

# HOW DO FAMILIES CHOOSE BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS?



By Jane Arnold Lincove, Joshua M. Cowen, and Jason Imbrogno

*For two decades, education reform in America has focused on giving students choices beyond being assigned by home address to a single traditional district-run public school. This is partly why policymakers in New Orleans and a number of other urban centers have instituted a “portfolio” of publicly-supported education options that includes traditional district-run public schools, public charter schools, and voucher-supported private schools. In theory, competition from charter and voucher schools will create additional pressure for public schools to improve in order to retain students and associated per-capita funding. But whether this competition arises in practice depends on whether families consider both public and voucher schools and how they choose among available school options.*

## WHAT DOES THIS RESEARCH ADD TO THE DISCUSSION OF SCHOOL CHOICE?

This study examines 1) whether there is a market segment of families who actively choose between public and private schools and 2) if these families exist, how they choose from the available options. These are important questions, because if enough families consider both public and voucher options, then public schools should be motivated to improve in order to attract and keep those students.

In this research brief we identify a group of families in New Orleans who consider both public and voucher-supported school options. We then examine how these families choose between public schools

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and voucher schools. Next, we break down the broad categories of public and voucher to understand how families choose among the portfolio of school options available in New Orleans. These options include district-run public schools, public charter schools, Catholic

private schools, Protestant private schools, and secular private schools. District school and charter school choices are available to all students in New Orleans. Private school choices are available to those families who can afford full tuition or those who meet the requirements of the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP). All LSP applicants must have family income below 250% of the poverty rate, and, in grades above kindergarten, must be currently enrolled in a public school graded C or below on the state's school report card.

## HOW DID WE CONDUCT THIS RESEARCH?

We conducted this research using data provided by the Louisiana Recovery School District. It includes all students who applied to enroll at a New Orleans public school (charter or traditional district run) or voucher school in the 2013 district-wide school enrollment lottery. This process, known as OneApp, is quite helpful for understanding what families want, because families rank their preferences for district-run public schools, public charter schools, and private voucher schools alongside each other on a single application.

Using a multivariate statistical method called conditional logistic analysis, we estimated the probability that families that rank both public and private schools would include a school among their OneApp choices, based on known school characteristics. These characteristics include state-issued school performance scores; make-up of the student body; distance from home; and whether the school was run by the local Orleans Parish School District (OPSB), a charter management organization, or a private operator. We also estimated the degree to which these characteristics influence

ranking of a school on the OneApp, that is, whether it is listed as first, second, or third choice, and so on.

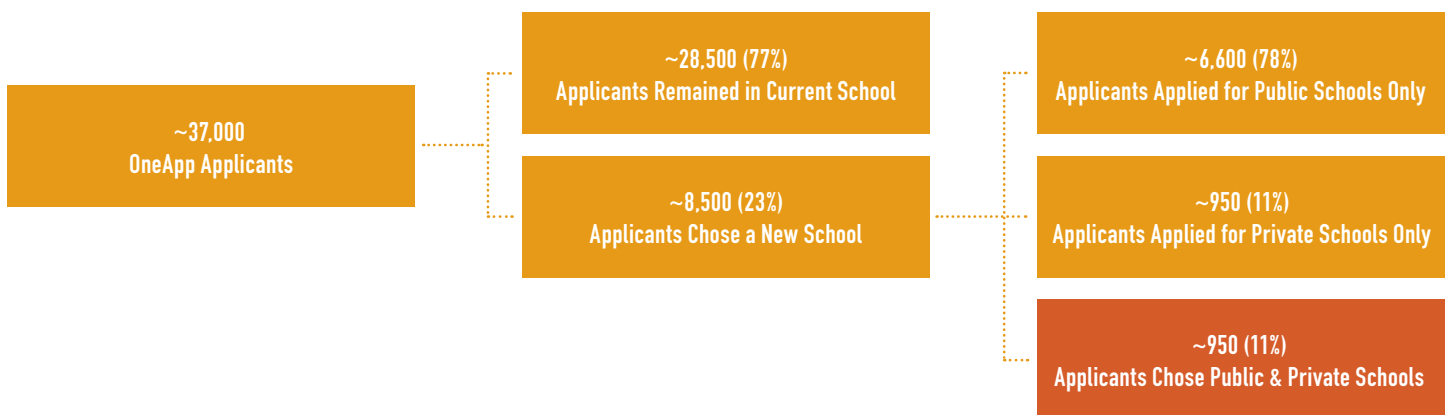
Many families' choices are not included in this data because not all school choices are made through the OneApp. Students exiting public schools for private schools outside the voucher program are not included. Approximately 20% of New Orleans students pay tuition to attend private schools. Additionally, selective admissions charter schools, which did not participate in OneApp, are not included. These omissions probably have a limited affect on our findings, because 1) families opting for non-voucher private schools would not likely meet the income ceiling (250% of the federal poverty level) to qualify for the voucher program, and 2) the vast majority of charter schools are open enrollment and available through OneApp.

## DO SOME FAMILIES CONSIDER BOTH PUBLIC AND VOUCHER SCHOOLS?

Of the approximately 37,000 OneApp applications completed in 2013, 77% of applicants were returning to the schools (public and voucher) at which they were previously enrolled. The remaining 8,449 students were using the OneApp to select a new school; that is, they were either incoming kindergarten students whose families were selecting their first school or students trying to switch schools by ranking at least one school higher than the school they currently attend. Of these 8,449 meaningful choosers, 78% applied only for public schools.

The other 22% of meaningful choosers applied for school vouchers. Of these, half applied only for private voucher schools, while the

**Table 1: OneApp Applicants by School Choice Strategy**



other half ranked a mix of public schools and private voucher schools. We refer to this strategy of ranking both public and private schools as a “mixed-strategy.”

The school choosers who employed a mixed-strategy when ranking schools on the OneApp are the market segment that is *in theory* responsible for inducing public schools to improve in response to competition from voucher schools. Table 1 illustrates how applicants selected into different strategies.

**“ A sizable proportion of those considering exit for private schools are also willing to enroll in at least one public school. ”**

Our research indicates that while many families consider only public schools and others only voucher schools, many families in New Orleans do choose between public school options and voucher schools, ranking both types of schools on the city’s enrollment application. Although this group includes only a small proportion of the overall enrollment in New Orleans public schools, it includes half of all new applicants to the voucher program. This suggests that a sizable proportion of those considering exit for private schools are also willing to enroll in at least one public school.

## DO FAMILIES PREFER PRIVATE SCHOOLS?

Louisiana requires all students at public schools and voucher-funded students at private schools to take annual standardized tests. These scores are the basis for the state’s school accountability system – the School Performance Score (SPS) for public schools and the Scholarship Cohort Index (SCI) for private schools. The two measures involve the same calculations based on test proficiency rates. However, only SPS scores are printed on the OneApp, so parents have easier access to this information for public schools than private schools.

We find that among mixed-strategy families, a higher SPS score typically increases a school’s ranking on the OneApp. School performance scores are even more influential for certain subgroups of mixed-strategy families, such as students trying to leave a D- or F-rated public school and those entering kindergarten.

SCI scores for private schools are less predictive of rankings, all other things being equal. It is possible that this is due to a lack of information about SCI scores, but parents might also believe that the SCI understates the quality of a private school since only voucher students participate in state testing. Private schooling may have an appeal for parents that outweighs evidence from standardized tests.

**Table 2: Most Popular Public Schools for Voucher Applicants Listed on OneApp**

SCHOOL RANK	SCHOOL NAME	PERCENTAGE OF BLACK STUDENTS	SCHOOL REPORT CARD GRADE	TYPE OF SCHOOL
1	Eleanor McMain High (7-12)	86%	B	Traditional
2	Benjamin Franklin Elementary Math & Science (PK-8)	94%	B	Traditional
3	Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School of Science & Technology (PK-12)	100%	C	Charter
4	McDonogh 35 High School (7-12)	98%	C	Traditional
5	Lafayette Academy New Orleans (PK-8)	99%	C	Charter
6	Lake Area New Tech Early College High School (9-12)	98%	C	Charter
7	Martin Behrman Charter School (PK-8)	98%	B	Charter
8	Gentilly Terrace Elementary (PK-8)	96%	C	Charter
9	KIPP Believe Primary (K-4)	97%	C	Charter
10	Langston Hughes Academy (PK-8)	99%	C	Charter

Parents considering both private voucher-supported schools and public schools overwhelmingly prefer private schools. However, some public schools with high performance scores are frequently ranked with or above private schools by parents. Among public schools, families tend to prefer traditional public schools run by OPSB over charter schools, all other things being equal. OPSB-run schools are historically high-performing and often carry a reputation for success that dates back to a period when they were selective admissions magnet schools prior to becoming open enrollment. In contrast, many campuses currently operated by Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) were historically low-performing prior to state takeover and reform.

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### WHAT PUBLIC SCHOOL ATTRIBUTES DO VOUCHER APPLICANTS PREFER?

Socioeconomic characteristics of public schools do influence school choice in New Orleans. Public schools with higher percentages of students participating in the free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) Program and those with higher numbers of students with special needs were less likely to be chosen by mixed-strategy families than other schools. Student race is less of a factor, mostly because New

Orleans open-enrollment public schools and voucher-supported private schools almost all enroll a large majority of black students.

Mixed-strategy families prefer schools that are closer to their homes. It is difficult for individual schools or CMOs to compete on location because they do not choose their buildings and, even if they did, switching buildings is costly.

Extracurricular activities and specialized academic offerings tended to have either little or a slightly negative influence on the selection and rankings of schools on the OneApp. This is important to note because in the public debate about school choice, there is often speculation that voucher schools and charters attract students by offering music and art classes, sports, or a particular academic focus like science or foreign language.

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### WHAT DO THESE RESULTS MEAN?

School differences that parents are aware of play a role in the choices they make. Families do appear to make use of publicly available information listed on the OneApp in ways that suggest they consider trade-offs between public and private school alternatives.

Families that apply for vouchers prefer private schools to public schools. When two schools have the same measurable characteristics,

**Table 3: How Do School Characteristics Influence School Choice**

Factors that increase the likelihood of choosing a school	Factors with no clear relationship to school choice	Factors that decrease the likelihood of choosing a school
Higher School Performance Score Proximity to Home	Race Extracurricular Activities Niche School Programs	Higher Free-and-Reduced Lunch Participation Higher Special Needs Population

families tend to choose private schools over public ones. The preference for private schools over public schools exists across private schools with different religious affiliations.

Among public schools, mixed-strategy families prefer district-run schools and schools with higher academic performance. In fact, public schools with high academic performance are able to compete with private schools even when these public schools have high numbers of FRL and special-needs students.

“Niche school programs such as foreign languages or arts do not appear to influence mixed-strategy parents. Rather, it appears that families that are considering opting out of the public school system in New Orleans are doing so to improve their academic opportunities.”

Niche school programs such as foreign languages or arts do not appear to influence mixed-strategy parents. Rather, it appears that families that are considering opting out of the public school system in New Orleans are doing so to improve their academic opportunities.

These results are generally consistent with a prior ERA-New Orleans study titled *What Schools Do Families Want (And Why)?* in which Douglas N. Harris and Matthew F. Larsen describe how parents choose among public schools. Harris and Larsen also found that parents prefer schools with high academic performance indicators and schools that are closer to home, although these families also gave considerable weight to popular extracurricular activities, such as band and football.

## WHAT THESE RESULTS *DO NOT* MEAN

Our study is limited to families who are eligible for the voucher program and applying for schools that participate in the OneApp. Families exploring other school options, such as non-voucher private schools and selective charters, may have different preferences that add another dimension to school competition in New Orleans. Finally, we cannot measure every characteristic of schools. There may be many influential characteristics we cannot observe.

### How is this research related to other ERA-New Orleans studies?

This is the first of a series of studies conducted by ERA-New Orleans on the connection between public and private school markets. Forthcoming studies will address the following questions:

- What effect have the reforms had on the number of students attending public and private schools?
- What effect does the use of a voucher have on student outcomes?
- What effect has the voucher system had on the isolation and segregation of students across schools?
- Have vouchers created pressure on public schools to improve?

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## About 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 support the long-term achievement of all students. Based at Tulane University, ERA-New Orleans is 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 Orleans Parents' Guide, 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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