

# WHAT SCHOOLS DO FAMILIES WANT (AND WHY)?

New Orleans Families and Their School Choices  
Before and After Katrina



By Douglas N. Harris and Matthew F. Larsen

*How families make school choices is a key part of debates about market-based school reforms. Advocates argue that market-based school systems give families the educational outcomes they care about most, especially for lower-income families who do not have the luxury of affording private schools or moving to wealthier neighborhoods where investment in public schools is higher. School choice might therefore be the rare policy that increases both average student outcomes and the equity of outcomes at the same time, a win-win situation. Alternatively, choice may do more harm than good. The market could widen the gap between low- and high-performing schools, more advantaged families might make “better” school choices, special needs students could get lost in the competitive shuffle, or schools might put more resources into transportation and advertising to make them more attractive without actually improving instructional quality.*

New Orleans is particularly important to this debate because, after Hurricane Katrina, attendance zones were eliminated and almost all traditional schools were turned into charter schools. The city therefore provides an unprecedented opportunity to learn how families make decisions when they are given a wide array of options. In particular we can learn about the school characteristics families prefer most and the barriers that still prevent them from getting what they want.

“After the Katrina reforms, parents became even more active choosers with 86% attending a school other than the nearest school.”

This study provides one of the most extensive analyses of school choice and parental preferences conducted in any city. Most research on the topic focuses on surveys and interviews of parents, but prior evidence suggests that this approach often does not yield accurate depictions of how choices are made. Here, we focus on what New Orleans families actually do and compare their decisions before and after the post-Katrina reforms.

## HOW DID WE CARRY OUT THE ANALYSIS?

Most of the data for this analysis come from the 2013-14 OneApp, the centralized school application system in which New Orleans parents rank preferred options. This provides a clear expression of what families want because these rankings determine where children enroll in school.

The purpose of the study is to understand the role of academics, extracurriculars, and practical considerations such as distance to school and school schedules. The School Performance Score (SPS), created by the State of Louisiana and based mainly on student test score levels, represents our main measure of academic quality. In recent years, the SPS has also been turned into letter grades from A-to-F. Extracurricular information comes from the city's *Parents' Guide*, a booklet that provides school profiles and characteristics. We also combined school addresses with home addresses from the OneApp to calculate the distance between every home and school.

Since many families have lived in New Orleans for decades, we considered whether schools using the pre-Katrina "legacy" school name were more preferred. Our data on family income are based on neighborhood characteristics from the U.S. Census.

In addition to the recent OneApp analysis, we carried out analyses of student enrollments prior to the OneApp and prior to Hurricane Katrina. This allows us to test how the role of academics, extracurriculars, and practical considerations changed when education policies changed. It is more difficult to understand what families want by analyzing enrollment, rather than OneApp rankings, but this still helps us understand how the schooling market is evolving over time.

A full Technical Report accompanies this Policy Brief and provides additional detail. In particular, it is important to emphasize that we are analyzing the relationship between rankings and each school factor using a technique called "regression analysis."

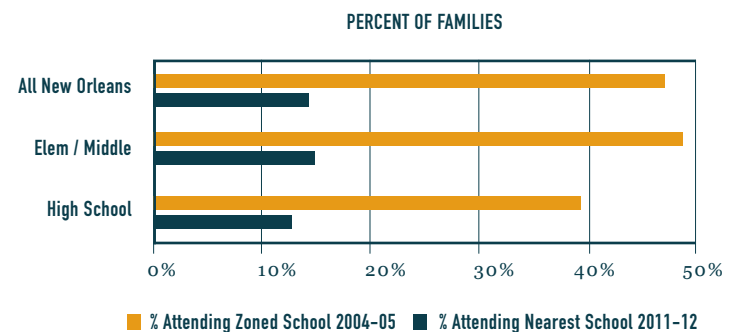
That is, when we look at the role of SPS in school rankings, we do this by comparing families' rankings of schools that differ on the SPS, but are similar in every other respect, such as whether they have band or football. Also, note that all the data we use are anonymous. We are simply examining the patterns in the data, not identifying what any individual person is doing.

## DID PARENTS BECOME MORE ACTIVE CHOOSERS AFTER THE POST-KATRINA REFORMS?

Somewhat surprisingly, 53% of public school students were already attending schools other than their neighborhood/zoned schools before the Katrina reforms started [Figure 1]. After the Katrina reforms, parents became even more active choosers with 86% attending a school other than the nearest school.

**FIGURE 1: Are Families More Active School Choosers?**

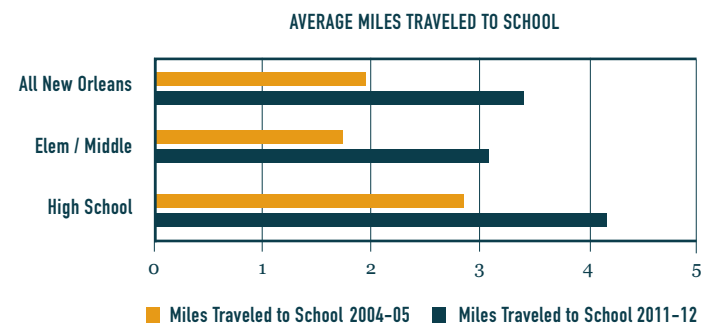
Percent of Families Attending Zoned or Nearest School Before and After the Reforms



As a result, average driving distance to school attended increased by 1.8 miles, and 1 in 4 students attend a school more than five miles away from home [Figure 2].

**FIGURE 2: How Far are Students Traveling?**

Number of Miles Students Travel to Attend School



## WHAT EXACTLY DO PARENTS WANT MOST FROM SCHOOLS?

- Distance from home to school, academic performance of schools, and extracurricular activities predict school choices at all grade levels. Also, even after controlling for other school differences, families typically prefer schools that have “legacy” names that were used pre-Katrina.
- For families of children going to elementary schools, practical considerations such as distance and availability of extended school days and after-care seem especially important. For example, an elementary school that is right across the street and has free after-care and a C letter grade would typically be preferred to a school that is two miles away with no after-care and a higher B grade [Table 1].
- For families with children going to high schools, extracurricular activities such as band and football seem especially important. For example, a high school with a legacy status, football and band, and a C grade would typically be preferred to one without legacy status, no football or band, and a B letter grade.
- Surveys of parents tend to over-state the role of academic factors in school choices.

## HOW ARE SCHOOL CHOICES INFLUENCED BY INFORMATION AND EDUCATION POLICIES?

- Families have less information about schools when students are first starting school in kindergarten and when transitioning to high school. We find that in these “transition grades” families are more responsive to easily observed school characteristics such as the SPS and availability of band and football.
- The SPS became more important to families after letter grades and the OneApp were introduced. This is unsurprising because the letter grades drew more attention to academics, and the OneApp form listed these letter grades prominently as parents ranked schools. Also, at about the same time, the Recovery School District began to close schools due to lower SPS scores, drawing even more attention to this factor.
- It is more difficult to judge whether the post-Katrina reforms changed the role of academics because we have less data pre-Katrina. Families did consider the SPS when making school choices pre-Katrina, but it is hard to determine exactly how much.

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**TABLE 1: How Do School Characteristics Influence School Choices For The Average Family?**

	ELEMENTARY / MIDDLE SCHOOL	HIGH SCHOOL
Factors that <b>strongly increase</b> the likelihood of choosing a school	Siblings in School · Higher SPS	Higher SPS · Siblings in School Legacy Name · Football / Band
Factors that <b>modestly increase</b> the likelihood of choosing a school	Number of Extracurriculars · Band / Football Extended Day (free and paid after-school care)	Number of Sports (excludes football)
Factors with no clear relationship to school choice	Legacy Name · Weekend Classes · New Building Parent Groups · Music (excludes band)	Parent Groups · New Building Number of Extracurriculars
Factors that <b>modestly decrease</b> the likelihood of choosing a school	Extended School Year	Longer Driving Distance
Factors that <b>strongly decrease</b> the likelihood of choosing a school	Longer Driving Distance	Weekend Classes

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## How Have New Orleans School Choice Policies Changed Since Hurricane Katrina?

*New Orleans is well known for the large number of unprecedented changes to its public education system made in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and our analysis suggests that these policies may influence how parents make school choices. To better understand these and other effects, it is important to consider exactly how policies and practices changed.*

### Pre-Katrina Policies

New Orleans had a traditional attendance zone system prior to Hurricane Katrina that was run by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB). But there were numerous avenues for families to exercise school choice prior to the reforms. They could change their housing location, select private schools, ask the OPSB or a specific school for permission to transfer, go directly to preferred schools, or choose selective-admission magnet schools and OPSB “focus schools.” There were also five charter schools open pre-Katrina, two authorized by OPSB, two authorized by the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), and one operating under the state Recovery School District (RSD). Any student in the city could attend these schools. There was apparently no official OPSB policy about providing transportation for any of these options, but many students had bus service to attend schools outside their attendance zones.

Though there is debate about the quality and variation in pre-Katrina options, the above list of options and the fact that 53% of students were already attending schools other than their zoned schools suggest that New Orleans’ parents had many public school choice options before Hurricane Katrina.

### Post-Katrina Choice Policies

While there were some options for families pre-Katrina, the post-Katrina school reforms pushed the door wide open. Attendance zones were eliminated and families could apply to any public school in the city, regardless of where they lived. In order to apply

to charter and traditional public schools, parents were required to submit to the school or district central offices a separate application for each school that interested them.

Choice policies have changed several times since Katrina. At first, families could apply to any school, but the schools themselves made most admission decisions. Admissions were not coordinated across schools. Lotteries were (and remain) legally required when there were more applicants than seats, though this law was not strictly enforced. Some OPSB schools also continued their selective admissions policies and required students to meet academic and other requirements before entering the lottery. From 2009-2011, many OPSB schools and all RSD schools used a common application form, though the process still required separate applications for each school. Starting in 2007, parents also had more information from the Parents’ Guide.

School leaders can also indirectly control who attends their schools through transportation policies. During the time period we studied, all RSD schools provided transportation, while many OPSB schools did not. Transportation practices vary across schools. Some schools pick up students right outside their homes, while others have pick-up points or rely on the standard city bus system. Given the RSD’s more extensive transportation system, and OPSB’s use of school-by-school and selective admission policies, RSD schools are generally more accessible than OPSB schools.

This somewhat ad hoc school selection process has since been replaced by the centralized OneApp, in which parents rank their options and an algorithm assigns each student to one school so that as many families as possible get their top choices. While the vast majority of the city’s public schools are in the OneApp, some still use their own separate application systems and use selective admissions policies.

Again, in the analysis, we compare the change in school choices from the pre-Katrina period through the first phase of post-Katrina reforms, as well as the later shift to letter grades.

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## DID SCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES AND ENROLLMENT OUTCOMES BECOME MORE EQUITABLE AFTER KATRINA?

- After Katrina, the lowest-income families had greater access to schools with high test scores. School bus transportation systems expanded, average test scores increased across the city, and schools with higher test scores were more likely to locate near lower-income neighborhoods. Pre-Katrina public schools zoned for the highest-income neighborhoods were 1.3 letter grades higher than schools zoned for low-income neighborhoods; the difference between the lowest- and highest-income neighborhoods dropped to just a half letter grade considering the nearest schools after Katrina.

*“Overall, the lowest-income families are attending schools with average test scores that are higher than before the reforms, but these families weigh academic outcomes somewhat less than higher-income families.”*

- While very-low-income families also have greater access to schools with high average test scores, they are less likely to choose schools with high test scores. This is partly because their incomes and practical considerations prevent them from doing so. Being close to home, having siblings in the same school, and including extended school days are all more important to very-low-income families than other families. Also, compared with other New Orleans families in the public school system, very-low-income families have weaker preferences for SPS and stronger preferences in high school for band and football. Overall, the lowest-income families are attending schools with average test scores that are higher than before the reforms, but these families weigh academic outcomes somewhat less than higher-income families.

## What New Questions Does the Analysis Raise?

While this analysis advances our understanding of school choice and other policies, it is important to consider the new questions these findings raise:

- What can be done to help families make choices that are best for their children?
- Have the choice policies in New Orleans increased the level of student mobility across schools?
- Even if test-based accountability does help to increase the focus on academic outcomes, does this have unintended consequences when families make school choices?
- How do choice and competition play out on the other side of the market—that is, how do schools respond to choice and competition in what they offer to families?

These are all questions that the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans will examine going forward.

## WHAT DO THESE RESULTS MEAN?

Supporters and critics of the New Orleans reforms may latch on to some findings over others, but these results should not be oversimplified. The fact that families have “more choices” and seem to actively exercise choice does not necessarily mean that communities are better off. Education fulfills social goals that go beyond what “consumers” might want. Also, while surveys suggest that the average parent is satisfied with the choice-based system, some parents may prefer the types of neighborhood schools that no longer exist with the elimination of neighborhood attendance zones.

At the same time, while very-low-income families are less likely than moderate-income families to choose schools for their academic outcomes, very-low-income families are not necessarily worse off academically. First, there is some evidence that average academic quality has improved and become more equally distributed across the city. Second, the reforms allow schools to develop specialized programs that attract like-minded families and teachers and may help

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build an engaging school culture—and higher achievement. Third, our evidence suggests that some parents have strong preferences for academics and these parents could influence the market in a way that improves academics for all students.

*“Choice is not enough and it is only real when parents are well informed and can readily access schools they prefer.”*

Strong family preferences for non-academic programs and outcomes may also be partially offset by the academic focus of test-based accountability systems developed by states and the federal government.

We find that the second phase of the reforms—combining test score-based letter grades for schools, SPS-based school closures, and the OneApp application system—increased the focus on the SPS for all groups of families. This highlights the way in which the effects of school choice policies intersect with other school policies. One policy can pick up where another leaves off.

While we have much yet to learn, this study of school choice in New Orleans is a first step toward a richer understanding of how, and how well, the New Orleans school system is really working. To the extent that equitable access to quality schools is a goal of the system, these findings reinforce the importance of increasing the number of quality schools available to disadvantaged populations through other forms of support and accountability. Choice is not enough and it is only real when parents are well informed and can readily access the schools they prefer.

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## 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 support the long-term achievement of all students. Based at Tulane University, ERA-New Orleans is partnership of a variety of prominent local education groups. Our Advisory Board includes (in alphabetical order): Educate Now!, 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, New Orleans Parents' Guide, the Orleans Parish School Board, the Orleans Public Education Network, and the Urban League of New Orleans. For more information, please visit the organization's website:

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**EducationResearchAllianceNOLA.org**

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