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Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice

EARLY EVIDENCE FROM DENVER AND NEW ORLEANS

By Betheny Gross, Michael DeArmond, and Patrick Denice

About This Report

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ABOUT THE CENTER ON REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families.

Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools.

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Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice

Foreword

Public school choice is taking root in America and that can be a good thing. No longer assigned to their neighborhood school by default, families in cities that offer school choice can choose from a diverse array of options, allowing them to personalize their child's education.

School choice attempts to level the playing field, making it possible for disadvantaged children, who may live in neighborhoods with low-performing schools, to have the same access to high-quality schools as their more advantaged peers.

But the act of choosing a school is complicated. As we've explored in previous reports in our *Making School Choice Work* series, families experience many barriers to choosing and accessing good schools, especially in cities where schools operate under different governing and accountability systems. In *How Parents Experience Public School Choice*, we surveyed 4,000 parents in eight "high-choice" cities and learned that they struggle to find useful information about schools and understand complex enrollment processes. Sometimes they have to make difficult trade-offs, sacrificing academic quality for the sake of safety and transportation concerns.

The good news is that a number of cities are trying to make school choice work better for families by adopting new systems and policies that cover district schools and charter schools.

The creation of common enrollment systems is a promising development. Common enrollment (also referred to as universal or unified enrollment) allows families to fill out a single application with a single deadline for any and all schools they wish to apply to. It's meant to cut down on the confusion and stress of choosing a school and to assure families that the application process will be fair.

But, as we learned in two pioneering cities, common enrollment is not yet a "be-all and end-all" solution to making school choice work.

This report, *Common Enrollment, Parents and School Choice: Early Evidence from Denver and New Orleans*, examines the implementation and early results of common enrollment in two cities with two very different demographics and educational landscapes. Many "high-choice" cities are thinking about adopting common enrollment systems and this report shows there are good reasons for them to do so. Most notably, my colleagues found evidence that a lot of confusion and inequities have been eliminated thanks to the

centralized application and choice system. The enrollment systems are also providing important data about what parents really value and want more of. We learn, for example, that:

- Math scores are particularly important to Hispanic and black parents when choosing schools.
- All parents prefer schools closer to home.
- Parents prefer schools with some degree of racial diversity. However, white parents are less comfortable than Hispanic and black parents with non-white schools.

On the other hand, parents in both cities still struggle with the challenges of choosing the right school for their child and understanding and accepting why they get matched to a particular school.

As Gross, DeArmond, and Denice point out, the enrollment process is one small part of the choice experience. Without building a supply of high-quality schools citywide, there will always be anger, resentment, and attempts to game the system—even using the most sophisticated and fair matching algorithms. With too few quality options, common enrollment systems can even become, as the authors note, a “purveyor of false hope.” Without providing diverse and rich information about different schools, parents will always struggle to know which schools to list on the enrollment forms. In particular, parents want more information about school culture, the relationship between adults and students and among students, the approach teachers take in the classroom, and how their own child might react to the school’s environment.

District and charter school leaders in both Denver and New Orleans are working hard to address these issues, but need to go further. This report provides essential guidance to them and to other cities thinking about implementing common enrollment systems. Maybe the most important piece of advice is to avoid the trap of believing that common enrollment is a solution in itself. In any true portfolio system, sets of interlocking—and difficult to implement—functions, leadership, and deep community relationships are what will make or break school choice.

–Robin Lake, Director of CRPE

Building the Evidence on Common Enrollment

For 20 years CRPE has examined how providing families with public school choices from a portfolio of schools overseen by different agencies and operated by different leaders can create a dynamic and productive public school system. For the last 10 years CRPE has worked with and learned from the more than 45 cities nationwide that have been building and leveraging what is now known as the portfolio strategy to provide their families with quality school choices. Coordinating enrollment systems across their many schools of choice in a way that assures parents an efficient and transparent way to make school choices has been a growing concern for many of these cities. Two of these cities, Denver and New Orleans, were among the first to build common enrollment systems to serve these needs. Cities around the country have been watching their efforts with interest.

This report is part of a body of work on common enrollment that studies various elements including design and implementation, stakeholder engagement, and oversight. Related briefs on school choice and common enrollment can be found here:

Coordinating Enrollment Across School Sectors: An Overview of Common Enrollment Systems

Working Together to Manage Enrollment: Key Governance and Operations Decisions

Stakeholder Engagement for Common Enrollment Systems



Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice

Introduction

“The application is very simple. The hard part is choosing the right school for our kids.” – Denver parent, Spring 2014

When parents choose a school for their child, they confront a complex set of issues and concerns.¹ They must identify the type of program that they think will best fit their child’s needs, gather and understand a range of information about their available options, decide how far they are willing (or able) to have their child travel to school, weigh other issues such as the extracurricular or enrichment activities that are available at different schools, and then, finally, decide on a school and fill out all the necessary application and enrollment forms. If the school is over-subscribed (as many are), they will need a backup plan in case their child does not get in. For many parents—especially those who have many choices and those with limited resources—meeting all these demands can be confusing, stressful, and too often full of uncertainty about how the whole process even happens.²

In a small but growing number of cities, education leaders are trying to make choosing a school less confusing and stressful, and more transparent for parents by streamlining how school enrollment works. In these cities, old decentralized enrollment procedures are being replaced with new common (sometimes called “unified” or “universal”) enrollment policies that call for a single enrollment process for all district-run and charter schools citywide. So instead of filling out different enrollment forms for each school, parents fill out one form for all (or nearly all) of the city’s public schools. Instead of participating in a separate assignment process and waitlist at each school, students are matched to schools by a centralized matching process.

Given that the nation’s most mature common enrollment systems for K-12 schools are still less than five years old, summary judgments about the effects of these policies are still premature. But enough initial evidence exists to suggest both their promise and limitations. With that in mind, this report examines parents’ early experiences with common enrollment in the two cities that adopted this approach first: Denver and New Orleans. The way common enrollment unfolded in these two cities is, of course, highly contextual. As we describe later, the Recovery School District (RSD) in New Orleans required the first cohort of schools to participate, while Denver Public Schools (DPS) had to persuade its charter schools to voluntarily opt into a common enrollment system.³ As Box 1 suggests, differences in school landscapes and student populations in the cities are also important to keep in mind when assessing how common enrollment unfolded. Nevertheless, many cities are considering adopting similar enrollment models and it is important to learn what problems they can and cannot solve.

Box 1. Denver and New Orleans Contexts

The school choice and educational landscapes in Denver and New Orleans differ in important ways. Choice has been a part of both cities for many years. Charter schools date back to the late 1990s and both cities see large shares of students enrolling in private schools. Affluent families in New Orleans historically tended to enroll in the city's private schools and only a select number of public schools, whereas affluent families in Denver have consistently opted into the city's public magnet and charter schools in large numbers.

One difference between the cities is that school choice in Denver is an opt-in process for parents, layered on top of a system of neighborhood schools. Parents in New Orleans, by contrast, are essentially required to participate in the system, as few schools citywide offer guaranteed enrollment to neighborhood students. Another important difference between the cities is the relative size of their charter sectors. In Denver, charter schools serve about 14 percent of the district's roughly 80,000 students (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools 2012-2013 data); New Orleans is mainly a charter school system; charter schools serve the vast majority of its nearly 45,000 students, or 91 percent (Cowen Institute 2014b). Many district schools in Denver, though, operate with significant autonomy approaching that of the city's charter schools.

Demographically, the student populations of both cities are majority-minority and often come from low-income households. Denver's students are primarily Hispanic or Latino (57 percent) and most are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (70 percent). In New Orleans, the majority of students are black (86 percent in 2013) and, as in Denver, most are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (82 percent).

Sources: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' Public Charter Schools Dashboard; Colorado Department of Education; The Cowen Institute (2014a), Nola By the Numbers: School Enrollment and Demographics Oct 2013, New Orleans, LA; The Cowen Institute (2014b), The State of Public Education in New Orleans: 2014 Report, New Orleans, LA.

The experience of parents in Denver and New Orleans suggests that common enrollment addresses two important problems.

First, common enrollment largely eliminated enrollment procedures that, in a decentralized system, confused parents and, at times, were inconsistent and unfair. By centralizing the enrollment and matching process, common enrollment policies streamlined timelines and formalized school-applicant matching decisions and made it easier for many (but not all) parents to apply for schools. Centralization also dramatically reduced students gaining admissions through "back door," non-standard procedures that, prior to common enrollment, favored assertive or politically connected parents.

Second, common enrollment brought with it complementary information policies directed at parents that centralized and standardized information about public schools citywide. By providing a single parent guide with a common set of metrics, including measures of performance, and information about school programs and student populations, parents were given a shared jumping-off point for assessing schools across the city. Parents in both cities reported using these guides in their decision-making process.

Despite these successes, Denver and New Orleans' experiences with common enrollment also reveal some of the policy's limitations. For example, although most parents in both cities took advantage of the new systems, administrative data show that during the first three years of the policy in Denver, minority parents and low-income parents participated in school choice at slightly lower rates than white and more affluent parents—a pattern that likely existed prior to common enrollment.

Also, parent focus groups and interview data, as well as their choices in the application process, show that parents from both cities are balancing a variety of interests including a desire for high-scoring, safe, relatively nearby, and integrated schools that will meet the needs of their own child. Streamlined enrollment and access to school performance metrics in the parent guides are useful to them but they want more detailed and personalized information to make an educated choice for their child.

Parent focus group and interview data also suggest that although the centralized application system is, in some ways, easier to navigate than the old decentralized system, some parents have misunderstandings about how common enrollment matches students to schools and, based on those misunderstandings, fill out their enrollment forms in ways that inadvertently *reduce* their chances of finding a match for their child—for instance, by listing fewer choices than are permitted on the application.

In addition, even though common enrollment made choosing a school fairer for everyone—virtually eliminating gaming and side deals—parents still find too few desirable options and the demand for schools is heavily concentrated in a handful of schools. Common enrollment obviously cannot automatically adjust the supply of schools, but when parents don't get their top choice they can view the common enrollment system as a purveyor of false hope. As one parent said, “They make us believe that we actually have a choice and we're involved in the process of picking our children's school, but ultimately, if the computer didn't pick your [lottery number], it doesn't matter.”

Finally, our interviews suggest that district leaders are using the data from the common enrollment system to inform how they manage and oversee schools in their city (e.g., targeting high-demand schools for expansion), but our interviews with principals in both cities suggest that some school-level leaders have yet to use the information about parent demand provided by the system to inform decisions about their schools and programs.

As cities continue to make school choice work for all families, it is clear that simplifying the application process and providing basic information to parents is just the first step to supporting parents in school choice. Cities need to keep testing a variety of strategies that will help parents to actually make decisions in light of their complex concerns. Cities also must continue to improve the supply of schools available citywide. Assisting school leaders to leverage the data from the choice system to drive improvement in their schools may help in the effort to improve supply, but ultimately this effort will require a concerted effort from all agencies overseeing public schools.



Why Common Enrollment?

Reform advocates argue that giving parents the right to choose their child's school will improve and diversify educational opportunities for everyone by leveraging the logic of markets.⁴ Market theories assert that when parents have the right to choose their school, *they* will choose one that meets their child's educational needs.

They also assert that when schools compete for students, schools will provide services and programs that meet students' needs or else risk closure due to under-enrollment. As schools respond to parent demand, and choice and competition play off of each other, market theories assume that schools will experiment with new programs and strategies to attract families. To the extent that families value academic quality, academics in schools will improve.⁵

In the long run, choice and competition may lead to better schools.⁶ But in the meantime, poorly performing schools continue to operate and attract students. These schools can persist, in part, because the power of parental choice is constrained. The logic of the market breaks down when parents cannot find the information they need about schools (or the only available information comes from shiny marketing brochures), or find their ability to choose constrained because of problems with transportation, complicated enrollment processes, or schools with discriminatory enrollment practices—all problems that are often worse for parents who have limited resources and social networks.⁷

Common enrollment policies are designed to address some of these problems and make choosing a school easier by giving parents a single place and process for picking a public school. Common enrollment policies require parents to submit a single application that lists schools (district-run and/or charter) they want for their child in rank order. By centralizing and streamlining the application process, common enrollment aims to reduce information and logistical burdens parents can experience when choosing schools in a decentralized system.

Once parents submit their applications, common enrollment systems assign students to schools using a matching algorithm similar to the process that the National Residency Matching Program uses to match medical students with residency programs. These algorithms simultaneously take into account parents' preferences for schools, school-based admission requirements (e.g., if a school for the arts requires an audition, the algorithm only matches applicants who have completed the audition), the space available at the school,

and the school's priorities. By centralizing assignment and using a trustworthy matching procedure, common enrollment assures that enrollment decisions are fair and consistent.⁷

New parent information tools often go hand-in-hand with common enrollment policies. These information tools, such as parent guides or websites, give parents a single, standardized source of information about all of the schools covered by the common enrollment system. Unlike state or district report cards, which typically provide test scores and demographic snapshots of students enrolled in the school, these new information tools are designed to help parents identify the schools their child is eligible for and compare their program, location, and performance to one another.

To summarize, Table 1 describes the differences between a decentralized system and a common enrollment system in the context of school choice.

Table 1. Decentralized Enrollment versus Common Enrollment

	DECENTRALIZED ENROLLMENT	COMMON ENROLLMENT
Applications	District schools may or may not have same application and timeline; charter schools have different applications and timelines.	District schools and charter schools all use a single application and timeline.
Matches	Districts assign students to neighborhood schools. Charter schools and magnet schools run individual lotteries and manage wait lists.	Centralized matching process uses consistent algorithm to manage all lotteries and waitlists.
Information	Often limited to state and/or district report cards.	Consolidated parent guides provide information about all schools covered by the common enrollment system.

Two Cases of Common Enrollment

In 2012, Denver and New Orleans launched the first common enrollment systems in the nation that covered both district-run and charter schools.⁹ Both cities adopted their common enrollment systems in a context in which parents had many choices about where to send their children to school.

Prior to the common enrollment system, individual schools in both cities had their own systems for recruiting and enrolling students. As a result, enrollment was a fragmented and opaque process. SchoolChoice, the Denver common enrollment system, and OneApp, the common enrollment process used in New Orleans, aimed to make enrollment more coherent and transparent.

Colorado was one of the first states to pass a statewide open enrollment law that allowed children to enroll in any school in the state that had room for them.¹⁰ Parents in Denver, particularly affluent ones, have actively engaged in public school choice for many years, availing themselves of magnet programs and charter schools, which began to open in the late 1990s. Today, Denver parents have a wide range of choices including traditional district schools, charter schools, selective and open enrollment magnet schools, and new “innovation schools,” which have charter-like autonomy.¹¹

The common enrollment system in Denver includes all district and charter schools, though participation is voluntary for charter schools. After the implementation of common enrollment, Denver students retained a default assignment, but the SchoolChoice application offered parents a single application, timeline, and process for applying to any public school in the city, including the district’s magnet schools and charter schools. Though all schools are considered open choice, schools can identify students who will have a priority for enrollment. For example, “neighborhood schools” give students living nearby priority in the match. Most schools offer priority to siblings of students attending their schools.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana Department of Education used the statewide Recovery School District (RSD), established in 2003, to take control of most of New Orleans’ schools.^{12,13} The RSD closed most of the city’s schools and replaced them with new, autonomous schools of choice (i.e., charter schools), often operated by outside partners.¹⁴ As part of its post-Katrina improvement strategy, the RSD eliminated all attendance zones and gave students the choice to attend any school in the city that had room for them.

In New Orleans, the OneApp process began by requiring only the direct-run and charter schools overseen by the RSD to participate. Now, schools operated by the Orleans Parish School Board (including selective admissions schools), local Type 2 charter schools,¹⁵ and schools accepting vouchers for eligible students participate in the OneApp voluntarily. Unlike Denver, no students have a guaranteed assigned school based on their residence, though elementary students receive priority in one of six geographic zones. Initially, schools could only give priority to applicants with a sibling in the school or in the geographic zones. Today the OneApp accommodates schools both with unique priority structures (e.g., siblings, geography, feeder patterns) and with selective admissions that require applicants to meet eligibility criteria (e.g., foreign language fluency in an immersion school).

In both cities, a number of policy details changed over the first three years of implementation. For example, New Orleans introduced Family Link, which the system uses as a way to try to keep children from the same family together, and Denver changed the way special education students participated in enrollment. Still, both Denver and New Orleans' systems follow the basic contours of the common enrollment design described earlier, with a general process illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. General Common Enrollment Process for Parents

TIME PERIOD	ACTION
Fall and Winter	Parents and students research school options.
Late Winter and Early Spring	Students complete the common application. Denver students list up to 5 preferences. New Orleans students list up to 8 preferences.
Spring	Receive school match. Denver students are placed on waitlists for unmatched higher-preferred schools.
Late Spring and Summer	New Orleans parents can seek alternate matches in subsequent match rounds. Denver parents can seek alternate matches directly through schools with remaining openings. Late applicants seek assignments through centralized parent choice offices.
Fall	Students enroll in and attend matched schools.

LEARNING ABOUT SCHOOL ENROLLMENT IN DENVER AND NEW ORLEANS

To examine parents' early experiences with common enrollment in Denver and New Orleans, we collected and analyzed a wide range of data, including interviews with system leaders and school building principals, parent focus groups, parent surveys, and administrative data from enrollment systems.

Interviews and Focus Groups

To better understand how people in both cities perceived their experiences under common enrollment, we conducted interviews with system and school leaders and held focus groups with parents between spring 2013 and spring 2014.

During the spring of 2013, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a snowballing sample of district and civic leaders in both cities. In all, we spoke with 20 leaders in Denver and 25 in New Orleans. The purpose of these leadership interviews was to

better understand why both cities adopted the policy and how leaders viewed the early implementation of the policy. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted over the telephone.

During the spring of 2014, we conducted additional semi-structured phone interviews with six school administrators (principals or school enrollment administrators) in each city. In these interviews, we wanted to learn more about how leaders of high schools and middle schools viewed the common enrollment system. The sample included three high schools and three elementary or middle schools. We purposefully selected the six schools to include two “in demand” schools, two “moderate” demand schools, and two “low demand” schools, based on the number of applications they received under the common enrollment system.

Finally, in the spring of 2014, we conducted parent focus groups in both cities. In New Orleans, we recruited parents for the focus groups by distributing flyers at the city’s annual school fair. In Denver, we recruited parents for the focus groups in cooperation with a local parent advocacy group and the district’s parent liaison office (which specifically targeted the recruitment of Hispanic and Latino parents). Our Denver focus groups also included Spanish language translation and were lead by a bilingual facilitator. In both cities, the focus groups were held in-person at schools after the school day, followed a semi-structured protocol, and lasted about one hour. The focus groups covered parents’ experiences with enrollment, from identifying a school, to completing the application forms, to the receiving a match. We asked parents what was working for them, what was not, and what advice they would give to other parents who were new to the enrollment system. We offered parents a \$25 gift card as an incentive to participate in the focus groups. For three parents in New Orleans who were interested in participating in the focus group but were unable to attend in person, we conducted phone interviews (phone interviews used the same protocol as the focus groups and participants received the \$25 incentive). In total, we spoke with 69 parents (48 parents in Denver and 21 in New Orleans).

Parent Surveys

To complement our parent focus group data, we also randomly selected 500 public school parents in both cities in March 2014 to participate in a phone survey. We used Random Digit Dialing (RDD) to select participants with a mix of landline and cellphone numbers. To qualify for the survey, respondents had to live in Denver or New Orleans and have a child currently enrolled in a K-12 public school. The survey included 57 questions and was available in Spanish language translation in both cities.

The purpose of the survey was to further explore parents’ opinions about the experience of choosing a school in Denver and New Orleans and, specifically, the extent to which they experienced barriers to exercising choice. The survey also allowed us to gather data from a more representative sample of parents than was possible from the focus groups sample.

Table 3 shows select characteristics of the respondents in both cities (for comparison, U.S. Census estimates are shown in parentheses). In general, the survey respondents reflect differences in the broader populations of both cities: Denver parents are less likely than New Orleans parents to be black, and more likely to have a bachelors or higher degree.

On an important note, because the survey asked parents *when* they last enrolled a child in school, we are able to make some rough comparisons between survey responses from parents who enrolled under a more decentralized system and survey responses from those who enrolled under the common enrollment system. Specifically, 281 of the respondents in Denver enrolled a child prior to common enrollment and 219 enrolled a child after common enrollment. In New Orleans, the numbers are 344 prior to common enrollment and 160 after common enrollment.¹⁶

Table 3. Parent Survey Sample Estimates by Race and Educational Attainment

	DENVER	NEW ORLEANS
	Sample (US Census population estimate)	Sample (US Census population estimate)
% Education BA+	41.6% (42.2%)	39.4% (33.0%)
% White	36.4% (52.2%)	22.2% (30.5%)
% Black	36.4% (52.2%) 12.1% (10.2%)	63.6% (60.2%)
% Hispanic/Latino	45.5% (31.8%)	9.1% (5.2%)
% Asian	2.0% (3.4%)	2.0% (2.9%)
Total N	500	504
Pre-Common Enrollment N	281	344
Post-Common Enrollment N	219	160

Administrative Enrollment Data

Finally, we complemented our qualitative data with an examination of choice and enrollment patterns using quantitative data from the DPS and RSD administrative data systems (in Denver we also used school performance data).

For Denver, we combined several sources of data to build a dataset on enrollment and performance that covers 2011–2013. First, we used three years of application data from the district’s SchoolChoice system: 2011, 2012, and 2013. In each year, roughly 23,000 to 24,000 students submitted applications through the SchoolChoice system. We have data on the schools they listed on the SchoolChoice form, the school the system matched them to, and the school they eventually attended. Second, we combined the SchoolChoice data with enrollment and demographic data on the rest of the students in Denver (about 85,000 students). These are students who did not submit an application through SchoolChoice because they either chose a neighborhood school or remained in the same school year-to-year. Third, we combined these enrollment and demographic data with two types of school performance measures: categorical school accountability rankings (e.g., “Distinguished,” “Meets Expectations,” etc.) and student-level standardized test score data.

For New Orleans, we built a similar, but more limited, enrollment dataset. Data on students submitting applications through New Orleans’ OneApp system include about 10,000 students in 2012–13 and roughly 11,000 students in 2013–14. As with Denver, we had data on the schools students listed on the OneApp form, the school the system matched them to, and the school they eventually attended. Unlike Denver, however, we did not have access to test score data for New Orleans.

Taken together, our qualitative and quantitative data allow us to zoom in on the experiences of individual parents as they choose schools for their children (focus groups) and to zoom out to the opinions of larger groups of parents (survey) as well as to broad patterns of participation and behavior under the new systems (administrative data).

Early Lessons About Common Enrollment

The early implementation of common enrollment in Denver and New Orleans suggests that the policy successfully addressed some of the problems parents face when choosing schools, but it also left other problems unaddressed and may have created new problems of its own.

EARLY SUCCESSES

Common enrollment assures consistency and fair play in enrollment. Denver and New Orleans first implemented common enrollment systems for students who enrolled in the fall of 2012. In both cities, common enrollment's centralized matching system processed the vast majority of new and transferring students and assigned them to schools using each system's matching algorithm. School leaders in both cities recalled with surprise and relief that the systems launched with a minimum of difficulty or controversy. They attribute this success to the intensive collaboration of many stakeholders and the competence of the DPS and RSD leaders who oversaw the design and implementation.

Leaders and principals in both cities report that the new approach created a much more formalized assignment process. Prior to SchoolChoice, it is unclear what mechanism the nearly one third of 6th and 9th graders who did not attend their neighborhood school used to gain entry to their school.^{17,18} But by the 2014–15 enrollment, our analysis of Denver's SchoolChoice application and enrollment data shows that fewer than 7 percent of students completing an application enrolled in schools for which we, the research team, could not find an official explanation.¹⁹

New Orleans faced more challenges in their rollout than Denver. In OneApp's first year, many schools in New Orleans underestimated the number of students they wanted matched to their school during the primary match rounds.²⁰ As a result, these schools found themselves short of students in the fall. Some responded by allowing families to enroll directly at school sites as school started, rather than through the centralized system. But after the first year, the RSD tightened up the application and enrollment process, significantly eliminating inconsistencies in the student registration process. Every school administrator we spoke with said that the OneApp has, since the confusion of the first year, made the application process much more transparent for everyone. As one New Orleans principal explained:

“[OneApp] just levels the playing field for parents, and it also gives them all of this information up-front, so they’re not chasing you [the principal] down trying to figure out what schools are available ... So I think it makes the parents and the kids’ lives a lot easier... the second thing is that it forces schools to all play by rules. I don’t know how to say that in a way that’s not as damning of schools, but it does kind of require everyone to play under the same guidelines.”

In short, system leaders and school administrators in both cities said that the centralized, standardized process improved the predictability and transparency of applications and enrollment overall (however, as we note later under the section “Early Shortcomings,” this perspective was not shared by many parents, for a variety of reasons).

Parents utilized better information when making choices. In addition to improving the transparency and consistency of the enrollment process, common enrollment indirectly improved school information that was available to parents because both cities developed new parent information policies that complemented their common enrollment systems. These information policies centralized and standardized information about public schools citywide in new and important ways.

The RSD provided resources to New Orleans Parents’ Guide (a community organization initially housed within the Urban League but now an independent nonprofit) to expand their comprehensive school guide. The Parents’ Guide provides parents with a print and online tool containing information about schools, including the school’s state-awarded performance grade, enrollment counts (total and by racial/ethnic subgroup), reported class sizes, details on the school’s schedule, and a statement about its mission and program. The guide is available in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. In addition, the Urban League hosts a citywide schools expo in New Orleans where parents can meet with school representatives to learn more about a school’s programs. The RSD also sponsors three family resource centers that offer application materials and information on the enrollment process to parents; parents can also drop off their OneApp materials at the resource centers.

In Denver, the school district takes responsibility for generating the comprehensive print and online guide to the city’s district-operated and charter schools.²¹ The guide, published in English and Spanish, includes information similar to the information in the New Orleans guide, including descriptions of school programs and each school’s performance rating, known as its “SPF” (School Performance Framework). Denver’s guide codes each school’s SPF by color: red for “on probation,” orange for “priority watch,” yellow for “on watch,” green for “meeting expectations,” and blue for “exceeding expectations.” Like New Orleans, Denver also sponsors several parent resource centers around the city and hosts a series of school fairs for elementary, middle, and high schools. Finally, the district has an interactive online tool that provides parents with lists of schools based on the preferences they enter into the tool (e.g., if a parent tells the tool that they are looking for a STEM school, the tool will return a list of STEM-focused schools—the tool ranks results either by the strength of the match or the school’s distance from the parents’ home).

Our interview and focus group data suggest that parents actively use these information tools to understand their schooling options. Nearly all of the parents we interviewed in Denver and New Orleans were aware of the guides and most had taken some time to view them. Parents valued the guides as an “official” source for information about schools; as one parent said, “I think more information is being put out there now about schools. Before it was more word of mouth.” Of course, the parents we spoke with were probably more engaged than the average parent (after all, they agreed to speak with us), and so their views may be more positive than most. Still, only one parent we interviewed, from New

Orleans, spoke negatively about the guide, saying that she was “terrified of this booklet” while gesturing to the size of the parent guide.

For most parents we spoke with, however, the parent guides provided a good jumping off point for understanding the overall quality of schools in the city. Nearly every parent we spoke with in Denver talked about the importance of the color rating that reflected the school’s SPF—they knew that blue and green were good and red and orange bad.²² Similarly, parents in New Orleans said that the guides gave them useful information about school performance, although they were slightly more skeptical about the performance information than parents in Denver.

EARLY SHORTCOMINGS

Differences in participation rates exist. Although large numbers of families in each city applied to schools through the new common enrollment systems, administrative data show that minority parents and low-income parents participated at slightly lower rates than white and more affluent parents in Denver (where participation is voluntary) compared to New Orleans (where participation is mandatory).

In Denver, students who do not complete a SchoolChoice application will be assigned to a school.²³ Still, each year, more than 70 percent of entering kindergarteners and middle school students and more than 60 percent of entering high school students submitted a SchoolChoice application. Because Denver students have an assigned school, some portion of families who do not complete a SchoolChoice application may be actively *choosing* their neighborhood school.

Beneath these high participation rates, the data show that affluent and white students in Denver participate at higher rates than less affluent or minority students—a gap that seems to continue from before common enrollment. For example, in the first three years of implementation, between 63 to 67 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) have participated in SchoolChoice each year, compared to 69 to 70 percent of non-FRL students. And in 2014, Hispanic students (71 percent) and black students (63 percent) had lower participation rates than white students (85 percent).²⁴

An analysis of choosing prior to the implementation of common enrollment suggests that the present gaps in participation are not new. It is difficult to compare choice participation rates before and after common enrollment; not only are the procedures for participating different, but the district also modified assignment boundaries and created new enrollment zones. The number and quality of available schools is also different. Nonetheless, prior analysis from the Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice found that prior to common enrollment, affluent students participated in the first round of school choice—the round in which the most options are available—at three times the rate of non-affluent students.²⁵

In New Orleans, even though students do not have an assigned school, many students still fail to complete the OneApp and, as in Denver, there have been gaps in participation rates. For instance, for students enrolling into transitional grades (kindergarten, 6th, and 9th grades) for the 2013–14 school year, 41 percent of FRL students in New Orleans participated in the OneApp process while 52 percent of non-FRL students participated. Forty-three percent of black students, by far the most prevalent group in New Orleans, participated in the application process while 38 percent of Hispanic and 30 percent of white students participated.²⁶



New Orleans’ parents see less benefit. Survey data suggest that the benefits associated with streamlining enrollment may be *less* evident to parents in New Orleans than to parents in Denver. For example, the survey results suggest that Denver parents who enrolled a child in public schools after the launch of SchoolChoice were less likely to report having trouble with multiple applications and deadlines—exactly the problems that SchoolChoice was designed to address (Table 4). Moreover, Denver parents across a range of socio-economic statuses (using education level as a proxy for SES) benefited from the streamlined system.

Table 4. Predicted Probability of Parents Reporting Difficulties After SchoolChoice Implementation in Denver

	DIFFICULTY WITH PAPERWORK		DIFFICULTY WITH NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS		DIFFICULTY WITH DEADLINES	
	Before common enrollment	After common enrollment	Before common enrollment	After common enrollment	Before common enrollment	After common enrollment
HS or less	.10	.11	.22	.14	.28	.20
BA+	.16	.17	.15	.09	.17	.12

Notes: In our survey we asked parents to tell us about their most recent experience enrolling their child in a new school. Naturally our sample included 281 parents who enrolled their child before and 219 parents who enrolled their child after DPS implemented the common SchoolChoice application. This table compares the predicted probabilities for these responses of these two sets of parents controlling also for age, race, and the special education status.

The focus group data mirrored the results shown in Table 4. Denver parents rarely criticized the mechanics of the SchoolChoice process: as one parent explained through a translator, “The advantage of [SchoolChoice] is that you do not have to go to every school to fill out an application. You have the option [to list more schools] in that same application.”

New Orleans parents, however, were divided about the benefits of OneApp. Survey results suggest parents in New Orleans who enrolled their child in school using the OneApp reported difficulty with multiple applications and deadlines *more* frequently than did parents who enrolled their child before the OneApp.²⁷ This is true for both high and low SES parents (Table 5).

Table 5. Difficulties Increase With the OneApp in New Orleans

	DIFFICULTY WITH PAPERWORK		DIFFICULTY WITH NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS		DIFFICULTY WITH DEADLINES	
	Before common enrollment	After common enrollment	Before common enrollment	After common enrollment	Before common enrollment	After common enrollment
HS or less	.16	.17	.22	.29	.25	.32
BA+	.10	.11	.14	.19	.22	.28

Notes: In our survey we asked parents to tell us about their most recent experience enrolling their child in a new school. Naturally our sample included 344 parents who enrolled their child before and 160 parents who enrolled their the child after the RSD implemented the common OneApp application. This table compares the predicted probabilities for these responses of these two sets of parents controlling also for age, race, and the special education status.

The New Orleans focus groups data and our interviews with school administrators provide some clues about why the results in New Orleans run counter to what we might expect. When parents and school leaders in New Orleans talk about OneApp, they point out that the new system imposed a process on an informal and ad hoc approach to enrollment that generally “worked” for the families we interviewed.

When New Orleans parents in our focus groups compared their experiences with OneApp to their prior experiences, many said things were easier, if not always clear, in the past—they used to just go to a school to enroll or enter the lottery. When the school didn’t require a lottery, parents could enroll at any point before or even after the school year started. One principal, in describing his prior recruitment process, explained that many parents would enroll when he or his staff canvased the neighborhood. He said, “We would sit in someone’s house or apartment, you’d pitch the school, fill out the enrollment packet and it’s done—high five it’s done.”

By contrast, the OneApp process requires parents to attend to enrollment decisions by February, six to seven months before their child’s first day of school. Parents wait, without any guarantee of a seat, until late March or April to find out if they are matched to their school of choice. If they are happy with their match, they then register for the school. If they are not, they enter subsequent lottery rounds with additional material and deadlines. The demands on their time and anxiety in the process seemed to them to be far greater than in previous years.

For many parents, the OneApp introduced puzzling materials and procedures; it required them to start their decision-making process much sooner than before (seven months before the start of school). Indeed, for its first two years, hundreds of families missed the primary OneApp window because they were not prepared to start the process so early. In 2013, after adjustments to the system ensured that late enrolling students completed the OneApp, about 2,400 of the roughly 11,000 applicants nevertheless waited until the second or third round to submit their first application. When we asked parents in New Orleans to give advice to a friend about how to successfully enroll a child in New Orleans schools, the most common response we heard was, “Give yourself a lot of time.”

Parents want more tailored and rich information on schools. Even though parents in both cities described using the school guides to inform their choices, they said the guides did not do enough to help them choose the best school for their child. For many parents, understanding a school’s performance level was only a first step; they still needed to weigh the school’s location and the overall environment in their decision. One parent aptly summarized the sentiments of many when she said:

“You look at how the school is rated, but also at your possibilities, how far you can go to bring them there, the school schedules. There’s a lot of things that you have to think about regarding where to put your kids.”

We analyzed Denver parents’ ranking of choices on their child’s applications to get a more systematic look at the complex decision factors parents balance when they pick a school. The analysis allowed us to look at how different school characteristics—including performance, distance from home, student body—factored into parents’ preferences. See Box 2 for more detail on the analytic model.

Box 2. Modeling Denver Parents' Preferences From Application Data

We model parents' preferences using a series of rank-ordered logit models.²⁸ We begin by matching every student who participated in SchoolChoice to every public school in the district (including those *not* listed by their parents on the application) that contains the student's grade level and carries no obvious restrictions (for example, boys are not matched to the city's all-girl school, the Girls Athletic Leadership School). We then look at what school characteristics are important to parents as they select and rank schools on their applications. While many characteristics likely matter to parents, we focus on those that prior research has shown to be particularly important and those that we can measure given the data we have. These characteristics include school quality (measured with school-level standardized math test scores), proximity (measured by the distance in miles between a student's home and the school), and student composition (measured by the proportion of a school that is non-white, and its squared term).²⁹ We also look at whether parents want their children to remain at their current school.

While these kinds of models help us understand which characteristics of a school are important to parents, we cannot directly look at the effect of students' own traits on the schools that they choose. However, since we expect that parents look for a good fit between characteristics of the school and characteristics of their children, we include them in two ways. First, we include an interaction between a student's own math test score and the school's average math test score to allow for the possibility that parents will seek to maximize school fit by finding a school that better matches their student's own ability. Second, we estimate the models separately for white, Hispanic, and black students to see whether what parents value about schools varies systematically by race/ethnicity.³⁰

The results (Table 6) show that school performance is a powerful predictor of whether or not a parent will put a school at the top of his or her list (positive estimates in the table imply an increase in parent preference for a school with that characteristic; negative estimates imply a lower preference). While this is perhaps unsurprising, what is interesting is that Hispanic and black parents place relatively higher importance on school quality than do white parents. Furthermore, parents of children with higher math tests are particularly likely to choose a high-performing school, likely in an effort to match the needs and abilities of their children. Table 6 also shows that all parents prefer schools closer to home, although black parents seem to be less deterred by distance than Hispanic and white parents. Finally, parents prefer schools with some degree of racial diversity. However, white parents request schools with lower diversity than do Hispanic and black parents.

Table 6. Denver Parents Weigh Many Factors When Setting Their Preferences

	WHITE	HISPANIC	BLACK
School average math score	0.97	1.39	1.05
Distance from home (miles)	-0.53	-0.54	-0.35
Percent non-white	11.75	6.66	13.57
Percent non-white ²	-10.57	-3.41	-10.28
Last year's school (1=yes)	1.93	2.28	1.90
Student's score x school score	0.46	0.27	0.27
N students	3,563	10,613	2,614

Notes: Results are from rank-ordered logit models. All coefficients are significant at $p < 0.001$.

Denver parents are markedly similar to parents in New Orleans in terms of what they want from schools. Harris, Larsen, and Zimmerman provide a similar but more elaborate analysis of application data in New Orleans.³¹ Like Denver families, these authors found that when they make decisions about how to rank schools, New Orleans families across the socio-economic spectrum want schools that are both nearby and high quality.

In our focus groups and interviews, parents acknowledged that what happens in schools and how a child responds to a school in terms of the culture and relationships—factors impossible to provide in a school guide—mattered to them at least as much as the performance rating listed in the parent guide. As one parent in Denver explained through a translator:

"This [school guide] is more about school quality and information about school quality—what they could practically put on a piece of paper. But once you visit the school and see the environment that surrounds it, it's like way different."

Tensions between school performance, reasonable travel times, the school environment, and parents' interest in balancing a variety of other factors (including extracurricular activities and sports, the diversity of the student body, school cultures, the curriculum, and the amount of testing) all made choosing a school very difficult. In the end, most of the parents we spoke with said they struggled to get the information they needed to make the "right choice" for their child.

In particular, parents said they wanted more information about the school culture, the relationship between adults and students and among students, the approach teachers take in the classroom, and how their own child might react to the school's environment. Parents said they searched for this information by reaching out to friends and family who knew their child and had experienced schools in the city.³² They also said that the best source of information was a school visit, which gave them a chance to "get a feel for a place" from the school's faculty and staff. Among Denver parents responding to our survey, the percent of parents reporting that they visited schools when making a school choice increased from 79 to 86 percent after the implementation of SchoolChoice; and, in both cities, parents identified school visits as the most important source of information (though we did not find that surveyed parents in New Orleans increased their school visits after the implementation of the OneApp). Finally, parents said that they wanted more information from their child's current and former teachers to help them choose a school. And yet, system leaders in Denver and New Orleans indicated that only those schools that fed into other networks routinely discussed future school options with their students or their parents. Of the 12 school leaders we spoke with, only one (a school leader in a network) described systematic efforts to discuss future schools with students exiting their school.

Parents misunderstand the matching algorithm. Although the common enrollment system aims to simplify enrollment for parents, we found evidence that some parents misunderstand how the system works, often to their own disadvantage. For example, there is an optimal strategy for listing and ranking schools when applying for transitional grades. In Denver, where students have a default school, they should list, in order of preference and up to a maximum of five schools, any schools they prefer to their default school. In New Orleans, where students do not have a default school, students should list, in order of preference and up to a maximum of eight schools, any schools that they prefer to any other schools participating in the OneApp.³³

However, data in Denver and New Orleans suggest that parents typically do not list the maximum number of choices.³⁴ As Figure 1 shows, most parents in both cities listed three or fewer schools on their applications. Of course in Denver, some of these parents may stop short of five choices because they prefer their default school.³⁵ In New Orleans parents may stop short of eight schools because they are truly indifferent between all unranked schools. Still, when parents do not list the maximum choices, they risk not matching to any school; doing so without a preferred default school or true indifference to the remaining unranked schools is risky. Figure 2 illustrates this finding by showing that only 93 percent of parents in Denver who listed just one school on the SchoolChoice form received a match, while over 97 percent of parents who listed the full five choices were matched to a school on their list.

Figure 1. Number of Choices Made by Common Enrollment Participants in Transition Grades in Denver and New Orleans

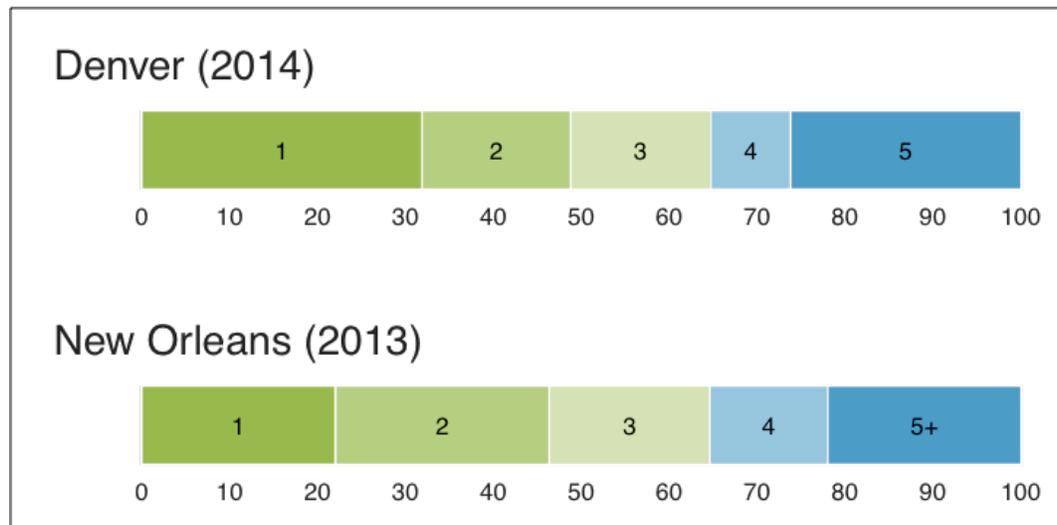
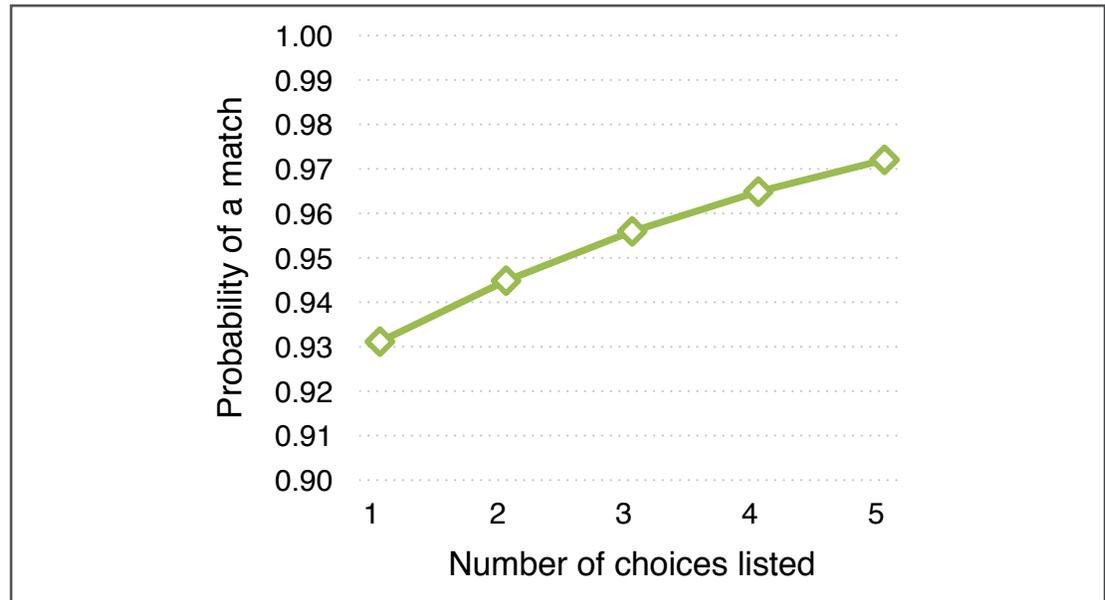


Figure 2. Differences in Match Rates for Students Applying for Transition Grades by Number of Choices Listed in Denver



It is hard to know from these data why parents are not listing the full number of schools allowed by the form. The designers of the systems feared that parents might not list the full number if they did not understand the consequences of completely filling out the choice form. As one of the original architects of the system in Denver said, “I’m not sure they [parents] got the message that you can make aspirational choices and it doesn’t harm you.”

Our conversations with parents suggest that some parents simply don’t find enough schools that they think are worth listing, a point we raise again later in this paper. Often, however, we learned that some parents listed fewer choices because they were trying to strategically “outwit” the matching algorithm. Parents in both cities said that they had heard that listing the maximum number of choices was the best strategy, but few of them could reconcile this message with their assumptions about how the system worked. They assumed that “the system” was somehow gaming *their* preferences, and so they decided to list only one or two schools because they feared that listing more schools would send a signal to “the system” that they were happy attending a low-demand school. In other words, they worried that if they showed “the system” that they would be willing to accept a low-demand school—even if it was their fourth or fifth choice—“the system” would skip over their first choices and just give them the low-demand school to fill seats.³⁶

HIGHLIGHTING CONCERNS

Depersonalization. Despite its advantages, common enrollment in both cities highlighted problems that have potentially important implications for its future, beginning with parents’ perception that the process is unduly bureaucratic and depersonalized. As the school administrators in New Orleans reported, enrolling students in a school no longer happens in a family’s living room. Parents are no longer assured that if they visit a school and develop a relationship with the faculty, administration, or staff, that their child will be assured a seat in that school. Of course, in some ways, that is the point of the policy: cities implement common enrollment with the intent of moving away from informal and ad hoc procedures because these practices tend to favor well-connected families.³⁶

Nevertheless, in interviews and focus groups, parents in both cities lamented how little the system seemed to consider their unique circumstances. They felt that their struggles to find transportation, to find their way out of low-performing local schools and into better-performing schools in other neighborhoods, or to find a school that will match their child's unique needs, should all somehow be part of the decision to match their child to a school. Parents routinely referred to “the computer” as making the final decision—not them. As one parent from Denver said:

“The first thing I’m not in agreement with and that I don’t like is, “I choose my school.” (A local motto for school choice in the city.) At no time do you choose your school. Here you have to put five choices and in the end you’re given the school that I-don’t-know-who chooses.”

Some parents bristled at the notion that the enrollment decision came down to a lottery.³⁷ A parent in New Orleans summarized the sentiment heard across both cities when she said:

“So you’re basically sitting up there like you’ve got a lottery ticket, just waiting? This is education you’re talking about. It shouldn’t be that way.”

Lotteries, of course, are not unique to common enrollment systems and many parents in these cities participated in school lotteries in years past. One important distinction parents seem to make between common enrollment and previous lotteries is that the final verdict on where their child will attend seems to come from a distant computer. Although parents know that they stated their preferences on the application, they don’t see themselves as actually making the final choice for their child.

A sense of false hope. Perhaps more worrisome than the sense of depersonalization that can accompany common enrollment is the perception that the system offers parents, especially those who did not receive their preferred match, false hope. More than anything else we learned from the early implementation of these policies, the false hope that can come with a second-best outcome might threaten the policy’s perceived legitimacy. As a parent in Denver commented:

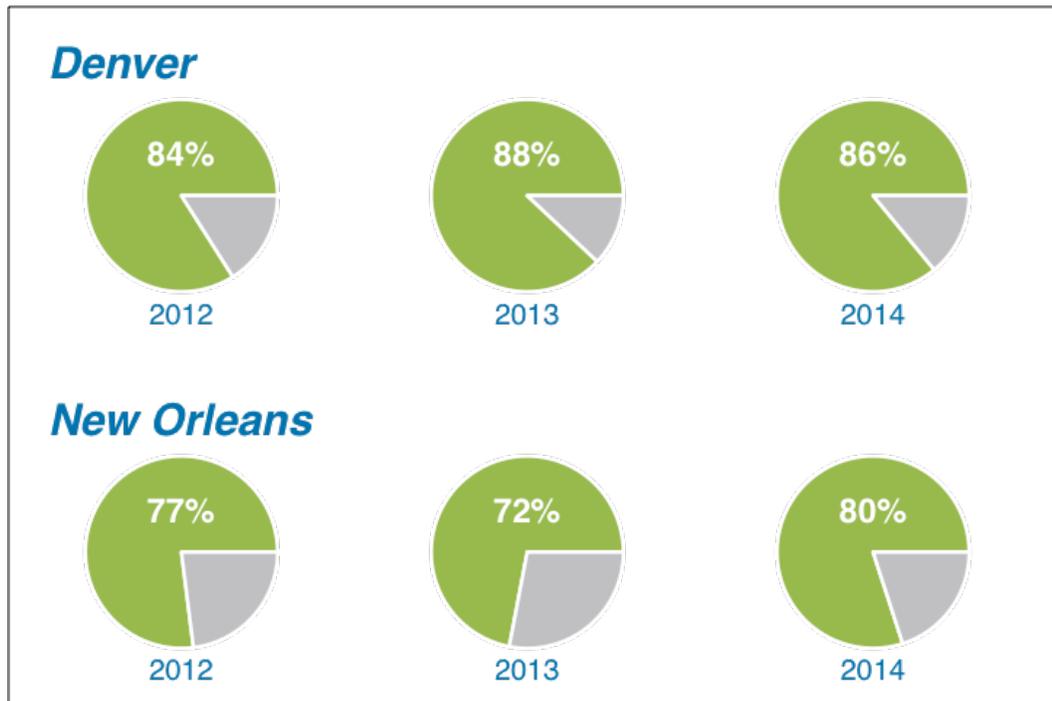
“So they make us believe that we actually have a choice and we’re involved in the process of picking our children’s school, but ultimately, if the computer didn’t pick your lottery, it doesn’t matter. It’s a machine that decides.”

The chance any student has to get into a school is determined by the priorities set by schools and the number of students demanding any given school. Still, when parents did not get what they hoped for and felt this sense of frustration and false hope, they questioned the value of school choice policies in general (rather than demand more good school choices). A Denver parent, frustrated that the choice system matched his son to a school he saw as low quality and unsafe contended that he really didn’t have a choice at all:

“It’s a raffle. We don’t have anything to do with it ... They’re not giving you the choice that you wanted, they should leave you where you are, not take you away from your place and send you somewhere they want to. Because it’s not ‘school choice.’ It’s their choice.”

It is hard to say how common these sentiments are among all parents in the two cities. A large share of families in both cities, after all, typically receives one of their top two choices. So only a small share of families probably experience the disappointment illustrated in the above quote (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Percent of Students in Denver and New Orleans Matched to Their First, Second, or Third Choice by Application Year



Notes: Figure shows the percent of students across all grade levels that were matched to one of their top three choice schools in each year and for each city. For Denver, we calculated the match rate for DPS students using the raw application data, and validated these calculations against published numbers provided by DPS (available [here](#)). For New Orleans, we report the match rates of students in the main round of the OneApp process found in the RSD's February 2015 Annual Report (available [here](#)). We rely on these published data in New Orleans for two reasons: while we were able to validate our own calculated match rates against the RSD's published numbers for 2013, we were unable to do so for 2012; additionally, using the published numbers allows us to show the match rates for the most recent year (2014), for which we do not yet have data.

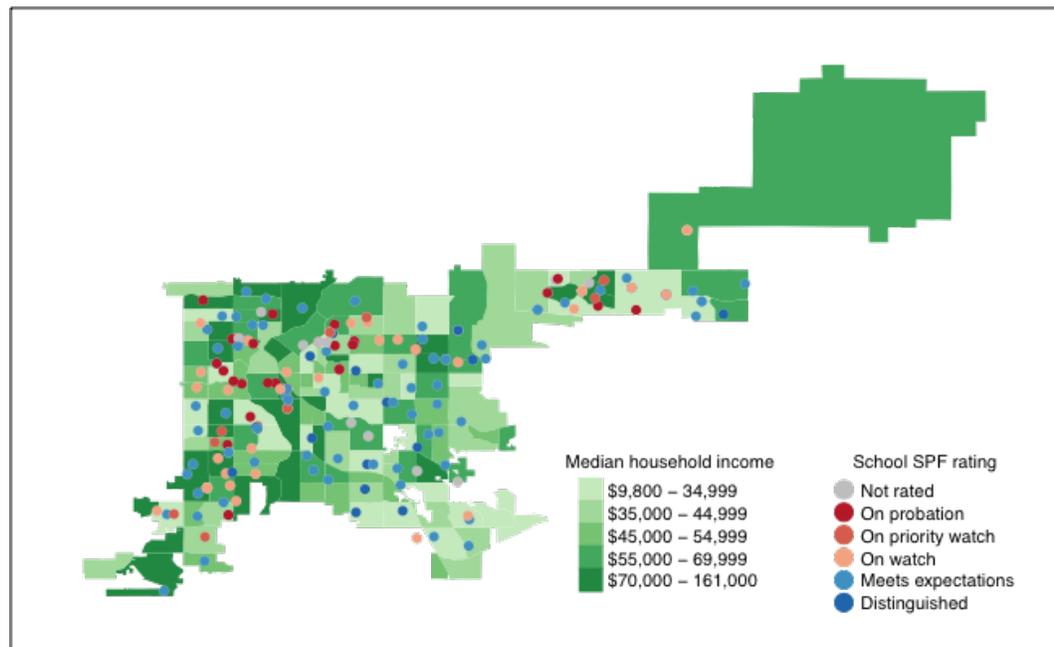
Supply does not meet demand. Regardless of whether a small share of parents experience a sense of false hope as a result of getting a third- or fourth-best choice, our focus group and interview data suggest that, for a broader number of parents, the experience of choosing a school under common enrollment—being encouraged to consider all of their options, reviewing the comprehensive guides, carefully crafting their preferences—revealed to parents how few good schools were available, particularly for families living in the less affluent neighborhoods of each city.

As one parent in Denver said, “I feel like if you don’t live in a good area, you don’t have many choices. The school I have here across the street [from my house] has always been bad ... and it’s still just as bad.” Likewise, a parent in New Orleans said she still had to fight to find a good school for her child under the new system. “I have to try so hard to get into a good school,” she said. “This [common enrollment] would be great,” said another New Orleans parent, “if we had better choices.”

These parents’ complaints about the uneven supply of schools are understandable when we consider how school quality is distributed across the cities and parents’ reluctance to have their children travel long distances to school. The map in Figure 4, for example, shows the locations and performance ratings for every traditional public school and charter school in Denver. Ratings range from “distinguished” (blue dots) to “on probation” (red dots). The green shading on the map shows median household income in different parts of the city.

As the map shows, red and orange dots (schools that are “on probation” or “on priority watch”) are clustered in the Northwest part of the city. If we were to break out the data out by elementary, middle, and high schools, we would see that the Northwest and Southwest regions of the city have zero high schools with a “distinguished” rating. The map shows an opposite picture in the Southeastern part of the city, where there are clusters of blue and green dots: schools rated as “meets expectations” or “distinguished.” Given the economic and ethnic distribution of families across the city, this map of school quality means that low-income students must travel 0.34 of a mile further to a high-performing school than their affluent counterparts. Hispanic students must travel 0.74 of a mile further, and black students must travel 1.22 miles further than white students to reach a high-performing school.³⁸

Figure 4. The Uneven Distribution of School Quality in Denver



Notes: The shaded green sections of the map are Census tracts, color-coded by median household income for 2012 using the Five Year ACS estimates (darker colors represent higher income levels). The School Performance Framework (SPF) rating is based on the 2013 rating. The SPF ratings, which come from 2013, are publically available on the Denver Public Schools website.

Administrative data from Denver show that parents who participate in SchoolChoice generally want to enroll their children in the highest rated schools in the city. In 2014, for example, eight of the ten most-requested middle schools and seven of the ten most-requested high schools were rated either “meets expectations” or “distinguished.” Seventy-seven percent of high schools in the city, however, had fewer requests than they had open spots (27 schools).

Again, the enrollment system did not determine the available supply of schools and could only indirectly shape supply by informing system leaders. This example illustrates how parents’ experience with common enrollment depends crucially on the how well the entire system of schools serves families.

Missed opportunities. In theory, school and system leaders should be able to use the data collected through a common enrollment system to gather information about demand for

schools and use that information to manage the supply of schools. System-level leaders in both cities reported that they consistently used enrollment data to inform their long-term decisions about where to open new schools and where to intervene in struggling schools. In some cases they can add some new capacity in high-demand schools within a year. But, typically, new schools, replications, and interventions at the system level take years to scale up and have impact.

In theory, individual schools could provide a quicker response to the demand data: low-demand schools, for example, could adjust their academic programs to meet families' needs and interests, and high-demand schools might expand their capacity to serve more students. Our interviews with school leaders suggest that these school-level responses are not happening, at least in the short run. Most often, the school administrators we interviewed reported that they rarely considered the demand data when they made decisions about their school programs. They said the data either did not provide them enough information to apply in their schools, or they had just never considered using it in the first place. When we spoke with administrators in high-demand schools in Denver and New Orleans, they said that the demand data they collected generally confirmed their existing plans to replicate (or encouraged them to consider replicating), but few indicated in our interviews that the data would drive any of their near-term decisions about what to do.

Two school administrators in our sample—one in Denver and one in New Orleans—identified broader issues that made it difficult for them to respond to the demand data. The director of enrollment in a low-demand New Orleans school suggested that low-demand status could lead to a downward spiral. She contends that each year, her low-demand school is increasingly attended by the city's highest-need students, making it very difficult to change the school's program.³⁹

In contrast, a principal in a low-demand, average-performing Denver elementary school sees the potential to make programmatic changes but feels other systemic policies constrain her action. This principal described how the district's transportation and prekindergarten policies undermined her marketing and recruitment efforts, which she launched in response to the low demand for her school. In most of the city, and in the region served by this school, DPS provides transportation to students' assigned schools and to all students in special education. This principal noted that few families with children lived near her school, leaving her to compete for students in apartment complexes in an adjacent neighborhood where students had free transportation to another school. She further noted that a district pre-K program housed in her building occupies a disproportionate number of classrooms due to its smaller class sizes, though many of these students are unlikely to attend her school for K-5 (they won't have transportation to the school in kindergarten). Ultimately, she felt that these district policies left her demand response moot.

That the central office is applying demand data to central decision-making is encouraging and could yield dividends over time for parents. But school-level responses appear so far to be a missed opportunity.



Conclusion

Leaders in Denver and New Orleans had good reasons for implementing a common enrollment system. Denver needed to streamline and make consistent a complex system that forced parents to navigate dozens of enrollment procedures and allowed many students to enroll in schools outside of the standard lottery and transfer processes.

New Orleans faced similar issues: a need to simplify the enrollment process and ensure that all students were given a fair chance to enroll in any of the city's schools. Both cities' investments in common enrollment and related information systems benefited parents and the broader system in several ways. Leaders felt more confident about the fairness of the process that matched students to schools under the new system. In Denver, parents found enrolling their children under common enrollment much more manageable than it was in the previous decentralized system. And parents in both cities clearly referred to school performance indicators when making choices about where to send their children to school.

At the same time, parents in both cities still faced difficulties when choosing a school for their children. For example, when parents must opt-in to a choice system, as is the case in Denver, more advantaged parents may be more likely to participate in common enrollment than less advantaged parents. Although common enrollment creates a more rational process for matching students to schools, parents can still struggle to understand how the matching works and, as a result, participate in ways that reduce their odds of actually receiving a desired match. And although parent guides provide basic school descriptions and performance information, parents may still want more personalized and detailed information to help them make their decisions about schools. Of course, some of these problems are not particularly surprising. Parent participation in choice systems can reflect underlying differences in parents' resources and opportunities. Understanding and using information for complex decision-making is a challenge for everyone. But other problems facing parents under common enrollment are more unexpected: the way the system can create a depersonalized experience for some parents, and the false hope that parents can feel when they get third-best or fourth-best matches.

To be fair, it is still too early to judge common enrollment based on parents' experiences or the quality of schools available in Denver and New Orleans. Leaders in each of these cities are well aware of the current issues. A variety of efforts are underway to help parents

become more informed and confident choosers, and to manage the supply of schools with the data provided by the enrollment system.

Nevertheless, at this point it is probably safe to say that cities need to think about common enrollment in the broader context of their city’s system of schools. Implementing common enrollment cannot (and never promised to) resolve all of the challenges in making choices or make the process feel fairer. The choice experience is about more than application forms and deadlines. Parents must balance complex concerns, and families face different opportunities and have different resources to seek out opportunities. Whether they feel they’ve had a “real shot” at a “good school” will determine how fair the system is for them. To address these concerns, cities pursuing common enrollment systems will also want to supplement their new process with targeted additional efforts.

Help Parents Understand and Trust the Matching Process

None of the parents we spoke with could explain to us how the matching algorithm worked. Both Denver and New Orleans leaders aggressively conveyed the optimal choosing strategy to parents, and many of the parents we spoke with had received the message. Parents reported to us that they were told to provide the full number of choices in their true order of preference. The problem was that few parents actually trusted this message. Instead, they commonly pursued strategies that matched their own inaccurate explanations of how the match worked.

To be fair, the match is complicated and not necessarily intuitive. It is not enough to tell parents *how* to choose. Simple interactive tools that allow parents to engage in mock lotteries may go a long way in helping to unseat parents’ misconceptions and may reduce the sense that a distant (and unsympathetic) computer is making the decision about their child’s school.

Offer More Diverse Information and Help for Choosers

A key challenge for cities interested in common enrollment is to personalize the choice process and provide more customized support for parents. Common enrollment is a technical solution to making a fair match between parents and schools, but picking a school is not just a technical problem for parents. Picking a school is a complex decision that involves a range of criteria and is shaped by a family’s individual circumstances and available options. Denver, New Orleans, and other cities interested in common enrollment need to recognize that, in addition to the technical solutions provided by common enrollment, parents also need more customized supports for making school choice decisions. Examples include enlisting teachers to counsel their students about the transition to middle or high school, investing in school choice counselors, launching an enrollment hotline, and providing on-going support and training for school-based personnel, who are often parents’ main source of guidance on school choice.

Cities may consider collecting information on the climate of schools. Excellent Schools Detroit, in partnership with Great Schools, provides data on school climate characterized as the Five Essential Supports for School Improvement.⁴⁰ City partners may seek ways to develop and manage “crowd-sourcing” opportunities similar to Yelp. In each case, districts and their city partners will need to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of different approaches (e.g., direct counseling is expensive, but perhaps effective) as well as the mix of information they provide (e.g., “objective” measures versus promotional materials). In the end, no single approach will do, so leaders will need to experiment with a suite of interventions—some more targeted than others—to serve the diverse needs of their parent community.



Attend to School Quality at the System Level: Growing and Distributing High-Quality Schools Across the City

A second key challenge for cities interested in common enrollment is to improve the quality of the available school options. An important feature of common enrollment is that it clearly reveals the distribution of high- and low-performing schools in a city (and related differences in the demand for schools) giving system leaders valuable information to improve the portfolio of schools. But common enrollment isn't designed to directly increase the number of high-quality schools in a city, especially in the short term.

Choice and competition might improve schools over the long run, but in the near term, cities interested in common enrollment must recognize that they need a complementary and intense strategy for increasing the supply of quality schools. That strategy might, for example, involve more aggressive oversight of chronically low-performing schools (including school closure for the worst schools) and a quality-focused new school agenda that preferences the strongest proposals and expansions.

This strategy could also include enlisting schools to be more responsive to parent demand by using the application data. Both oversight agencies and organizations supporting the work of local schools should help schools analyze the demand data for their schools, consider what parents' demand implies for their future plans to expand or replicate, and determine which types of programs (academic and extracurricular) would better serve parents' and students' interests. Whatever a city's approach to improvement, cities need to work aggressively to make sure parents have better choices or they risk losing families' confidence in the value of having a choice at all.

Making School Choice Work: Building the Research Agenda

The city school landscape is far more complex than ever before. Today, many cities have thriving charter school sectors alongside school districts, and families can choose a school beyond what exists in their neighborhood. This diversity and choice is meant to serve families by giving them more options, but it has also meant that they face and must navigate many different rules for accessing their choices.

City leaders have only recently started to consider ways to help families make sense of this complexity. The common enrollment systems in Denver and New Orleans are pioneering efforts to bring some coherence and transparency to parents. Each of these cities learned many lessons along the way and they continue to hone and build off of their early successes. We are fortunate to have this window into their work.

Understanding how to best take advantage of common enrollment for the larger effort to make school choice work for families is still a work in progress. Leaving this study, we see a significant need for city education leaders to better understand: 1) the implications of specific design elements, such as schools' criteria for priority enrollment, assuring students a neighborhood assignment, and individual timelines for applications; 2) how to support parents in making choices in a cost-effective and sustainable way; and 3) how to make more productive use of the enrollment data. See Box 3 for a sample of proposed research questions. Some of this work is already underway at CRPE and by our colleagues in research centers across the country. Still, considerable work remains to be done for common enrollment to have its greatest benefit to families and school systems. With this research agenda in mind and a new wave of common enrollment implementers on the horizon, opportunities abound for significant progress in making school choice work for all families.

Building a Deeper Understanding of Common Enrollment: A Research Agenda

A comprehensive research agenda will help us better understand the implications and impact of different design elements in common enrollment systems, how to support parents to use these systems, and how to leverage the data in these systems to improve a city's portfolio of public schools. A sample of key questions to explore in each of these strands of work may include:

Understanding the implications of specific design elements

1. What is the probability that each student will have access to the city's high performing and specialized schools, given existing school priority structures? How do a student's chances change as school priorities are modified and depending on the availability of a default school?
2. How does shifting the application deadline earlier or later affect who participates in school choice and why?
3. How do different approaches to mid-year enrollment and transfers affect the ability to match students to a desired school?
4. How do different approaches to placing students with special learning needs affect parents' satisfaction with school choice, the fit between students and schools, and the outcomes of students with special needs?

Better supporting parents to make school choices

1. What support strategies help parents synthesize available school information to find the best environment to meet their child's specific needs?
2. How should family support be targeted to meet the needs of specific groups of students, especially students with special needs, English language learners, and students who have experienced disciplinary actions, such as repeated suspension or expulsion?
3. How can cities leverage a range of parent support providers already embedded and trusted in parent communities, such as other public school parents, leaders in faith, neighborhood and ethnic communities, and social service agencies?
4. What do parent support strategies cost and what revenue sources are available to sustainable them?

Making better use of the data provided by common enrollment

1. What capacity and support do school administrators need to make better use of the enrollment data during and after the application cycle?
2. What is the likelihood that a low-demand school will improve and under what conditions is such a turnaround possible?
3. What is the relationship between school demand and the demand to replicate a school in a subsequent year?

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ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this paper we use the word parent in the interest of being succinct, but recognize that other guardians are often responsible for choosing a school and otherwise parenting a child.
2. On challenges facing the least advantaged parents, see Courtney A. Bell, *All Choices Created Equal? How Good Parents Select “Failing” Schools* (New York, NY: National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, 2005); Jennifer Jellison Holme, “Buying Homes, Buying Schools: School Choice and the Social Construction of School Quality,” *Harvard Educational Review* 72, no. 2 (2002): 177-205; Erin McNamara Horvat, Elliot B. Weininger, and Annette Lareau, “From Social Ties to Social Capital: Class Differences in the Relations Between Schools and Parent Networks,” *American Educational Research Journal* 40, no. 2 (2003): 319-351; Mark Schneider, “Information and Choice in Educational Privatization” in *Privatizing Education: Can the School Marketplace Deliver Freedom of Choice, Efficiency, Equity, and Social Cohesion?* ed. Henry M. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group, 2001).
3. After the first year of implementation the Orleans Parish School Board voted to include its schools in the OneApp. As of spring 2015, only a small number of long-running charter schools continue to maintain their own enrollment procedures. These schools are expected to join the OneApp when their charters are renewed at some point in the future.
4. For example, see John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1990); Joseph L. Bast and Herbert J. Walberg, *Ten Principles of School Choice* (Chicago, IL: The Heartland Institute, 2004).
5. For a recent overview of the theory of school choice, see Susanna Loeb, Jon Valant, and Matt Kasman, “Increasing Choice in the Market for Schools: Recent Reforms and Their Effects on Student Achievement,” *National Tax Journal* 64, no. 1 (2011): 141-163.
6. Interestingly, a recent longitudinal study of charter schools in Texas found some long-term improvements in the sector between 2001 and 2011: see Patrick L. Baude et al., *The Evolution of Charter School Quality, NBER Working Paper No. 20645* (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2014): 1-45
7. For example, see Bell, *All Choices Created Equal?*; Holme, “Buying Homes, Buying Schools;” Horvat et al., “From Social Ties to Social Capital;” Schneider, “Information and Choice in Educational Privatization.”
8. Ensuring the integrity of enrollment procedures is no small matter. In New Orleans, for example, the Southern Poverty Law Center filed a lawsuit against the Recovery School District alleging that the district’s charter- and direct-run schools systematically denied access to high needs and special needs students. Analyses in Denver prior to common enrollment showed that nearly a third of student enrollments could not be explained by any official process: see Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice, *An Assessment of Enrollment and Choice in Denver Public Schools* (New York, NY: Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice, 2010). The centralized matching process also prevents students from holding seats in multiple schools.
9. Other places, including New York and Boston, have enrollment systems that feature common applications and the simultaneous match algorithm that cover only district-run schools.
10. A 2013 50-state policy analysis by the Education Commission of the States shows that

Colorado is one of 23 states with some degree of mandatory inter-district choice policy; see *Open Enrollment 50 State Report*, www.ecs.org.

11. Innovation schools were first authorized through the Innovation Schools Act of 2008; Colorado Department of Education, Innovation Schools, www.cde.state.co.us.
12. The RSD was established by state legislation referred to locally as Act 9. A detailed account of the law and transition of Orleans Parish School Board schools to the RSD can be found in Debra Vaughan et al., *Transforming Public Education in New Orleans: The Recovery School District: 2003–2011* (New Orleans, LA: Cowen Institute, 2012).
13. Stacy Teicher Khadaroo, “After Katrina, How Charter Schools Helped Recast New Orleans Education,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 29, 2010.
14. Paul Pastorek, “In Katrina’s Wake, New Orleans’ Schools Reinvent Themselves Around Competition,” *The Seattle Times*, January 31, 2012.
15. Louisiana has five types of charter schools. Type 2 charter schools are new or conversion schools that are authorized by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.
16. A potential limitation of this design relates to recall bias. While all respondents were asked the survey questions in March 2014, they were recalling their choosing experiences from different points in time. Those whose most recent choosing experience occurred prior to the implementation of common enrollment were, by definition, recalling experiences from an earlier time period than those who were answering the questions about their choosing experiences under the common enrollment system. However, it is not immediately clear in what direction this would bias the responses. It is possible that both positive and negative experiences would be remembered less clearly for those answering the survey questions from the period prior to the common enrollment’s implementation. At the same time, common enrollment systems were introduced quite recently in both Denver and New Orleans, so we expect this bias to be minimal.
17. At the time, students could be assigned to a non-neighborhood school by participating in the lottery, being granted an approved administrative transfer (the transfer process stipulated by No Child Left Behind), or being a sibling of a child who already attends the school.
18. The Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice, *An Assessment of Enrollment and Choice in Denver Public Schools*.
19. It is possible that an explanation exists for the small number of school assignments we cannot trace. For example, students may have been approved for a transfer. We, however, do not have access to information on the nature of these placements.
20. Schools are advised to request matches for more students than they intend to enroll in order to account for the fact that some number of students will ultimately not enroll in local schools, or will seek an alternative to their matched school in subsequent rounds, or, in Denver’s case, will gain entry to schools in which they have been waitlisted. It is possible that this shortage was also due to a number of schools not receiving enough requests to match the number of open seats.
21. The decision to publish an official guide from the district as opposed to supporting a nonprofit effort is an important policy decision. On the one hand, the district has access to a great deal of school data and can be held accountable for the guide’s contents. On the other hand, the independent nonprofit may be more easily viewed as an unbiased

information provider. New Orleans parents did express slightly more skepticism about the content of the guide than Denver parents but our data are not able to provide clear evidence on whether one approach or the other is better-received by families.

22. Previous research suggests that parents in Denver may not know exactly what these assessments of quality mean or imply about the performance of the school, though our analysis shows that they clearly understand the relative ranking implied by the colors; see Mary Klute, *Understanding How Parents Choose Schools: An Analysis of Denver's SchoolChoice Form Questions* (Denver, CO: Buechner Institute for Governance, 2012).
23. The district encourages parents interested in their guaranteed school to complete the form listing their guaranteed school as their only choice. The applicant data indicate that many in fact follow this instruction.
24. For many of our analyses, including those related to participation rates presented here, we define transition grades in both Denver and New Orleans as kindergarten, 6th grade, and 9th grade. The notion of “transition grades” is more complicated in New Orleans, where schools are typically comprised of different grade spans than in Denver. In practice, 6th grade is not a transition grade for many students in New Orleans given the large number of K–8 schools. While we use our consistent definition of transition grades for both locales in the analyses presented throughout this report, we also ran each of our analyses for New Orleans constraining our transition grade definition to just kindergarten and 9th grade, and the results are substantively similar.
25. Affluent students are those who are not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.
26. Again, these results are similar if we restrict our analysis to just students entering kindergarten or 9th grade.
27. It is important to remember that some schools did not participate in the OneApp in the initial year. Parents interested in applying to a non-participating school would still need to complete multiple applications.
28. See Paul D. Allison and Nicholas A. Christakis, “Logit Models for Sets of Ranked Items,” *Sociological Methodology* 24 (1994): 199–228; Justine S. Hastings, Thomas J. Kane, and Douglas O. Staiger, *Heterogeneous Preferences and the Efficacy of Public School Choice* (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2009).
29. For school quality, we also looked at ELA standardized scores, and the results were substantively similar.
30. Our focus here is on students’ race and performance as they interact with the school traits, given their salience to issues of fit and proximity to highly rated schools. We also looked at groups that categorize students by free and reduced-price lunch, special education, and English language learner status in addition to race, these will be presented in future publications.
31. Douglas Harris and Matthew Larsen (of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans) analyzed application data in a similar way as we analyzed the application data from Denver to arrive at these findings: Douglas N. Harris and Matthew F. Larsen, *What Schools Do Families Want (and Why)? School Demand and Information Before and After the New Orleans Post-Katrina School Reforms* (New Orleans, LA: Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, 2015).
32. Friends and family have long been known to be a trusted source for parents making school choices. See Annette Lareau, “Schools, Housing, and the Reproduction of Inequality,” in *Choosing Homes, Choosing Schools*, ed. Annette Lareau and Kimberly

- Goyette (New York, NY: Russell Sage, 2014): 169-206; see also Mark Schneider et al., 1997, “Networks to Nowhere: Segregation and Stratification in Networks of Information About Schools,” *American Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 4 (Oct. 1997): 1201-1223.
33. Students in New Orleans currently enrolled in schools and considering a transfer to another school before the end of their current school’s grade span (e.g., grade 5 in a K-8 school) retain a right to return to the school even if they request a new school with the OneApp. These students, therefore, can act as if they have a default school with an optimal strategy to list in order of preference as many schools as they prefer to their current school, up to a maximum of eight.
 34. This analysis is based on students entering transitional grades (kindergarten, 6th grade, or 9th grade). Results are similar if we restrict our analyses in New Orleans to students entering kindergarten or 9th grade only.
 35. While we cannot test this, given our data (since we cannot know which families in the data have a default school with which they would be satisfied), it is unlikely—because of the distribution of highly rated schools in either Denver or New Orleans—that all of those listing fewer than the full 5 or 8 schools would be satisfied with their default school.
 36. Unfortunately, this behavior stands to reinforce the original misunderstanding. Consider this following scenario: a parent is interested in two high-demand schools and lists them first and second on her child’s application. She does not want to list a third school, because she is worried it will undermine her chances of getting into her top two choices. But someone convinces her to list a third school anyway, because that is the optimal strategy. The reality is that she has a low chance of winning the lottery for her first two choices, and a relatively high chance of winning the lottery for the third choice. So the most likely result is that her child will match to the third choice, confirming her worst fear.
 37. Importantly, lotteries are not unique to common enrollment systems. At the same time, they may be more prevalent or more often encountered by parents since more families can apply to more schools given the centralized process of doing so.
 38. The policy to maintain a neighborhood-assigned school further deepens the disparate experiences of families. Recall that all students have an assigned neighborhood school. No matter the result of their lottery, families in affluent neighborhoods, which house the city’s highest scoring schools, can always default to their neighborhood option. By contrast, parents with low-scoring neighborhood-assigned schools must rely entirely on the outcome of the lottery if they want a high-scoring school.
 39. In reality, low-demand schools are more likely to be matched to students who have not completed the OneApp or did not match to more preferred schools. Notably, the RSD implemented a strategy to assure that all schools receive students mid-year so no schools will be overwhelmed with a disproportionate number of mid year transfer or enrollees.
 40. The Five Essential Supports for School Improvement are research-based features of schools with the capacity to make substantial school improvement. These supports include effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environment, and ambitious instruction, and are based on research by the Consortium for Chicago School Research. See Penny Bender Sebring et al., *The Essential Supports for School Improvement* (Chicago, IL: Consortium for Chicago School Research, 2006).

