small number of students have a half-mile priority to multiple schools. Here, students with half-mile priority to both a high-demand and low-demand school are included only in the high-demand group. An asterisk indicates that the difference between lower and higher income students was statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .*

The half-mile priority benefitted higher income applicants more often than lower income applicants in the 2019-20 school year. Only 8.7% of Kindergarten applicants qualifying for free or reduced priced lunch (FRPL) had a half-mile priority to a high-demand school, while 14.9% of their more economically advantaged peers did. This difference of 6 percentage points between the two groups of students means that higher income applicants were 71% more likely to live within a half mile of a high-demand school than lower income applicants.

It is worth noting that we do not see this pattern when examining the effects of the broader geographic zone priority, which is a much larger area. 73% of students qualifying for FRPL had a geographic zone priority for a high-demand school relative to 69% of their more economically advantaged peers.

## Key Finding #2

**White Kindergarten applicants were 6 percentage points more likely to have a half-mile priority for a high-demand school than applicants of color in the 2019-20 school year.**



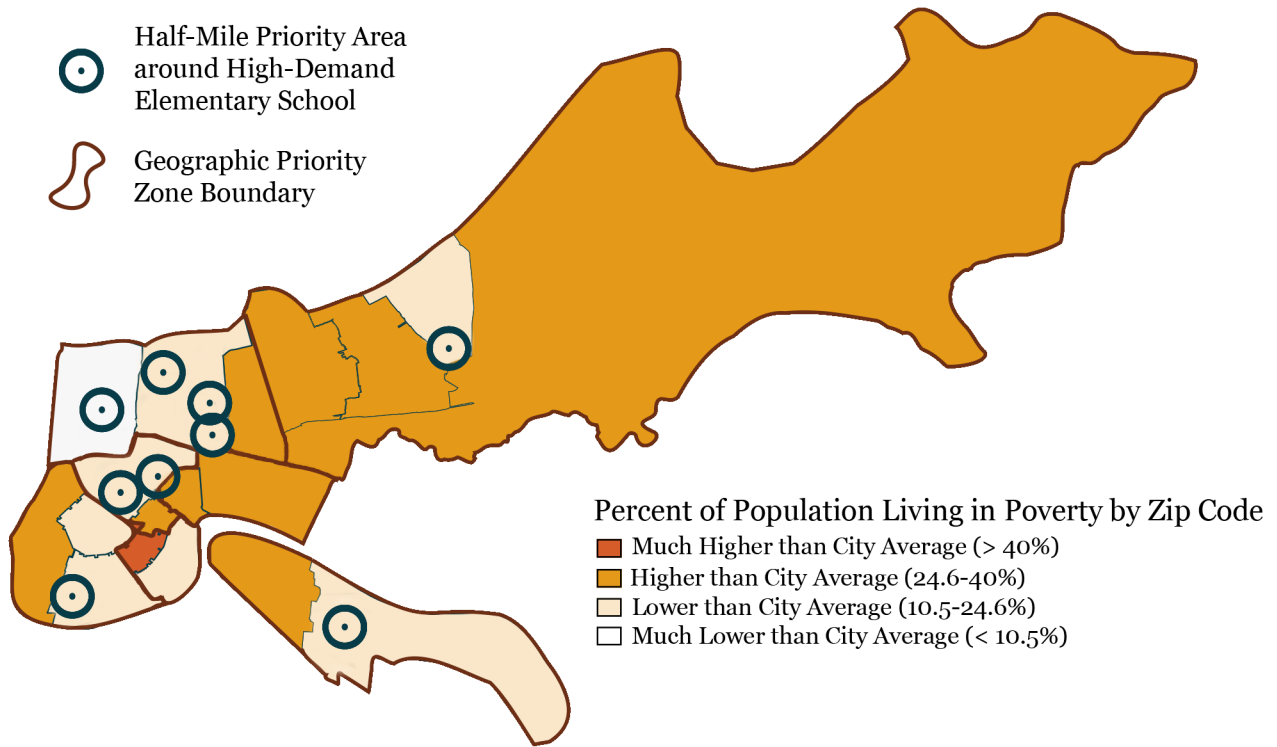
*Note: A small number of students have a half-mile priority to multiple schools. Here, students with half-mile priority to both a high-demand and low-demand school are included only in the high-demand group. An asterisk indicates that the difference between students of color and White students was statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ .*

The half-mile priority benefitted White applicants more often than applicants of color in the 2019-20 school year. Only 9.6% of students of color lived within a half mile of a high-demand school offering Kindergarten with the priority, while 15.4% of their White peers did. This difference of 6 percentage points between the two groups means that White applicants were 60% more likely to live within a half mile of a high-demand school than applicants of color.

By contrast, 74% of students of color had a broader geographic zone priority to a high-demand school relative to 60% of their White peers. In this case, geographic priority advantages students of color in accessing at least one high-demand school. However, because many more students have geographic priority than have half-mile priority, the geographic priority does not provide as strong an advantage.

### Key Finding #3

***All nine high-demand elementary schools offering half-mile priority to applicants are located in zip codes with income levels above the city average.***



*Note: 24.6% of the New Orleans population lives in poverty.*

High-demand schools offering Kindergarten are located in neighborhoods where the average poverty rate is nearly 10 percentage points lower than the city average. By contrast, low-demand schools are located in neighborhoods where the average poverty rate is 25%, roughly the same as the citywide rate. The locations of these schools determine who benefits from the half-mile priority, underscoring what we observed in the application data: higher income applicants are more likely to have a half-mile priority than low-income applicants.

## Methodological Notes

We used OneApp records to identify high-demand schools, and the American Community Survey's 2018 five-year-estimates to identify poverty rates for each school's zip code. For schools with multiple programs within the OneApp (e.g., one school may operate a language immersion program and a Montessori program out of the same building), we treat those programs as the same school.

We used student demographic and address data, without names or other identifying information, to determine broader geographic zone and half-mile priorities by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, for each rising Kindergarten student applying for the 2019-20 school year. We do not include the 1,368 applicants who have a guaranteed seat at the OneApp school where they attended pre-K in the previous year, and therefore did not have to submit an application for 2019-20. Of the students who did submit an application in 2019-20, our analysis only includes the 77% of Kindergarten applicants who ultimately enrolled in a public school in Louisiana, as only the enrollment records contain demographic information, resulting in a final sample size of 2,116 applicants. However, only a small number of these applicants without demographic records have a half-mile priority to a high-demand school, and so these missing records do not have a substantial effect on our results. We then calculated differences in the likelihood of living within a half-mile of a high-demand school by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status using logistic regression.

## About the Authors

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Note: This brief was updated in December 2020 to correct an error in the number of students who were admitted to a high-demand school through the half-mile priority.

## About Our Research Snapshot Series

In this series of reports, we analyze data to inform New Orleans education policy and practice by answering questions asked by either our Advisory Board or NOLA Public Schools (NOLA-PS).

## About ERA-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 representatives from (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, NOLA Public Schools, Orleans Public Education Network, and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. For more information, please visit the organization's website.