

BRIEF | Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice

Early Evidence from Denver and New Orleans

May 2015

OVERVIEW

Public school choice is taking root in America. No longer assigned to their neighborhood school by default, families in cities that offer school choice can choose from a diverse array of options. School choice empowers families to choose the school that works best for their child, whether that school is around the corner from their house or a bus ride across town.

But families still experience many barriers to choosing and accessing a school, especially in cities where schools operate under different governing and accountability systems. A number of cities are trying to make school choice work better for families by adopting new cross-sector solutions that cover district schools and charter schools.

One solution is common enrollment, an effort to make choosing a public school fairer and less confusing for parents by simplifying the way students enroll. Leaders are replacing old, decentralized enrollment procedures with new common enrollment policies that call for a single enrollment process for all district-run and charter schools citywide. Instead of filling out different enrollment forms for each school and juggling multiple deadlines, 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.

Drawing on parent surveys and focus groups, interviews with school and district leaders, and analysis of application data, this report examines early experiences with common enrollment in the two cities that adopted this cross-sector approach first: Denver and New Orleans.

Given that the nation's most mature common enrollment systems for K-12 schools are still less than five years old (Denver and New Orleans adopted them in 2012), it's too early to judge their ultimate outcomes. However, initial evidence suggests common enrollment is a valuable—but incomplete—solution for making school choice work for families.

COMMON ENROLLMENT ADDRESSES IMPORTANT PROBLEMS

Common enrollment policies are designed to bolster the integrity of school matches and enrollment for students, make it easier for families to participate in a choice program, improve information for parents on school choices, and deliver better feedback to education leaders about what parents seek in a school.

Early implementation suggests that these common enrollment policies successfully addressed inconsistencies parents faced when choosing schools prior to common enrollment, resulting in more fair play, transparency, and consistency, and dramatically reducing “back door” student admissions that favored assertive or politically connected parents. The policies also brought with them new parent information policies, including development of parent guides using common metrics to assess performance school by school. Parents reported using these guides in their decision-making process.

THE LIMITATIONS OF COMMON ENROLLMENT

Although most parents in both cities took advantage of the new enrollment systems, in Denver, where participation was optional, minority and low-income families participated in school choice at slightly lower rates than white and more affluent families—a pattern that likely existed prior to common enrollment.

Parents reported benefiting from streamlined enrollment and better school information, but they still wanted more detailed and personalized information to help them choose the right school. Some parents misunderstood the school match process under common enrollment and may have inadvertently filled out their forms in ways that actually reduced the chances of their child receiving an optimal match.

Finally, parents complained that they do not have enough quality schools to choose from. Demand is heavily concentrated in a handful of schools.

IMPLICATIONS

The investments in common enrollment systems made by both Denver and New Orleans benefited parents and the broader school systems in important ways. Leaders felt more confident about the fairness of the enrollment and school matching process, though in New Orleans (where participation was mandatory), some parents struggled with the new system. Parents in both cities benefited from improved school information systems. Each of these cities continues to hone the process and build off of their early successes.

But 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. We see a significant need for city education leaders to better understand the implications of specific system design elements, how to support parents in making choices in a cost-effective and sustainable way, and how to make more productive use of enrollment data.

About this brief

This brief summarizes *Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice: Early Evidence from Denver and New Orleans* by Betheny Gross, Michael DeArmond, and Patrick Denice. The report is part of CRPE's *Making School Choice Work* series.