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What Happens When Families Whose Schools Close Receive EdNavigator Support and OneApp Priority?

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Overview

Perhaps the most extreme step that education leaders can take to improve school quality is to close a school entirely. School closures are controversial due to the harms and disruptions they can create for families. These harms may be particularly severe if displaced families do not receive adequate support in transitioning to new schools.

Since moving to a charter-based system, New Orleans has seen regular changes to its school landscape. This includes many school closures, mergers, takeovers, and openings. Over time, concerns about the impacts of closures have changed how leaders approach school closure and resulted in additional supports for families whose schools close.

This study examines what happened following three school closures in the 2017-18 school year. In that year, families in closing schools were offered two new types of assistance. First, the city's enrollment system, OneApp (now called NCAP), began to give students from closing schools high priority when they applied for schools for the following year. Second, the nonprofit organization EdNavigator began to offer help and information to families as they sought their next school placements. The local district (like the state-run Recovery School District before it) had offered support to families in closing schools. However, EdNavigator's support differed in important ways. For example, EdNavigator was very willing to recommend specific schools to families—recommendations that came from an organization unaffiliated with the district.

We analyze outcomes for families from these three schools who were eligible for priority in the city's unified enrollment system and offered support by EdNavigator staff. Our outcomes include both immediate school requests and placements and longer-term patterns of student mobility and test scores. Our study design does not allow us to identify the precise causal effects of these supports. However, we compare the outcomes for these supported and prioritized families to other groups of families for context.

Ultimately, our data reveal several notable findings:

1. Families that received priority and support requested schools rated highly by the state more often than families in comparison groups.
2. Families that worked with EdNavigator requested schools the organization recommended and received a seat in those schools through the OneApp placement process more often than families in comparison groups.

3. Families that received priority and support were more likely to receive a placement in high-rated schools than families in comparison groups, but many students (in all groups) were again placed in low-rated schools.
4. Families that received support and priority were more likely to complete the choice process during the OneApp's first placement round (when there are more seats available at high-rated schools) and remain in the same school for at least a year after enrolling than families in comparison groups.
5. Test scores for students from supported and prioritized families increased slightly after exiting their closing schools. However, they remained far below state averages.

Background

In New Orleans, charter schools open under operating agreements that include an expiration date. Renewal of these operating agreements is based on academic performance, organizational performance, and financial performance. If a school fails to meet the charter renewal standards, it is subject to school closure or another structural change like takeover. While some see school closures as necessary for helping students avoid unproductive or unhealthy environments—and the threat of closure as constructive in decentralized systems—they are typically painful and disruptive to families. Research indicates that how painful they are with respect to student outcomes depends on the circumstances of the closure and whether students move to higher quality schools as a result of the intervention. Clearly, however, closures should be a last-resort option, and policymakers and practitioners should take care to minimize harm to families experiencing closures.

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With its majority-charter system, New Orleans has seen many school closures and various types of restarts in recent years. The types of support offered to families whose schools close have changed over time. For example, the New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS), like the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) before it, has run Family Resource Centers that families can seek out for enrollment needs. The school district has engaged in more targeted outreach as well by, for example, ensuring that families are familiar with the application process and that their children's records transfer to their new schools.

Beginning in the 2017-18 school year, families whose schools were closing were offered two additional, notable types of support:

• First, the city's unified enrollment system offered a "closing schools" priority. In New Orleans, families submit ranked school requests via a unified enrollment system (now called NCAP but known as OneApp in the years of this analysis). A placement algorithm then determines which students are assigned to which schools. Certain applicants, such as siblings of already enrolled students, have received priority in this process for many years. However, in 2017-18, the algorithm changed, and students from closing schools began to receive the highest priority. These students essentially moved to the front of the line in choosing a school for the following year—ahead even of students whose siblings already attended a given school. While NOLA-PS has given priority to students from closing schools before, this most recent policy change elevated closing school priority in a way that it hadn't been before, instituting a lasting, district-wide change to the policy.

- Second, the nonprofit organization EdNavigator offered one-on-one and group support to families whose schools were closing. The organization's navigators met with parents and guardians, offering guidance and resources related to the choice process, recommendations for schools to consider, and support in getting settled in their new schools. These navigators sought to build relationships with parents such that they would be trusted advocates who could offer personalized guidance. In addition, the organization created a packet with a list of 11 schools "worth special consideration" because EdNavigator believed the schools offered "strong academics, a safe and vibrant culture, and a sense of community." While these schools were recommended to all families, navigators emphasized that families' needs vary and customized their work with individual families. EdNavigator provides additional information about these efforts on its website.

Families did not have to use any of these supports. For example, they could seek out schools not offered in OneApp, such as private schools or public schools outside of New Orleans. They also could decline EdNavigator's invitations to meet and disregard their resources. However, the vast majority of students enrolled in these schools sought their next school placement through OneApp, and conversations with EdNavigator staff indicate that they worked with many of these same families.

This study focuses on three elementary and middle schools that closed after the 2017-18 school year (note that it is ERA-New Orleans' organizational policy not to identify or name individual schools in our analyses). We examine what happened with the students who were enrolled in these schools in the year they closed (in a grade other than the last grade offered by the school). In total, we observe 582 of these students in our data. We examine their OneApp school requests and placements, subsequent school enrollment and mobility, and math and English scores on state tests.

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For context, we provide outcomes for two comparison groups:

- Comparison group #1: Same schools, prior year. Our first comparison group consists of families that sought to exit these same three schools a year before closing. These families attempted to exit, in most cases successfully, after the 2016-17 school year. They did not have to exit in that year, since their children could have continued to the next grade in the same school and their school had not yet been identified for closure. This makes for a useful comparison group because these families came from the same schools as families who would experience closure a year later and had generally similar backgrounds, but they did not receive closing school priority in the OneApp or targeted support from EdNavigator.
- Comparison group #2: Other schools rated D or F. Our second comparison group consists of families that sought to exit non-closing schools that had received a D or F grade from the state (based primarily on state test scores). Like the families from closing schools, these families attempted to exit low-rated schools after the 2017-18 school year even though their children had not reached the final grade offered by their school.

These comparison groups provide useful context for the patterns we observe for prioritized and supported families from closing schools. However, we should stress that neither of these groups—nor any other group available—offers

a perfect comparison. For example, some families from the first comparison group might have been especially focused on finding a better-fitting school for their children (or aware of the possibility of closure) since they exited these schools before they were forced to exit. As a result, we refrain from saying that this study identifies the causal effects of providing additional support. Rather, we see these results as suggestive of possible effects and important, in themselves, as outcomes.

How Often Did Families Receiving Priority and Support Request Highly Rated Schools?

In the OneApp, families can rank several schools. First-choice requests are especially important because the OneApp algorithm initially attempts to assign applicants to their top-choice requests. However, if no seats are available at one's first choice school, then the applicants' lower-ranked requests matter, too.

Among families in closing schools who received priority and support ("Supported and Prioritized, Year of Closure (2018)"), 76% ranked a school that received an A, B, or C letter grade from the state as their top choice in the Main Round. This compared to 59% of families exiting those same schools one year earlier ("No Support or Priority, Year Prior to Closure (2017)") and 52% of families exiting other D or F rated schools ("No Support of Priority, Other D/F Rated Schools (2018)"). A higher percentage of families whose schools were closing (50%) also requested at least one A, B, or C rated school somewhere in their rankings.

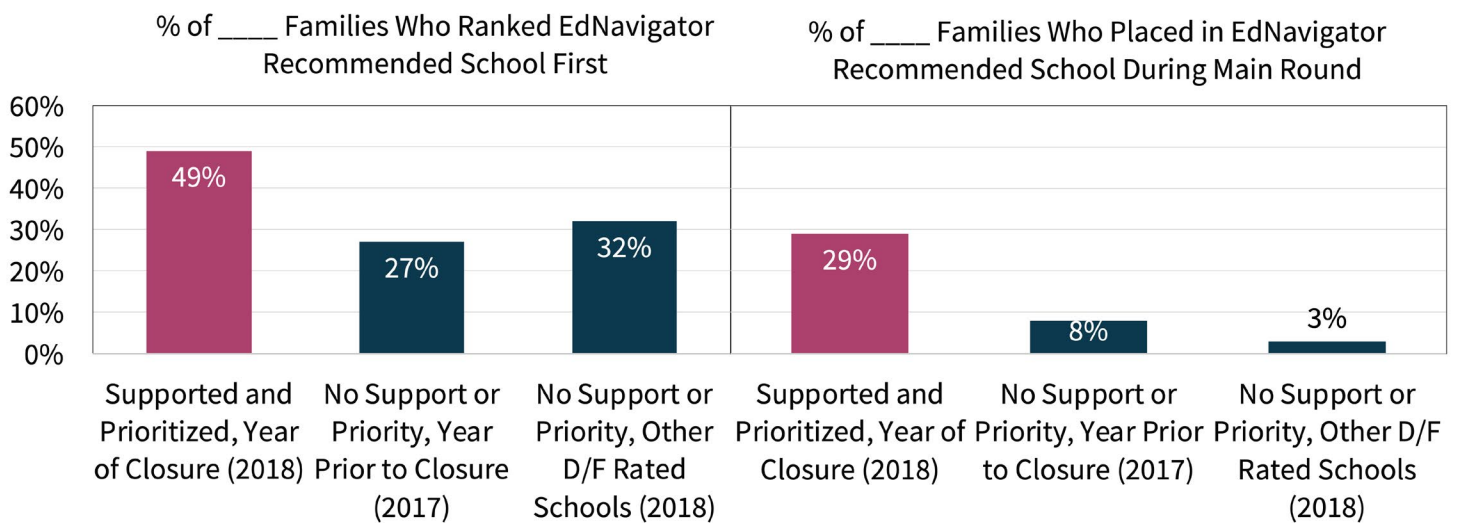### Figure 1. Families That Received Priority and Support Requested Schools Rated Highly by the State More Often Than Families in Comparison Groups

% of _____ Families Who Ranked an A, B, or C Rated School First

% of _____ Families Who Requested At Least One A or B Rated School
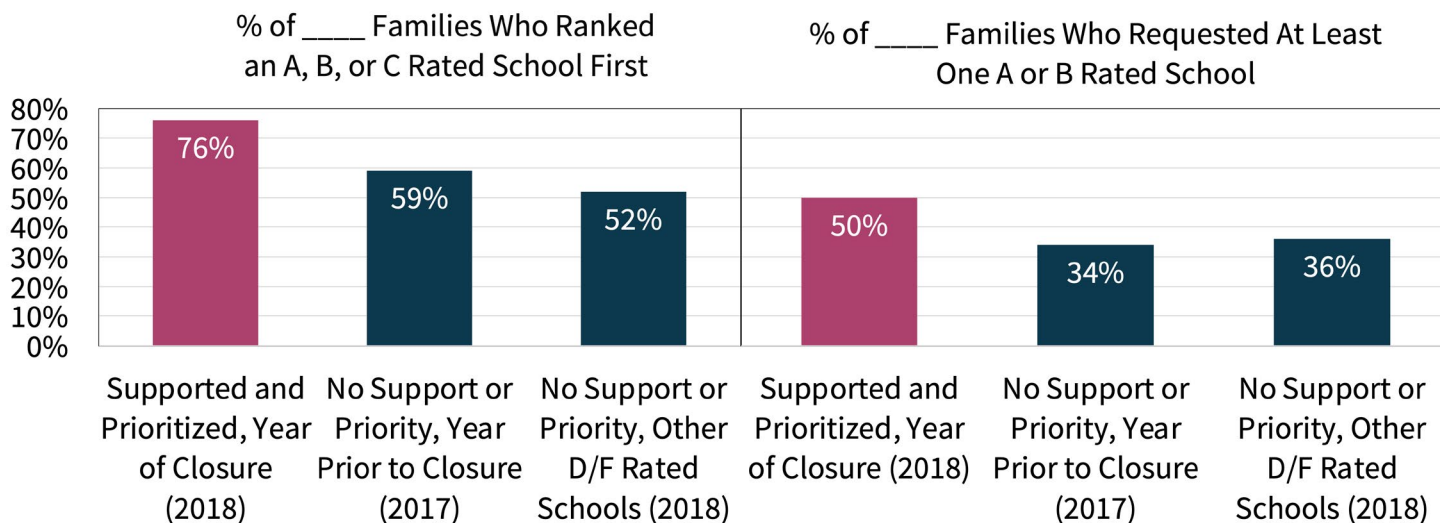
How Often Did Supported and Prioritized Families Request and Receive Placement in EdNavigator Recommended Schools?

EdNavigator gave families from closing schools a list of schools it suggested as potentially desirable options. About half (49%) of these families ranked an EdNavigator-recommended school first in the Main Round, 74% ranked at least one of these schools on their application, and 29% were placed in an EdNavigator-recommended school (after Round 2). Comparison groups appear for context. A few of the "No Support or Priority, Other D/F Rated Schools (2018)" applicants likely saw these recommendations. No one from the "No Support or Priority, Year Prior to Closure (2017)" cohort saw the recommendations since EdNavigator didn't create the list until the year after these families exited their schools. However, some families might have worked with EdNavigator staff members who informally suggested these schools.

Figure 2. Many Families That Worked with EdNavigator Requested Schools the Organization Recommended and Received a Seat in Those Schools Through the OneApp Placement Process

% of _____ Families Who Ranked EdNavigator Recommended School First

% of _____ Families Who Placed in EdNavigator Recommended School During Main Round

Supported and Prioritized, Year of Closure (2018)	No Support or Priority, Year Prior to Closure (2017)	No Support or Priority, Other D/F Rated Schools (2018)	Supported and Prioritized, Year of Closure (2018)	No Support or Priority, Year Prior to Closure (2017)	No Support or Priority, Other D/F Rated Schools (2018)
49%	27%	32%	29%	8%	3%

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How Often Did Supported and Prioritized Families Receive Placement in Highly Rated Schools?

Figure 3 below shows students' placements after Round 2 of the OneApp. Among applicants from closing schools, 69% were placed in an A, B, or C rated school. We created a "grade point average" variable to summarize the letter grade ratings of schools to which students were assigned (equal to 4 for "A"-rated schools, 3 for "B"-rated schools, etc.). Students from closing schools were assigned to schools with an overall rating of 2.01. This was higher than the corresponding GPAs for the comparison groups. However, across all groups, many students left one low-rated school for another low-rated school.

Figure 3. Families That Received Priority and Support Were More Likely to Receive a Placement in Highly Rated Schools, but Many Students (in All Groups) Were Again Placed in Low-Rated Schools

% of _____ Families Who Placed in
School with A, B, or C Ranking
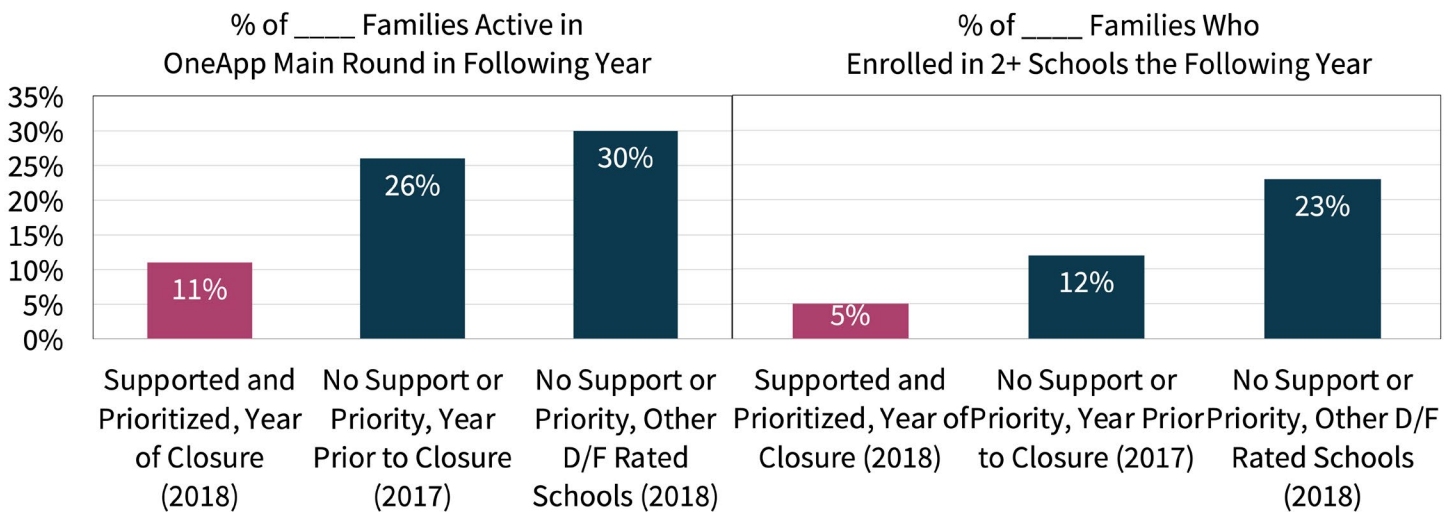

Average Rating of Schools Where Placed
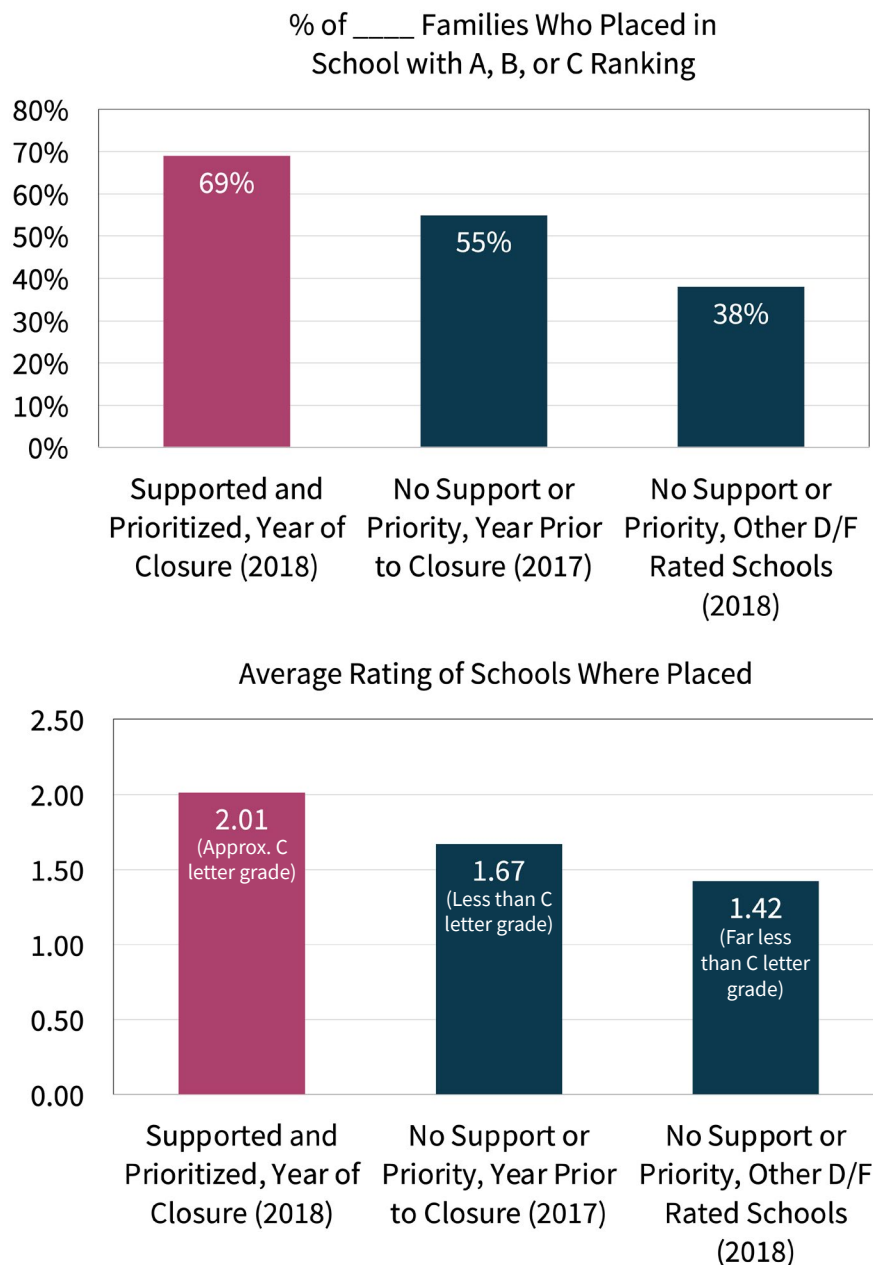
Notes: Placements in top panel occurred after round two of the OneApp. GPA of placement schools (A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, F=0).

What Share of Supported and Prioritized Families Stayed at Their New Schools?

A much lower percentage of families from closing schools (18%) than the comparison groups participated in Round 2, which suggests that most of these families were prepared to apply in the Main Round and satisfied with their Main Round placements. Applying in the Main Round is important because this is when the most seats are available in high-demand schools. Only small percentages of the families from closing schools sought a new placement one year later (11%) or enrolled in more than two Louisiana public schools in the year after their school closed (5%). These rates were also considerably lower than the comparison groups, suggesting that the prioritized and supported families had more stable educational experiences in that subsequent year.

Figure 4. Families That Received Support and Priority Tended to Complete the Choice Process During OneApp's First Placement Round (When There are More Seats Available at Highly Rated Schools) and Remain in the Same School for at Least a Year After Enrolling

% of _____ Families Active in OneApp Main Round in Following Year

% of _____ Families Who Enrolled in 2+ Schools the Following Year

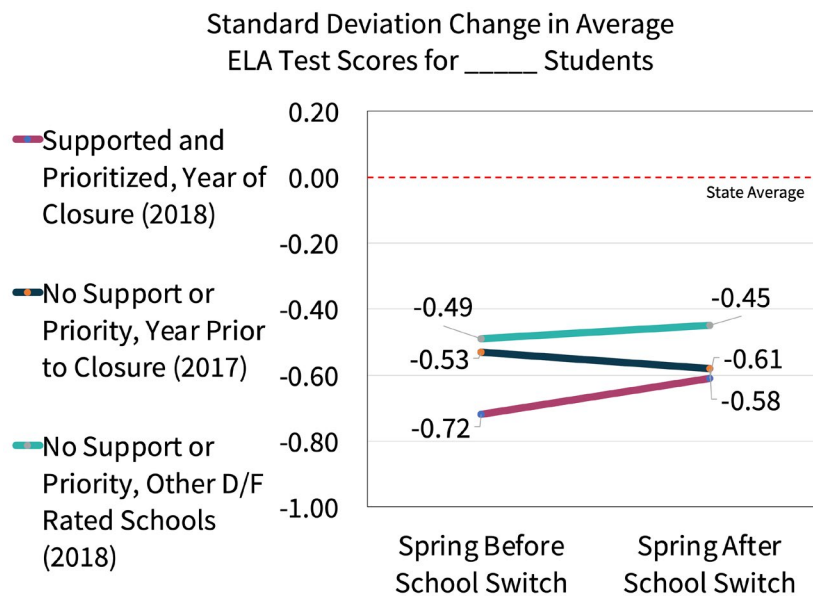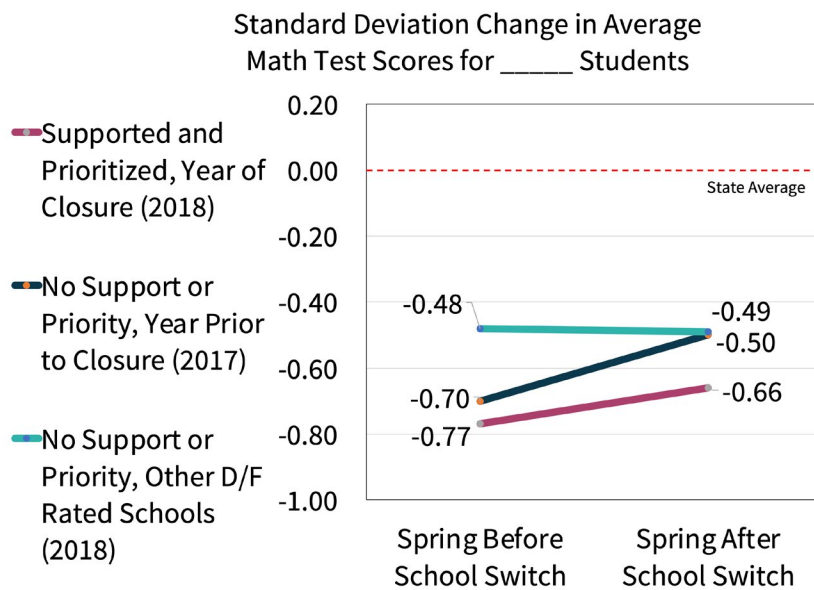|	% of Families Active in OneApp Main Round in Following Year			% of Families Who Enrolled in 2+ Schools the Following Year	
Supported and Prioritized, Year of Closure (2018)	No Support or Priority, Year Prior to Closure (2017)	No Support or Priority, Other D/F Rated Schools (2018)	Supported and Prioritized, Year of Closure (2018)	No Support or Priority, Year Prior to Closure (2017)	No Support or Priority, Other D/F Rated Schools (2018)
11%	26%	30%	5%	12%	23%

How Did Supported and Prioritized Students' Test Scores Change After They Switched Schools?

We tracked the average math and English language arts (ELA) scores of students whose schools closed in 2018. We focused on students who have scores from both the spring of 2018 (a few months prior to closure) and spring of 2019 (after enrolling in their next school).

In math, students in closing schools moved from about the 22nd percentile of scores statewide (0.77 standard deviations, or SDs, below the state average) to about the 27th percentile the following year (0.66 SDs below the state average). In ELA, these students moved from about the 24th percentile (0.72 SDs below the state average) to about the 28th percentile (0.61 SDs below the state average). In other words, students from closing schools improved their math and ELA scores in the first academic year after their schools closed. However, their scores remained far below state averages.

Unlike students who received OneApp priority placement and EdNavigator support, students in comparison groups who did not receive placement assistance did not consistently trend upwards in math and ELA scores. For students who exited their schools the year before they closed, we observe an increase in math scores and decrease in ELA scores after their transition. For students who tried to exit non-closing D/F rated schools, scores were relatively stable. Regardless of increases or decreases in standardized test scores, both comparison groups also scored well below state averages both before and after their school moves.

Figure 5. Test Scores for Students from Supported and Prioritized Families Increased Slightly after Exiting Their Closing Schools, but Remained Far Below State Averages

Standard Deviation Change in Average
Math Test Scores for _____ Students

Standard Deviation Change in Average
ELA Test Scores for _____ Students

How Did We Carry Out the Analysis?

We used data from the New Orleans Public Schools and Louisiana Department of Education. We linked anonymized, student-level records from the OneApp (e.g., requests and placements) and the state (e.g., enrollment and test scores). For both the cohorts who received support and priority and the comparison cohorts, we excluded students in the final grade at their school.

Each comparison group is useful in many respects, but neither is perfect. Perhaps, for example, the families that exited these closing schools a year earlier were especially concerned about the performance of those schools. This is why we refrain from claiming to identify causal effects.

Data on students' enrollment in the subsequent year reflects enrollment in Louisiana public (and charter) schools. Our data do not include private schools.

We only include test score trends for students who took state tests in both periods. As a result, students in lower grades (PK-2) in either year are not included.

How Does This Relate to Other REACH Research?

Advancing REACH's goal of informing and improving school choice policy for the betterment of disadvantaged students, this study examines how additional support for families affected by school closures in New Orleans impacts student outcomes. Key findings from the report highlight the importance of information accessibility for families making decisions within the school choice sector. Study findings also emphasize the critical role responsive enrollment systems play in school choice settings.

A recent REACH study from Douglas N. Harris and Valentina Martinez-Pabon provides the first analysis of closure and restructuring for all schools nationwide over the past 30 years. The study finds closure rates have been relatively steady in the charter and traditional public school (TPS) sectors over the past two decades, but closure rates have been declining over the past several years in all sectors. The authors identified student enrollment as the most consistent predictor of school closure/restructuring across sectors. In elementary/middle TPS and charter schools, student test scores predict closure/restructuring nearly as strongly, or more strongly, than enrollment. Schools with high achievement levels and/or high achievement growth were less likely to experience closure/restructuring than those with lower achievement. While enrollment and achievement were the strongest predictors of closure/restructuring, the percent of students of color also predicts closure/restructuring.

About the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH)

Founded in 2018, REACH provides objective, rigorous, and applicable research that informs and improves school choice policy design and implementation, to increase opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged students. REACH is housed at Tulane University with an Executive Committee that includes researchers from Tulane, Michigan State University, Syracuse University, and the University of Southern California.

About the Author

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Jon Valant is a Research Partner at the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH), a Non-Resident Research Fellow at the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans), a Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, and the Director of the Brown Center on Education Policy.