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REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Finding a Great Fit: Improving the School Choice Process for Students with Disabilities

Lanya McKittrick, Robin Lake, Sivan Tuchman, and Travis Pillow

Center on Reinventing Public Education

Jon Valant

Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution
Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, Tulane University

Matthew Larsen

Assistant Professor of Economics, Lafayette College

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Introduction

Families with children with disabilities must constantly work to advocate for their children, find the school that provides the best fit, and assess whether educators are providing the right interventions. This can be exhausting and frustrating, especially when it comes on top of the unique demands of parenting a child with a disability. Add to that the reality of living in poverty—perhaps as a recent immigrant or with a limited education—and the challenges of guiding a child with disabilities through the education system can begin to feel overwhelming.

We wanted to learn how parents, including those in the circumstances described above, manage the school choice process, and how they can be better supported to advocate for their children and choose the best educational opportunities.

Public school choice, whether it comes in the form of charter schools, alternative programs in district schools, or other forms, increases the options and opportunities for such families to find a good fit. But it also creates new challenges as families must sort through their options and manage the process of applying to schools, all while still working to ensure their children have access to the services, supports, and challenging education to which they are entitled. In a previous study, one parent of a child with a disability told us why they chose a charter school: "The advocacy never stops, but it's always better to have options."

Two cities, New Orleans and Washington, D.C., exemplify both these opportunities and challenges. New Orleans has over the last 15 years become an all-choice system. Every public school in the city is now operated by a nonprofit serving as a charter management organization under a performance-based charter contract with the local school board, which provides oversight and support. Each individual school is subject to the same special education obligations under federal law as a traditional school district, such as providing a full continuum of placement options and ensuring appropriate specialized and trained staff. In Washington, D.C., public charter schools comprise about half of the city's public schools, and each charter network, like the district, is responsible for complying with federal special education laws. Because they are designated as local education agencies (LEA) under state law, each individual charter school is subject to the same special education obligations under federal law as a traditional school district: they must meet the needs of every enrolled student in the least restrictive environment possible, whether or not they have existing staff or program specializations in place. This creates a critical tension for charter schools in both cities. On one hand, they are expected to be more focused, outcomes oriented, and mission driven than school districts. On the other hand, they are expected to offer a broad range of programs and staffing expertise that districts typically offer through a combination of programs and specializations across a number of schools.

Although both cities have shown considerable academic improvement as choices have expanded, and while overcoming histories of dismal performance and corruption, they continue to strive for improved outcomes for students with disabilities. And both cities are known for thoughtful government oversight: neither city presumes to have improved special education so it functions well for every student. Both have struggled for decades to meet federal mandates and consent decrees for their district and charter schools, and have worked to increase quality special education options and to address issues of information and access, especially for families from low-income households.

We set out to study these two cities in order to identify ways they can continue to maximize opportunities and minimize challenges for families with children with disabilities—especially to help both communities improve their enrollment and information-sharing processes, with the understanding that a process is only as good as the choices available. Thus, we recognize that this work is an initial step and that the gateway to a choice system cannot be perfected as a process until families have meaningful choice as

illustrated by a diversity of strong special education programs. While school governance in both of these cities is fairly unique compared to other school systems around the country, we believe their experience can inform other cities' efforts to expand educational opportunities and improve the experience for families with children with disabilities.

To that end, we studied how parents of children with disabilities choose schools: what supports are available to them, and their experiences using these supports to navigate the school choice process. In each city we conducted:

1. A landscape analysis of services available to help parents of children with disabilities search for, select, and access resources in schools.
2. Focus groups with 27 parents (15 in D.C. and 12 in New Orleans) to discover how they used available resources in order to select schools to meet their children's needs.

More details on our research methodology can be found in Appendix B. We wanted to learn:

- What are parents looking for in schools?
- What information are they and aren't they getting?
- How are parents assessing whether a school is a good fit or not?
- What tradeoffs are they considering?

The next phase of research is to follow the experience of a smaller set of families throughout this school year to understand 1) how the reality of the school the family chose or were assigned fits with what they thought they were getting, and 2) how they navigate the school choice process.

We are also performing a complementary quantitative analysis that explores school choice preferences among families with students with disabilities in New Orleans (see Appendix A for preliminary findings), as well as the impact their choice decisions have on their children's educational trajectory.

Findings

From our initial interviews with parents and local observers, as well as the preliminary quantitative analysis of school preferences among families with children with disabilities in New Orleans, several clear themes emerged. These initial findings will inform later phases of our research. They also point to ways New Orleans and D.C.—and other "high-choice" cities—can better support students with disabilities and their families.

Across both cities, we heard three clear themes:

Lack of specialized expertise is a bigger barrier for families than the choice process. Because every charter school is expected to meet every student's needs, inclusion is the default approach to special education. However, families in both cities regularly experience schools that cannot meet their children's needs due to insufficient specialized expertise. As a result, families feel forced to choose between what they perceive as low-quality inclusion and specialized, segregated programs. Most expressed a clear preference for high-quality specialized programs and schools over poorly executed inclusion.

Families still need much more help finding the best fit, even as information and supports for the choice process have improved. Official information, such as school performance data, is too limited to allow families to assess how well schools are equipped to meet their children's needs. They want more sophisticated information about special education—such as staffing levels, areas of specialization, school culture, and parent involvement—to determine if the school can be trusted to effectively meet

those needs. Currently, parents perceive the burden of research falls mostly on them. In the absence of more detailed information, parents in New Orleans rely on overall school performance scores, which was a finding supported by both our quantitative analysis (see Appendix A) as well as in our conversations with parents.

The need for advocacy never ends, no matter the type of school. Families in both cities, across all types of schools, described instances of "counseling out," failure to provide services, and lack of follow through on promises to serve all children. Despite strong oversight in both cities, schools still struggle—or lack the incentive—to meet their full legal obligations to students with disabilities, much less focus on improving their learning outcomes. Families learn they must take the initiative and be assertive about their rights.

School Quality and the Ability to Find a Good "Fit" Are a Much Larger Concern to Families than the Process of Choosing

Across both cities, families' primary concern was less about the process of choosing and enrolling in a school than about the overall quality of education and special education services available. One New Orleans parent put it bluntly: "There are a limited amount of good schools with not enough seats."

Parents perceive there are both too few good schools and too few quality special education programs. A widespread perception among the parents we spoke with was that, despite increasingly fair access via blind school lotteries and citywide enrollment systems, the best schools *are not equipped* to serve all students: even if a family gained access to a school with a well-regarded academic program, it might not be a good fit for their child. As well, just because a school has a high overall rating doesn't mean it has good special education programs. This was true with both cities and across both district and charter schools. Our quantitative analysis in New Orleans showed that, in general, parents of children with and without disabilities had the same level of preference for schools with higher ratings but parents of children with disabilities did not show a tendency to apply to schools differently, regardless of the special education program available.

A widespread perception among parents was that, despite increasingly fair access via blind school lotteries and citywide enrollment systems, the best schools are not equipped to serve all students.

Insufficient staffing, expertise. Some parents in our New Orleans focus group preferred a full inclusion environment, but told us that the schools often lacked the staffing and expertise to make it work.

The grandmother of one student said her grandson did well learning in a full-inclusion Head Start program. He was capable of learning, she said. "He was capable of sitting with the other students, when it was time to play, he played, when it was time to work, he did well." But when he started kindergarten, he started regressing. One time, she came to the school and found him sitting in the hallway:

> "All we heard was, 'I don't know what to do I don't know what you want me to do . . .' All of his setbacks then were because the teachers he had were really not qualified to teach him. They don't have a plan. They have inclusion, and inclusion will work for some kids, but you have to have a plan, and that's where everyone is dropping the ball. Even with the principal."

One New Orleans parent ended up being very happy with her child's elementary school experience but recounted how she initially had to threaten to call her attorney if the school didn't serve him. She then explained that she had to help the school figure out how to meet his needs:

> "So, once we got him in there, I was like, 'Okay, we need this, this. . . ' I had to hold their hand, because they were like, 'Oh, we're going to put him in a classroom.' I said, 'No, you're not.' 'Oh, yes we are.' I said, 'Well, call me and let me know how that works out.' Fifteen minutes into his first day, they called me, 'All right, Miss . . . he's back in his self-contained room.' 'Thank you.' So, I had to tell these educators what my son needed and how to do it."

We heard a general sense that parents who understand their special education parent rights can often work with good schools to advocate for their child's needs. As one parent told us, "The school tries hard, but I research a lot and end up providing them ideas to try." Some parents had used their insurance or out-of-pocket funding to support their child, a potential barrier to educational access for some families. One New Orleans parent shared her experience in bringing her own Applied Behavior Analysis therapist into the school, something that has been a relevant local topic because of a related recent consent decree:

> "I brought my own [applied behavior analysis] therapist into the school, because they were not accommodating my child at first. They're an A school, but they just . . . He's socially awkward, he's aggressive sometimes, because he has anxiety and people make fun of him. We've brought in bouncy chairs for him and [the therapist] coached [the teachers] for two years, she taught them how to deal with him. She taught the teachers reward charts, all of that stuff. They didn't have anything in place."

Another parent went further, saying the lack of expertise is an urgent barrier for successful inclusion:

> "For the parents that want their kids in full inclusion, these schools have to start getting onboard with hiring [applied behavior analysis] therapists, teachers that know how to handle these kids. Because let's face it, these teachers don't know how to handle these kids. That's probably more than half the problem. There are not enough certified, experienced teachers to work with our children."

Another New Orleans parent whose child has a hearing impairment said the school's special education director didn't know where to find sign language instructors. After responding, "Then we have a big problem," the parent called a friend who told the special education director who to call. The parent told us, "I'm not going to lie, within a week's time, she had lined up five part-time sign language instructors."

Finding specialized programs that are staffed with special educators who are knowledgeable about how to serve specific subpopulations of students with disabilities can be challenging for families: most districts and schools do not offer programs that provide this type of specialization. In New Orleans, because each school is a separate LEA, these programs are challenging to create and maintain. As one parent stated:

> "I wanted to see that the school had an effective program for autism that wasn't just a warehouse, but where they really knew what they were doing. When I was trying to rank the schools, I called the schools and asked about their autism programs, and I got some very vague answers."

In other words, families told us they want quality special education in the least restrictive environment staffed by quality special and general educators who are knowledgeable about different disabilities. Because families can't find this, they opt for self-contained programs when they make their choices because, they told us, "at least the special education teachers in self-contained settings have a better chance of understanding" how to serve their child. Families also want high-quality inclusion and are frustrated that they can't seem to get both. Having more choices without quality special education

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Parents feel they have to choose between low-quality inclusion and specialized programs.

In both cities, parents expressed mixed feelings about inclusion. On one hand, parents wanted their children to have access to the full set of social and academic opportunities that a fully included classroom offered:

> "You don't want to segregate them and separate them . . . even though my daughter's hearing impaired and she signs fluently, she still likes being with her peers. She fits in everywhere. Every child should fit in everywhere. She shouldn't have to choose between we ship her off for boarding school where everybody's together and they sign."

On the other hand, parents expressed a strong and commonly held view that schools in D.C. and New Orleans are increasingly inclined to offer only full inclusion along with few specialized classrooms or programs. In both cities, this is likely due to systemic limitations: because each school is their own LEA, it is extremely difficult to provide specialized programming. As one New Orleans parent told us, "The big push is inclusion." And yet few schools, according to parents' experience, are equipped to serve every student—especially those with more significant disabilities—in a full inclusion environment. When asked why parents choose specialized programs over inclusion, they shared how special educators in a specialized setting seemed better equipped and more knowledgeable about special education, leading to a more positive experience for their children.

One D.C. parent, who had a similar experience as a parent in New Orleans, described being told she would have to foot the bill herself if she wanted her child in an inclusive setting. "There are not a whole lot of schools that have inclusion options for kids with severe needs. We were told my child needed an [applied behavior analysis therapist] that we would have to provide through our insurance in order for them to be in an inclusive classroom." This is a barrier for many families, especially those who are living in poverty or are uninsured.

When asked why parents choose specialized programs over inclusion, they shared how special educators in a specialized setting seemed better equipped and more knowledgeable about special education, leading to a more positive experience for the children.

Parents recounted stories of being assigned to a full inclusion school but then having to fight for more specialized supports or self-contained classrooms. "Don't preach to me about full inclusion," one parent told the teachers at her school. "I knew my son would never be in a regular classroom," this parent added. "I've had teachers thank me for stepping up and saying, 'No. I don't see him in a regular class.'" These parents' concerns were about their own child's welfare, but one also talked about the impact on other students:

> "Some children just cannot sit in a regular class. How fair is it that the 28 kids, they're responsible for all their objectives, all the goals, all the regular curriculum, and then they have two who just, God love them, they just can't sit still."

We heard many disheartening stories about failed inclusion attempts. One parent told us:

> "My son is in a special class for autistic kids only, and it's five with him. But the horrible, horrible thing is, if his teacher is not there and he's having a meltdown, they chase him like an animal all around the

school, because they don't know how to approach him. There is a specific information about how to approach him during a meltdown. People touching him without permission, that makes it worse.

"I have had a horrible, horrible week and we ended up in the hospital, and things like that. My son is coming home all drugged every day, because he got this medication for meltdowns. Put it under his tongue every single day in the school. When I was homeschooling him, he was very peaceful, and he was not taking so much medication."

Schools are not providing a continuum of special education placement options for families. While some families want full inclusion, both cities' offerings simply do not reflect the reality that inclusion is not best for every child.

Schools are not providing a continuum of special education placement options for families. While some families want full inclusion, both cities' offerings simply do not reflect the reality that inclusion is not best for every child. One parent stated emphatically, "You have to look at the individual child. Look at the child." If forced to choose, most parents expressed a clear preference for high-quality specialized programs and schools over poorly executed inclusion. However, not nearly enough specialized programs are available to meet the demand and need, and it was not clear whether parents would have viewed inclusion more favorably if their schools had the staffing and expertise to support their children effectively in inclusive classrooms.

A set of toxic realities for families with children with disabilities. The lack of sufficient expertise in inclusion, the scarcity of quality specialized programs, and the overall lack of access to both high-quality schools and high-quality special education programs in schools—in New Orleans especially—means that the families we spoke with nearly always run into situations where they just can't find a school that checks all the boxes for what their children need.

One parent tried to get her son into New Orleans' therapeutic day program. The elementary school he attended agreed and recommended her child for enrollment, but he was refused because the specialized program could only accept students with certain disabilities. Another tried to get her child into one of New Orleans' selective admissions schools and was told the school does not "take kids like that."

One New Orleans parent ended up withdrawing her son from a high school and homeschooling him after the school failed to provide occupational and speech therapy.

Most of all, parents wanted quality academic and social supports geared to their child's unique needs.

Ultimately, the families we spoke with stated their preferences clearly. Some strongly wanted their child in an inclusive setting. Others did not. Most of all, they wanted quality academic and social supports geared to their child's unique needs. One parent summed up other parents' comments this way: "To each their own, but the wave of inclusion, I think, has hurt kids like my son, and your son, dramatically."

This led to a general sense of frustration with the offerings available. New Orleans offers an all-choice school system but one parent told us, in her experience, "We don't have a choice. There is none." Many families, so exhausted by the continued effort to find a good fit and to fight for services, said they wished they didn't have charter schools. At the same time, participants in our focus groups recognized that few wanted to attend a neighborhood school and understood that charter schools filled an unmet need. Many simply wished they could get high-quality services and education in their neighborhood school.

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Although Information and Supports for the Choice Process Have Improved, Families Still Need Much More Help Finding the Best Fit

Both Washington, D.C., and New Orleans have, over the course of the past two decades, made a concerted effort to expand the number of options available to students, focus on accountability and quality, and streamline enrollment processes. The goal, of course, is to improve upon the previous district-run systems, where students with disabilities achieved at very low levels and were often consigned to programs or low-performing neighborhood schools with dismal performance and services. Families had few alternatives and little recourse beyond hiring a lawyer.

Now that school choice is the norm in D.C. and compulsory in New Orleans, more families have become active consumers of information about schools and have become educated about parent rights and advocacy.

School system leaders and community organizations in both cities have launched robust efforts to support families, including:

- Common school information and application systems that are designed to reduce the legwork associated with researching and applying to various schools of choice operated by the district and charter school networks.
- Telephone hotlines, school choice guides, and parent engagement offices that help answer families' questions about the enrollment process.
- Independent "navigator" organizations that aim to provide families objective advice about how to choose schools that will meet their children's needs, and to advocate for their children.
- School enrollment fairs where families can meet with representatives from multiple schools and learn about their offerings.

The families we talked with said they were heavily engaged in the process of choosing schools, though some were new to it. But despite efforts in both cities to provide families with more information and support, they clearly want more. Finding the right fit for their children is a stressful, time-consuming process in which families feel the burden falls mainly on them.

A need for more detailed information about special education program availability and quality. We heard from families that the type of information they could access through official channels was not well suited to their needs. School information was almost entirely focused on academic performance, ratings, and letter grades, with few details about the nature and quality of support provided to students with disabilities. This is consistent with our complementary quantitative findings in New Orleans: all families—not just families of children with disabilities—relied heavily on school performance scores when making decisions.

School information was almost entirely focused on academic performance, ratings, and letter grades, with a few details about the nature and quality of support provided to students with disabilities.

The quantitative analysis found no relationship between parents' choice preferences and the special education programs advertised in the citywide parent information guide, which may be related to our qualitative finding that parents do not find the special education program information in the guide helpful in making school choice decisions.

Some parents we interviewed felt that when they turned to community organizations for additional information about schools, the people they spoke with only had deeper information about the most highly rated schools in their cities, leaving much of the additional information-gathering work to parents. This may also be why, in our New Orleans quantitative analysis, we found that families with children with disabilities were more likely to apply to schools with higher school ratings. One parent stated how the process should be easier, and "you shouldn't have to go to a third party for information." This parent added:

> "I went down to the school board office and got a small little pamphlet. It had just small information about the school. The gradings, they rate the schools now by grades. It had what the school offered, and that's about it. It just gave you a general view of what the school offered.
>
> "[The enrollment office] said, 'Okay, pick from this list.' They didn't explain to me which one had the speech therapy."

Partly because there has been so much emphasis in both cities on adherence to the law in admissions, charter schools are very careful about what information they provide on their websites, on the phone, via email, and even in person during the application process. They know they need to send a clear message that they are open to all families. While this is a natural response, the result for the families we talked with was frustration about not being able to learn much from the schools themselves about what programs they offered and their overall approach to special education. If a school turned out not to be a good fit for their child, they might not learn that until after they enrolled. As one parent told us:

> "There's nothing to let people know: this is how many special needs kids we have, how many special ed teachers here, is therapy provided here? There's nothing. Because . . . if they don't take a child then they don't want someone to say they discriminated against your child.
>
> "It really burns me up that charter schools don't have to tell parents anything about their [special education] program beyond, 'We will fulfill our legal obligation.' Imagine if that was their selling point to typical kids. It really makes a parent feel like these schools don't want to deal with special needs kids."

The school enrollment fairs have been helpful for some families when they are narrowing down choices, but families know that the information received at those fairs is limited. Two D.C. parents described their frustration at not being able to get specific information about special education from individual schools or at the school enrollment fair:

> "The websites don't talk about the special needs; people on the tours of the schools couldn't answer my questions."
>
> "There is no one at the school fair that is [special education] specific, but each table could answer some questions. In about half of the tables there was someone who could speak to [special education] at the school."

Other issues, such as language barriers, that might pose challenges for any parent were exacerbated for parents of children with disabilities. One parent who helps advocate for immigrant families suggested that immigrants may have unique support needs that go beyond translation services. She said many families she works with have a lack of familiarity with their rights and fear possible stigmas associated with special education. This parent suggested that immigrant families may need specialized advocates to help them with the choice and Individualized Education Program (IEP) process.

Currently, parents perceive the burden of information gathering falls mostly on them. Despite the public and private investments made in both cities, families said they struggled with knowing what questions to ask, doing the research, networking, touring schools, and going through the application process. One parent called it "a long research process." Another parent said it is difficult to even know what questions to ask to determine if a school would be a good match. One organization in D.C. recognized this challenge and created a parent resource.

> One parent called it "a long research process."

Because information on special education programming is hard to come by and complicated by hearsay and political narratives, many families feel they must personally visit as many schools as possible. This makes the research burden even more time consuming, especially for a family whose child has complex needs—such as the parent who stated:

> "My son is very complex: disabilities, challenges, down syndrome, autism, mood disorder, so I started looking around. I went to different schools, actually visiting the sites, just because I heard, 'Oh, these people don't take special needs kids. These people do, but they're all put in one room.' So I said, well let me get out there and see what they offer."

Another parent told us about trying to find a school for her child who had been homeschooled but was hurting himself and needed more expertise than she could provide. After applying to one school and not having him accepted, she described her desperation as she tried to find a fit: "I was Googling and I was so stressed out in the car trying to read and read. And scared. It's really scary that you don't have a place for your child to go learn."

The parents we interviewed had a strong sense of care and determination. One of them said she knows she needs to be her child's "first teacher" and offer solutions, not just complaints. But that, too, adds to the burden on parents who are already under strain and worried about their children.

Sophisticated questions, heavy reliance on word of mouth. Although families told us they want more information about schools' programs and staffing to be included in official guides, they also wanted much deeper information, which they recognized could only be gleaned through school visits and word of mouth from other parents whose children attended those schools. Parents we spoke with said they reached out to other families on social media and in person to find out about their experiences at a particular school: about the school culture, parent involvement, and quality of special education. This is consistent with our quantitative findings that families with children with disabilities in New Orleans seem to rely on much of the same kind of information that other families do when making school choice. During interviews, families in both cities shared that they gathered information through friends and neighbors, and sometimes from educators at their current school who had strong opinions about what would be the best fit as a student transitioned to higher grades.

> They also wanted much deeper information, which they recognized could only be gleaned through school visits and word of mouth from other parents whose children attended those schools.

Parents we spoke with said they were diligent about doing their research online but didn't know what information they could trust, which is why they relied so heavily on word-of-mouth information. Parents said they wanted to know that programs the schools claimed to offer would match reality if their children were to enroll.

Several families talked about the importance they placed on the types of personal relationships among the special education teams—and between teachers and students—in schools:

> "I was looking for the relationships, I wanted to meet the entire special ed team, I wanted to know about other kids with similar issues, I got email addresses, etc. It was important to me to know how the team functioned because my experience with my older child showed me that that was important."

> "The principal is actually the last person I want to talk to. I want to know the people who are actually going to engage with my kid. The other folks make or break whether my child is happy or not."

Parents mentioned that when they visit a school they are focused on the hard questions, such as what type of evidence-based practices are used, what the outcomes are for students with disabilities, and how well the school understands how to serve kids that are "like my kid."

Social experience is a priority for families in the choice process. Especially in D.C., the families we interviewed placed social dynamics at the center of their decisions about school selection. Parents spoke of fighting to keep their child in their current school to preserve friendships and stability, yet they wanted to find a school that could serve their child well. Several expressed feeling like they had to choose between social comfort and academics:

> "They wanted to send him to another school, but I fought to keep him there because he was familiar with the school. We all went up there and pressed [DC Public Schools], and we got a program in his school in order to keep him in the school. It was an autism-specific program that we fought to have at his school."

> "Such a headache to have to bounce your kid around from school to school, it is frustrating because it hinders my child socially. As soon as she gets comfortable, I have to move her. I have to balance whether or not to move her for academics vs. her social comfort."

This high prioritization of nonacademic goals played out in many ways during the choice process. Some of the parents of children with significant support needs said they took support for toilet training into account in their school visits. Some families said they wanted to know their child would be fully integrated into the social life of the school. One parent said:

> "The big question I ask everyone is, what happens at 3:30? Is everyone getting on a bus and no one has access to extracurriculars, clubs, etc.? How do you get our kids involved in the school culture? Are there any parents of kids with special needs involved in the PTA?"

For parents it came down to more than just academics. They want their children to have a positive experience at school and to do this, the nonacademic priorities were considered important. Parents told us they felt that if children have these positive social experiences, they are more likely to feel welcome and included in a school. This often translated to overall positive outcomes for children. This is consistent with the quantitative findings that showed that all parents in New Orleans placed value on extracurriculars such as band and football.

Parents told us they felt that if children have these positive social experiences, they are more likely to feel welcome and included in a school.

The Need for Advocacy Never Ends, No Matter the Type of School

The tradeoffs these families described are not only difficult choices, they are also tangled in legal issues. Charter schools in both cities are legally organized as LEAs and as such are legally obligated to serve every student. Findings from a 2018 study found that when parents divulge to schools that their child has a special need, schools are not as responsive. Both cities have a unified application system for charter schools that deters "counseling out" or subtle messaging to discourage enrollment. In Washington, D.C., the charter authorizer, the DC Public Charter School Board, goes a step further with its "mystery shopper" program, in which officials call schools pretending to be parents of students with disabilities, then report publicly on schools that attempt to sidestep their legal obligations to these students.

The District of Columbia Public Schools district (DCPS) is similarly obligated to serve every student, but every school may not be able to serve every child. Like most districts, specialized programs exist only in certain schools. Other DCPS schools have program designations with their particular approach—for example, inclusion.

In New Orleans, a small number of "selective" public schools have test score-based admission requirements. Parents told us that it is a real struggle to get appropriate accommodations for the entrance testing, making these schools an option for only some students.

Families revealed numerous instances where they felt schools failed to adequately provide the services outlined in an IEP, demonstrating that much more work is needed in both cities to continue focusing on special education compliance.

Once a student clears admissions hurdles and enrolls at a school, they may still be denied necessary services or accommodations. Resolution in these cases is highly dependent on a parent's knowledge of their legal rights, willingness of the school or oversight agency to respond to requests, and ultimately, legal action. Our conversations with families revealed numerous instances where they felt schools failed to adequately provide the services outlined in an IEP, demonstrating that much more work is needed in both cities to continue focusing on special education compliance.

Parents must become knowledgeable of the rights their children have. In both cities and across district and charter schools alike, parents told us they have learned that they must be well educated about their children's rights and well equipped to fight to make sure schools deliver on them—a challenge parents of children with disabilities face in all types of school systems across the country.

While parents navigating charter systems benefit from increased training about their rights, the relentless need to advocate for their children at school is not unique to the charter sector.

One New Orleans parent told us that the first two schools she picked said they could not accommodate her child. At the third school she finally insisted, "You have to take him, this is what we chose. This is what we got. . . . So, I just wasn't taking no for an answer."

Another New Orleans parent told us that their child was constantly being suspended and expelled to the point where the parent almost lost their job due to the burdens of constantly having to pick their child up from school and provide supervision. Eventually the parent found out through discussion with a parent advocacy organization that their child qualified for an IEP. The parent explained what a difference it made to know the child had rights: "Certain things I know now, I was ignorant to. I was like, well, you have to accommodate him now. You can't just kick him to the curb."

While parents navigating charter systems benefit from increased training about their rights, the relentless need to advocate for their children at school is not unique to the charter sector. However, given the socioeconomic demographics of both D.C. and New Orleans, the urgency of connecting parents to advocacy resources is significant. Family support organizations can help families—especially low-income and nonnative English-speaking families—learn about their parental rights in special education, but not all families know these resources are available. Getting a parent to understand their rights is the first thing advocates do when a family is struggling to find a "right fit" school. As one parent advocate shared, once parents have a basic understanding of their rights, they are better equipped to navigate the school choice process and find a "best fit" school for their child—a clear reason that these support organizations can be such a good resource for families.

Families had much advice to offer, demonstrating the importance of parent-to-parent support.

Families learn they must take the initiative, be assertive. Finally, when we asked parents what advice they would give to other families, they had much to offer, demonstrating the importance of parent-to-parent support. Parents we met with recommended that other parents work with an advocate to help them choose schools and go to IEP meetings. They also urged parents to educate themselves, know their rights, and advocate confidently on their children's behalf. As one parent stated:

> "Take the initiative. Don't wait for them. You have to take the initiative.
>
> "Ensure that you know what the path is leading to: a diploma or a certificate. They never told me that our non-public placement was not leading to a diploma.
>
> "I read a book called *One Mind at a Time* which was so helpful to me. It differentiates the types of needs that children have. It was the most empowering and helpful tool that I have had in 10 years. If I had a chance to get around more families with children with special needs, I recommend this book. It teaches you what type of testing to ask for.
>
> "It's horrible because you get no one who can give you advice, because in the first school where he was, they tried everything in their power for not giving him a reclassification. It was something else, that IEP evaluation was. . . . But I got the OK, and this year they are reevaluating my son. I got better in learning about how to navigate the system.
>
> "My advice would be to not go to the IEP table on your own: I will take anyone. Get an advocate. There is always information that you'll be able to use at parent education opportunities. Because it is war."

To sum it up: "When you go to the table, say, 'I am the expert on my child.'"

Conclusion

Our focus groups exposed an inherent tension in high-choice school systems: placing the legal onus of a district on an individual charter school helps ensure every student can get into and stay in the school of their choice, but creates another problem. When an individual school is expected to meet every type of special need, it places an extraordinary burden on that one school. Aside from not having the economies of scale that allow districts to pay for all needs, individual schools are often constrained by resources such as building spaces, teacher expertise on staff when the student arrives, and funding.

Each city we studied has tried to address these challenges in a variety of ways. New Orleans has created a citywide needs fund to support schools to be more responsive in their legal obligation to better serve students with low-incidence disabilities that are costly for independent public schools to support. NOLA Public Schools is in the process of reallocating some funds to schools that create or scale specialized programming for students with more severe disabilities. But there are barriers to creating these programs, such as how to overcome the fear of attracting too many students to a particular program without sustainable long-term funding. Educators in the city have also formed a dedicated special education cooperative where they can share expertise and troubleshoot systemwide issues. Both cities have authorized a number of charter management organizations (CMO) that have district-like internal capacity to recruit and train specialized staff (see our New Orleans and D.C. city briefs for more detail). In New Orleans these CMOs, as a result of economies of scale, are more willing to take on more risk in program creation and acquiring staff. But it is clear that more is needed in both cities.

Both cities should consider requirements that every school adopt a program specialization of some kind, with enrollment preference for families whose children will benefit most from that specialization, as the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools recommends.

Parents in our focus groups spoke about how such specialization and lottery preference could work, which was a focus of our quantitative analysis in New Orleans. One D.C. parent stated:

> "The charters are supposed to be a 'laboratory' for innovating, but each charter should also have a mission for kids with special needs so that we can know what their approach is. Schools could then have a set of seats that are designed specifically for this type of kid."

Another New Orleans parent added:

> "The lottery needs to be weighted for kids with special needs the way it is for sibling preference. If my kid is in a wheelchair and there are five schools in the city with a functioning elevator, I need to be able to preference that. They need to look at the algorithm to be looked at in terms of equity for physical and intellectual disability. We also need to have access to open data: we need to be able to see how many girls with autism graduated from each school. I need a graduation rate that is weighted toward my child."

Right now, schools are unsure about how to candidly describe their special education offerings to families without making it seem like they are sidestepping their legal obligation to serve all students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. If increased specialization and enrollment preferences are part of the solution, schools will need better guidance about how to communicate this information to parents and other stakeholders.

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Lessons for Making School Choice Work

While the structures governing public education in D.C. and New Orleans are unique, the two cities contend with issues that are mirrored across the country—such as New Orleans' low funding and high rates of student poverty, and D.C.'s gentrification and jarring proficiency gaps for some groups of students, including those with disabilities.

Despite the cities' efforts to expand options for families and hold schools accountable for performance, the dynamics that created frustration for the parents we talked with are also prevalent in more typically

governed school systems. School funding and accountability systems do not create strong incentives for schools to excel at special education. Individual schools lack the capacity to effectively support students with complex needs.

Parents in our focus groups shared concerns about a lack of qualified personnel at their schools. Finding these personnel is a challenge many cities face, and one that is especially difficult to manage in a system of decentralized schools. The decentralized structures in D.C. and New Orleans call for unique solutions that could become models for other cities to address these common challenges.

Encourage collaboration, and shared services and supports, across schools: Districts and charters alike must find ways to share staff expertise across schools to build capacity, be innovative and intentional in how they deliver special education professional development, and provide real-time network supports. This will allow decentralized charter schools to increase their capacities to meet the needs of students with disabilities, despite their lack of access to economies of scale.

The decentralized structures in D.C. and New Orleans call for unique solutions that could become models for other cities to address these common challenges.

Improve the leadership pipeline: Additionally, D.C. and New Orleans must think creatively about how to increase the pipeline of school leaders who prioritize special education, and hire or train teachers who support high-quality inclusion. Districts and authorizers should incentivize this by prioritizing special education in their strategic plans and charter renewal process.

Train teachers for effective inclusion: To address this larger systemic issue, we must put pressure on local and national preservice teacher education program developers to rethink how to prepare both general and special educators to work with students with disabilities, as well as emphasize the need for high expectations and quality supports for these students. We also must address the nationwide need for more targeted professional development to ensure general and special education teachers have the skills necessary to serve students with disabilities in more inclusive settings. This problem could be addressed through collaboration among schools, districts, cities, and at the national level.

Understand the family experience in order to improve it: As D.C. and New Orleans improve transparency about special education offerings, we must continuously ask families about their ability to access the available information. Some information is available, but if families don't know about it, can't access it, or can't understand it, it does them no good. We also need more transparency than we have now: we must require schools to publicize the special education resources, teacher training, accommodations, and specialized programs they currently have in place, and to state any evidence-based practices that are used. These efforts will help families access the available special education programs and help identify any gaps. In 2019 Louisiana passed a law requiring all districts to create a special education advisory council of parents; New Orleans has complied. New Orleans should actively engage that parent council often, especially when initiating changes to address family needs, such as the current initiative to create or scale specialized programs. This advisory council could be a great resource to ensure the proper balance between inclusion and specialization that families want.

Improve the availability of information: Parents in our focus groups reported frustration with the lack of information, difficulty finding information, and appropriateness of the information provided. Although D.C. and New Orleans have made significant strides in information sharing related to special education, we must do better. These cities must ensure schools provide truthful, substantive information about existing programming and services while also making it clear that all students are welcome and will be accommodated if they enroll.

We must also make it easier for families to engage with schools directly through the creation of virtual tours of schools' special education programs that include interviews with the special education directors, guides for families about what questions to ask (similar to what the nonprofit Advocates for Justice and Education has for families in D.C.), and the addition of specialized special education enrollment counselors, such as NOLA Public Schools' recent hire, who tap deep knowledge to give families objective advice on how to find the best-fit school.

The Work Ahead

The past two decades have seen major changes—and substantial improvements in student outcomes—to public education in both Washington, D.C., and New Orleans. Our research finds both cities have work to do to ensure their transformed education systems are able to meet all the needs of every student with a disability. The transformed educational ecosystems of both cities have also created conditions that can help special education improve. Groups of committed educators and system leaders meet to understand and solve citywide problems. New nonprofit organizations have sprung up to help parents navigate special education and ensure their children's needs are met—which can be a challenge in any school system.

In other words, the difficulties this report describes do not negate the reality that both cities have come a long way from where they were 20 years ago, when the school district was the sole provider and rampant graft and incompetence was the norm. Students with disabilities from low-income households were trapped in an inept system and often segregated with few or no options. A mountain of work lies ahead to meet the needs of every child with a disability, but families have increasingly better options and more are learning to be effective advocates for their children.

Other communities should consider how they can better help families learn from other families, how they can help parents become better advocates for their children, and most importantly, how they can stay focused on increasing quality—not just attending to legal compliance.

A mountain of work lies ahead to meet the needs of every child with a disability, but families have increasingly better options and more are learning to be effective advocates for their children.

Appendix A. Quantitative Analysis: Preliminary Results

This appendix describes preliminary results from an ongoing quantitative analysis that is being conducted by Matthew Larsen (assistant professor of economics at Lafayette College, nonresident research fellow at the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans), Jon Valant (fellow in the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution and nonresident research fellow at the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans), and Sivan Tuchman (research analyst at CRPE). Additional details of this analysis will be published in subsequent reports.

Overview

We looked to New Orleans to examine what types of schools parents request for students with disabilities (SWDs) and whether these requests differ from those of other parents. New Orleans is uniquely well suited for this kind of analysis. It has the most choice-oriented education system of any large U.S. city, and families submit their school requests—ranked in order of preference—through a unified enrollment system called OneApp. This generates extraordinary data on parents' school choices.

We are analyzing school choice data from New Orleans in hopes of addressing three interrelated questions:

- What types of schools do parents request for SWDs?
- Do the outcomes of SWDs improve when they are placed in the school their parents ranked first?
- Could changes to the placement algorithm result in substantially more families with SWDs getting into their first-choice schools?

This report focuses on the first question. Subsequent reports will address the other two.

Data and Methods

We obtained data on families' OneApp requests and placements for the 2014–2015 school year. We focused on that year because we can identify whether individual students had been classified as having a disability. Since our data do not have detailed information about students' disabilities, we group all SWDs together (except for those classified as gifted).

This report focuses on families' requests for K–8 schools in order to limit complications associated with the high school application process. We limit the sample of students to those who were not guaranteed a spot in any particular school and therefore had to list at least one school on their application. We observe the school requests for 2,029 students that meet this criteria, 193 of whom were classified as having a disability during the 2014–2015 school year. At the time, 50 of the 56 public elementary schools in New Orleans were available to request in the OneApp. Several private schools were also available through the Louisiana Scholarship Program, but we omitted those schools from this analysis.

We modeled our analyses on an existing study of the types of schools that parents request in New Orleans. Harris and Larsen (2019) examined the school characteristics associated with schools being more popular on the 2013–2014 OneApp. They combined data on parents' school requests with information about schools that was published in the New Orleans Parents' Guide to Public Schools, a popular resource (print and online) for families conducting school searches. The Parents' Guide provides profiles of individual schools with information such as student performance on Louisiana's standardized tests, school programs, and student demographics. Harris and Larsen found that certain characteristics—such as having a child's sibling(s) already enrolled, being closer to home, and having a higher School Performance Score—were associated with schools being more popular. This is broadly consistent with research on school requests in Washington, D.C., (Glazerman and Dotter 2017), Denver (Denice and Gross 2016), and Charlotte (Hastings, Kane, and Staiger 2005).

Because of data limitations, Harris and Larsen (2019) could not distinguish the school requests made by parents of SWDs from those made by other parents. This is where our quantitative analyses begin. We use a technique called rank-ordered logistic regression, which enables us to assess which school characteristics are associated with parents requesting schools and listing them higher in their rank-ordered requests. We run these analyses separately for SWDs and other applicants to assess whether these groups exhibited different types of school preferences.

We include an assortment of variables in these regression models. Some of the variables are based on information in the Parents' Guide, which would have been readily available to parents during the school choice process. This includes, for example, School Performance Scores (letter grades assigned by the state based largely, but not entirely, on student test scores), student demographics (including the percent of the student population with disabilities), and the modest information about schools' special education services that appeared in the Parents' Guide (such as student support services offered and overview of the special education model). We also include information from other data sources, which was probably less well known by parents while they were choosing schools (in particular, schools' value-added gains averaged across subjects and grades).

We note a couple of important points about how to interpret the results. First, these results show the relationship between a school characteristic and its popularity in the OneApp after controlling for all of the other school characteristics in the model. For example, where we find a strong relationship between value-added gains and school popularity, that relationship exists among schools with a similar School Performance Score (which was based more on proficiency levels than value-added gains). Second, these relationships are not necessarily causal. For example, we cannot say definitely that a school should expect to receive more applications if it improves its School Performance Score. Causal relationships along these lines might exist, but other factors could also account for relationships between school characteristics and parental demand.

Findings

We summarize our key findings below in Table 1. In general, the results look similar across SWD and non-SWD populations. For both groups, having a better School Performance Score and band and football programs are associated with receiving more—and higher-ranking—applications. Both SWD and non-SWD populations were less likely to rank schools higher if they offered extended school days or had a speech therapist on staff. The remaining characteristics were not statistically significant in the probability that families of SWDs would choose to rank a school higher on the OneApp. One reason we may not see statistical significance for SWDs is because of a much smaller sample—about 10 percent of the larger sample—than the sample of other students, reducing the statistical power of our analysis for them.

It is worth noting that several variables specific to SWDs show a lower probability of choosing a school for students who do not have disabilities. The schools that stated in the Parents' Guide that they had a special education resource room, speech therapist, and higher rates of SWDs were associated with a lower probability of being chosen by families with a child without a disability. This pattern of choosing may be based on parent preference for higher-ability peer groups or concerns about the syphoning of resources by SWDs in a school. It is unclear, however, why a family with a child with a disability would have a lower probability of choosing a school with a speech therapist.

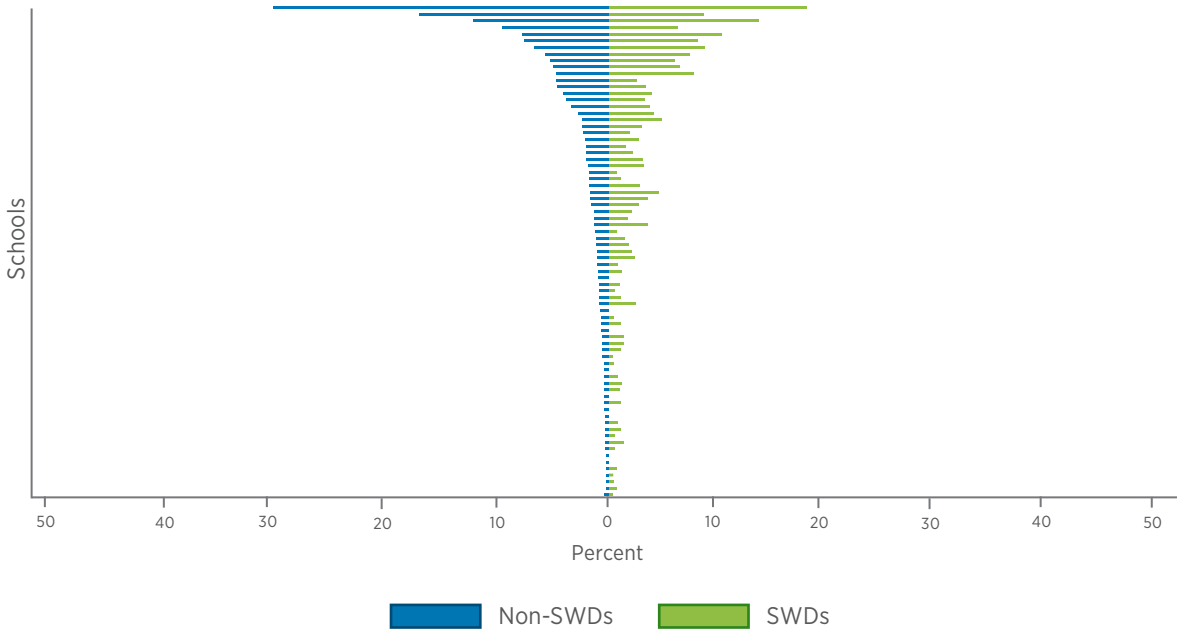
Table 1. Relationships Between School Characteristics

	Students with disabilities	Other students
Factor associated with higher probability of choosing school	• School Performance Score • Band/football	• School Performance Score • Value-added measure • Band/football • Early admissions • Suspension rate
Factors associated with a lower probability of choosing a school	• Extended school day • Speech therapist	• Extended school day • Paid afterschool care • Special education resource program • Speech therapist • Percent SWDs

Still, what we find most striking about these results is the similarity across the applications of SWDs and non-SWDs. These similarities are also evident when we look at the school level. For each school, we calculated the percentage of SWD applicants (n=193) and the percentage of non-SWD applicants (n=1,836) who ranked that school first. Because the number of SWD applicants is small, the percentage of SWD applications that rank a school first can change substantially with just a small change in the number of applications received.

Figure 1 shows a bar for each school that represents the percentage of applicants who requested that school first. The bars are ordered from top to bottom according to the schools' relative popularity with non-SWD applicants (in blue). The green bars show the corresponding percentage of SWD applicants who requested that school. The figure shows that the most popular school with non-SWD applicants (30.4% of all applications) is also the most popular school with SWD applicants (17.8%). The second-most and third-most popular schools are also the same. While differences emerge among the schools that receive fewer applications, this may be at least partly a result of the relatively small samples. We conducted a Pearson's Chi-squared test to assess the similarity of the SWD and non-SWD distributions as a whole and found no evidence of statistically significant differences.

Figure 1. Individual Schools by Percentage of Applicants Ranking That School First



A few schools do appear somewhat more or less popular among SWD applicants than other applicants, but only four schools have a larger rate of special education applicants than general education applicants that is statistically significant. This school might have a particularly good reputation for how they serve students with disabilities or might differ in how they recruit these students.

Takeaways

We see three key takeaways from this work:

1. Families of SWDs are more likely to request schools with strong performance ratings from the state. Although this is not necessarily a causal relationship, they suggest that parents of SWDs might be attentive to schools' performance records.

2. The school characteristics associated with schools' popularity in the OneApp are generally similar for SWD and non-SWD applicants. For the most part, the types of schools that are popular among SWD applicants are also popular among non-SWD applicants. In addition, the specific schools popular with SWD applicants are also popular with non-SWD applicants.

3. The reasons for these similarities are unclear—for example, whether SWD and non-SWD applicants have similar preferences or SWD applicants have different preferences but struggle to find information that speaks to those preferences. The quantitative analyses presented in this report are well equipped to describe patterns in application behaviors for a large population of families. However, they are not well equipped to explain why those patterns emerge. For this, we turn to our qualitative analyses, which can help to identify the reasons why school requests for SWD and non-SWD applicants appear so similar.

Appendix B. Qualitative Research Methodology

With support from the Walton Family Foundation, we studied how parents of children with disabilities choose schools in two "high-choice"[1] cities—Washington, D.C., and New Orleans—what supports available were to them, and their experiences using these supports to navigate the city's school choice landscape. In each city we conducted:

1. A landscape analysis of services available to help parents of children with disabilities search for, select, and access resources in schools.
2. Focus groups with parents to discover how they used available resources in order to select schools to meet their children's needs.

Landscape Analysis

To conduct the landscape analysis, CRPE interviewed organizations that support parents of children with disabilities. We first identified organizations providing these supports through an internet search and based on recommendations from local and national education leaders. We requested an interview from a leader in each of the organizations on our original list. We further expanded the list through snowball sampling and asking for additional recommendations from each organization leader we interviewed.

In total we interviewed thirteen D.C.-based and eleven New Orleans-based organizations, as well as three national organizations. The organizations included school districts, charter sector management, parent advocacy nonprofits, schools that offer specialized programs for special education, and government agencies in both cities.

Parent Focus Groups

To better understand parents' experiences in the school selection and application process, CRPE conducted in-person parent focus groups in both cities in April 2019 where a total of 27 parents (15 in D.C. and 12 in New Orleans) participated. We created a website and a digital flyer to recruit parents for the focus groups in each city, specifically targeting parents who had recently gone through the school lottery process. The flyers and website were then shared widely with organizations that support families who have children with disabilities, as well as with the districts and the charter sectors in both cities. The parents who participated in the focus groups were recruited using targeted marketing via CRPE's social media channels and through support from organizations. In New Orleans: Families Helping Families of Greater New Orleans, Urban League of Louisiana, and EdNavigator. In D.C.: Advocates for Justice in Education, DC School Reform Now, DC Special Education Cooperative, District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, and Parents Advocating Voices in Education. Interested parents signed up for the focus groups using a Google form available on the city-specific webpage.

Focus group participants were parents of children with disabilities who had recently gone through the lottery process. Participants were offered $20 gift cards for their participation, as well as on-site childcare and food during the focus groups. We partnered with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education in D.C. and the Urban League of Louisiana in New Orleans to help organize the parent focus groups. We sent a follow-up survey to participating parents to collect additional demographic information and to provide them with an opportunity to share more details about their school choice experience. Focus groups followed a semi-structured interview and lasted one hour.

1. Both D.C. and New Orleans are considered "high-choice" cities because they offer a range of school options for families, such as charter schools, traditional public schools in districts, and interdistrict choice.

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K–12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S Department of Education.

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