DOES INFORMATION ABOUT HIGH-PERFORMING AND CLOSE-TO-HOME SCHOOLS AFFECT FAMILIES' CHOICES ON THE ONEAPP?

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Overview

New Orleans' choice-based school system provides families with opportunities that many students across the country do not have. They can enroll in schools across the city, deciding which schools they believe would best serve their children. However, families' understanding of their options may vary, and obtaining high-quality, useful information about schools can be difficult.

> **Corresponding technical paper**: Jon Valant and Lindsay Bell Weixler. "Informing School-Choosing Families About Their Options: A Field Experiment From New Orleans." Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, 2020.

We worked with NOLA Public Schools (NOLA-PS) to examine how receiving different information about schools and pre-K programs affects families' choices and school placements in the city's centralized enrollment system, OneApp. More than 7,000 families with a student entering pre-K, kindergarten, or 9th grade in the 2019-20 school year were randomly assigned to receive one of three types of information by mail, email and text message. One group received a list of the highest performing schools, as measured primarily by student test score growth for K-12 grades and classroom observations for pre-K. A second group received a list of schools near their home. A third group received only generic reminders about OneApp deadlines which were also provided to the other two groups.

Our key findings are as follows:

- Receiving information about high-performing schools increased the chances that 9th-grade applicants both applied to and were assigned to those schools by four percentage points. Pre-K and Kindergarten applicants who received these lists were not affected.

- Providing Kindergarten applicants with lists of nearby schools increased the likelihood that they would apply to one of those schools by four percentage points. However, these applicants were no more likely to be assigned to a school near them. Pre-K and 9th-grade applicants were not affected.

- Students with disabilities were 13 percentage points more likely to apply to a high-performing school when they received a list of those schools and seven percentage points more likely to be placed in one.

In a choice-based education system, families with the time and resources to devote to researching their options may have advantages over families who do not. Some families, such as those who have children with disabilities, confront particular challenges in finding relevant information. This research shows that many (though certainly not all) families in New Orleans act on information about the schools available to them.

Background

School choice is designed to empower families to enroll in schools with the characteristics that are most important to them. In theory, this process encourages the development of educational programs that are responsive to community needs, which may result in better outcomes for children. However, fulfilling the promise of school choice has been difficult in practice. An assortment of barriers can keep families from accessing schools that serve their children well. One of these barriers is obtaining high-quality, useful information that enables families to identify schools in which their children would thrive.

The New Orleans education system has embraced school choice more than any other city in the country. After Hurricane Katrina, the state assumed control of most traditional public schools in the city and converted them to publicly funded, privately run charter schools. Families can request placement at any of these schools. Over time, the state-run school district developed a centralized enrollment system, called OneApp, with the hope of making the enrollment process more efficient, transparent, and fair. The OneApp and almost all of the city's publicly funded charter schools and early childhood education (ECE) programs are now overseen by NOLA-PS.

" *The New Orleans education system has embraced school choice more than any other city in the country.* "

In the OneApp, applicants can list up to 12 school choices or eight ECE program choices in order of preference. The system uses an algorithm to assign students to a school (or program) based on families' requests, seat availability, the priorities given to certain applicants (e.g., siblings of enrolled students), and, if necessary, a random lottery. Our research team partnered with NOLA-PS to study whether providing families information about high-performing and nearby schools influences their OneApp choices and school placements.

The study was designed to answer three research questions:

- How does providing lists of <u>high-performing schools</u> affect families' requests and placements?

- How does providing lists of schools <u>close to families' homes</u> affect their requests and placements?

- Do these effects vary by students' characteristics including race, gender, income, and disability status?

How did we study the effects of providing families with school information?

This study included 7,067 families with students entering pre-K4, kindergarten, or 9th grade in the 2019-20 school year. We sent information to these potential applicants during the Main Round of the OneApp, which is the first application period and the time when most program placements are made. For simplicity, we use "schools" to refer to both K-12 schools and pre-K programs, most of which are located in schools, throughout this brief.

We randomly assigned each family to one of three groups. Each family received information via U.S. mail (flyers), email, and text message unless their contact information was unavailable. The three groups were as follows:

- The "Performance" group received general information about the OneApp, plus a list of high-performing schools. Kindergarten and 9th-grade applicants' lists included the 17 primary and six secondary schools that earned an "A" grade from the Louisiana Department of Education in student progress in 2018. This measure reflects growth in students' test scores as opposed to average test scores. Pre-K applicants received a list of the ten schools with the highest scores on the state's Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). The system uses classroom observations to rate early childhood programs on emotional and instructional support and classroom organization.

- The "Neighborhood" group received general information about the OneApp, plus a list of schools located in their home's OneApp geographic zone. Orleans Parish has seven OneApp zones. The number of schools listed varied by grade level and geographic zone, with 9th-grade applicants generally seeing the fewest schools (four, on average) and pre-K applicants seeing the most (11, on average).

- The "Baseline" group received only general information about the OneApp, without highlighting any specific schools. It served as the comparison group for this study.

Of course, families in all three groups likely obtained information about schools from a variety of other sources. These include NOLA-PS and Louisiana Department of Education websites, the Urban League of Louisiana's annual school exposition at the Superdome, and word-of-mouth information from friends and other people. The benefit of randomizing families is that the three groups should be the same in terms of these other kinds of information, so that the differences in school applications reflects just the new information we provided.

We measured the effects of providing families with different types of information by comparing outcomes for the Performance group and the Neighborhood group, respectively, to outcomes for the Baseline group. This brief highlights two outcomes: whether families requested at least one of the schools that appeared on the list they received, and whether they were placed in one of the listed schools. Results on additional outcomes, such as the total number of listed schools requested, are detailed in the technical report that accompanies this brief.

How does providing lists of high-performing schools affect families' requests and placements?

Receiving information about high-performing high schools led to a 3.8 percentage point increase in the likelihood that a family would request at least one of these schools. As shown in Figure 1 (next page), receiving this information did not affect the placement requests of pre-K or kindergarten applicants.

Figure 1: Ninth-grade applicants in the Performance group were more 3.8 percentage points more likely to request a high-performing school than those in the Baseline group.
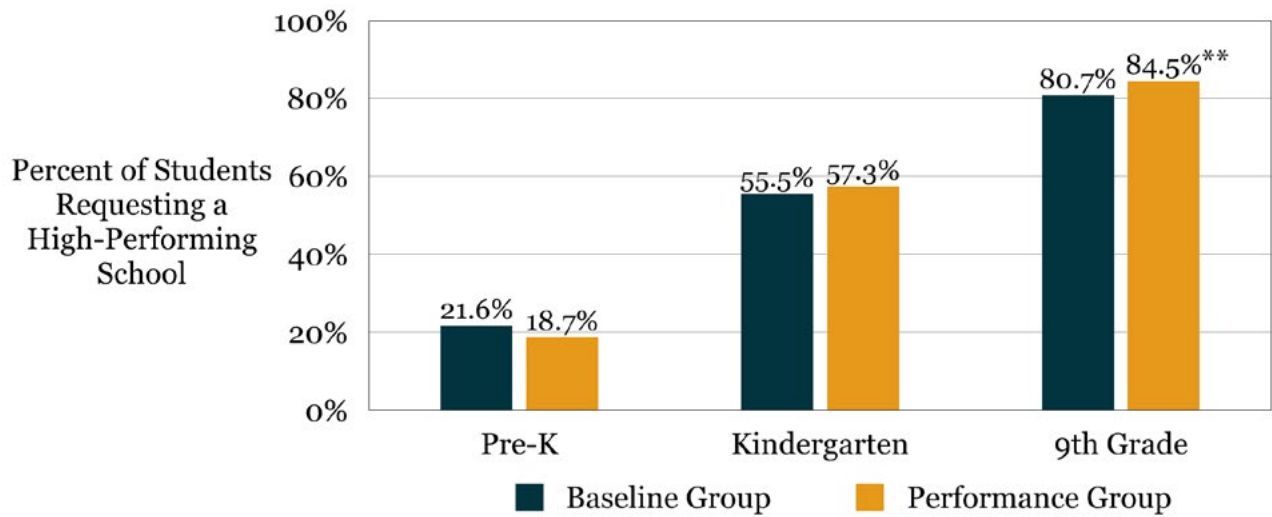
Note: Two asterisks indicate that the difference between the Baseline and Performance groups is statistically significant at p<0.05.

Our results suggest that providing information about school performance, specifically growth in student test scores, influences OneApp decision making among 9th-grade applicants. Since the list of high-performing high schools was created using the state's new student progress measure, one potential explanation for this effect is that exposure to the new measure changed families' perspectives about which high schools are the strongest academically.

High school applicants in the Performance group were 4.1 percentage points more likely to be placed in a high-performing school than high school applicants in the Baseline group. We did not observe significant effects of providing families with information about school performance on pre-K or kindergarten applicants' placements. While these effects are modest overall, they are more pronounced within certain subgroups, which we discuss later in the brief.

> *High school applicants in the Performance group were 4.1 percentage points more likely to be placed in a high-performing school.*

How does providing lists of schools close to families' homes affect their requests and placements?

Kindergarten applicants in the Neighborhood group were 4.1 percentage points more likely than those in the Baseline group to request at least one in-zone school (Figure 2, next page). Pre-K and 9th-grade applicants in the Neighborhood group were slightly more likely to request an in-zone school or program compared to their Baseline counterparts, but the differences were not statistically significant.

Figure 2: Kindergarten applicants who received a list of nearby schools were 4.1 percentage points more likely to request one of those schools on the OneApp.
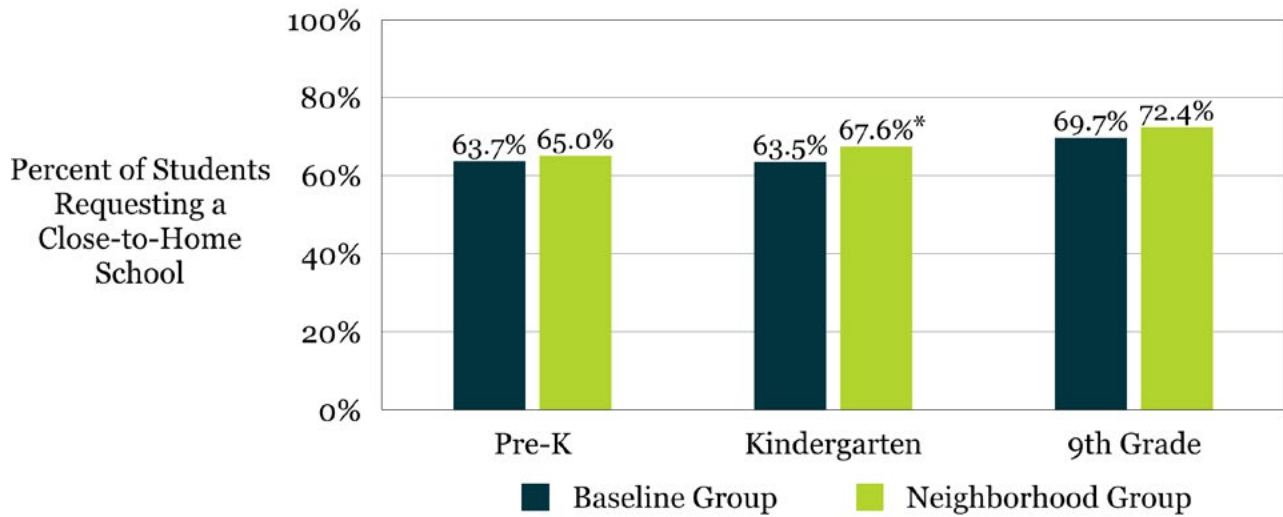
Note: One asterisk indicates that the difference between the Baseline and Neighborhood groups is statistically significant at p<0.10.

Results indicate that supporting awareness among Kindergarten applicant families about close-to-home schools makes them more likely to apply to those schools. However, these students' likelihood of placement in a school close to home did not change.

Most families in the Neighborhood and Baseline groups requested at least one school in their home geographic zone, suggesting that families in New Orleans value proximity even though receiving a list of close-to-home schools had minimal impact on their choices. It seems likely that many families were already familiar with the schools near their homes, so the list did not represent new information (and therefore had little influence).

Do these effects vary by students' characteristics including race, gender, income, and disability status?

To see whether receiving information about high-performing and close-to-home schools affected some families' decisions differently than others', we examined results by race, disability status, gender, and income (using free or reduced-price lunch eligibility as an indicator of income level). We averaged data on these student subgroups across all grades.

We found no significant effects of assignment to the Neighborhood group on the choices made by any demographic subgroup. However, in the Performance group, Black applicants, male applicants, and students with disabilities were more likely to apply to a high-performing school by 4.2, 5.8, and 12.6 percentage points, respectively, as shown in Figure 3 (next page).

> *In the Performance group, Black applicants, male applicants, and students with disabilities were more likely to apply to a high-performing school.*

Figure 3: Black applicants, male applicants, and students with disabilities who received information about high-performing schools were more likely to apply to a high-performing school.
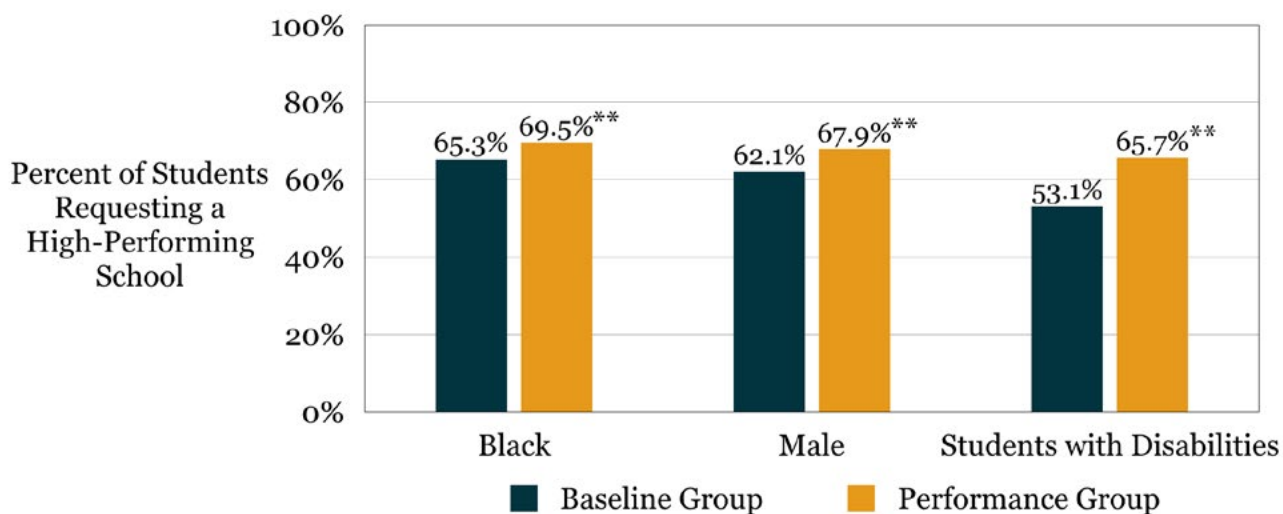
Note: Two asterisks indicate that the difference between the Baseline and Performance groups is statistically significant at p<0.05.

These effects were particularly large for students with disabilities, who were also 7.3 percentage points more likely to be assigned to a high-performing school. The reasons why these families responded so strongly to school performance information are not known. One possibility is that the new K-12 progress measure, with its focus on gains among learners at all proficiency levels, may also have resonated with families of students with disabilities more than others.

Although the effect of being in the Performance group was only statistically significant for Black students, the effect size was similar across racial groups.

Discussion

These findings highlight the potential impact of sending information to families seeking schools for their children. Sending families a list of high-performing schools increased the likelihood that they would request a seat or be placed at one. Sending families a list of schools located near their home had less effect, perhaps because this information was not new to most applicants.

Families of students with disabilities are the one group for which the performance intervention's effects were unambiguously large. These results suggest unmet informational needs within this community. They may also suggest that measures of student growth, which only recently came into widespread use in New Orleans, are more useful to these families than measures that emphasize proficiency and focus on average test scores.

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It is also notable that the effects of having additional information were much stronger for families choosing high schools than families choosing pre-K or kindergarten programs. The study cannot definitively answer why this was the case, but we suspect it was a combination of factors. For example, many school-based pre-K programs provide a guaranteed seat at the school for Kindergarten, so perhaps applicants were less concerned about the quality of the pre-K program than the quality of the elementary school with which it is affiliated. In addition, students themselves are often involved in choosing their high schools but not their pre-K or kindergarten programs. Perhaps by directing materials to parents, this study shifted some of the decision-making from 9th-grade applicants to their parents, affecting families' eventual decisions.

More broadly, this study fits into a growing body of research that explores the resources and support that families need in school systems centered on choice. Choice-based systems often pose heightened challenges for families – not only finding relevant and up-to-date information in a dynamic landscape of schools, but also completing multi-step application processes and securing safe and reliable transportation to school. These challenges are especially hard on the most disadvantaged families. Providing useful, relevant information about schools should be part of a larger strategy to help families effectively exercise their role as decision makers in a choice-based system.

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

This research builds upon previous ERA-New Orleans studies that examine school choice in New Orleans:

In *Can Text Messages Help Families Applying for Early Childhood Education Programs?*, Lindsay Bell Weixler, Jon Valant, Daphna Bassok, Justin B. Doromal, and Alica Gerry test whether text messages to parents can increase income verification rates for families applying to early childhood programs in New Orleans. The authors find that low-cost supports can help parents complete this complex, multistep process, a crucial step in enrolling their child in an early learning program (and a barrier for many families). However, effects were small for Head Start applicants in this study. In a follow-up study, *Increasing Access to Head Start Through Text Messages*, the authors explore why this was the case. After working with NOLA-PS to clarify online resources for Head Start applicants, they found significant effects for these applicants from an intervention similar to the one previously tested.

In *What Schools Do Families Want (And Why)?*, Douglas N. Harris and Matthew Larsen analyze OneApp data to see which factors predict the schools that parents will choose. They find that the school's location, academic performance, and extracurricular activities predict family choices at all grade levels. Families in New Orleans also care about whether the school has a "legacy" name that existed before Katrina. Elementary school families place particular value of the availability of after-school care.

In *Finding a Great Fit: Improving the School Choice Process for Students with Disabilities*, Lanya McKittrick, Robin Lake, Sivan Tuchman, Travis Pillow, Roohi Sharma, Jon Valant, and Matthew Larsen present insights from focus groups of families of students with disabilities in Washington, D.C. and New Orleans. They find that these families need much more help in finding the right fit for their children. This study was released in partnership with the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE).

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.

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