

When people talk about common enrollment initiatives they often focus on technical details and procedures: the algorithms and data used to match student preferences to available seats in schools, or the way the system handles midyear student transfers and other complex contingencies. But leaders interested in moving toward a common enrollment system have to do more than marshal technical expertise to successfully design and implement these reforms. They also need to engage and win over a range of stakeholders whose interests are affected by the changes associated with common enrollment.

This issue brief provides an introductory look at how leaders can engage stakeholders during the design and implementation of common enrollment. The brief is based on the experiences of leaders in two pioneering cities—New Orleans and Denver—and the stakeholder politics they encountered during the design and implementation of their city’s respective common enrollment systems.¹

WHAT IS COMMON ENROLLMENT?

Families in a growing number of large urban school districts can choose among a variety of public charter and district schools for their children. But to make these choices, parents navigate a maze of applications, often filling out multiple forms with different preferences, requirements, and deadlines. Common enrollment systems eliminate the need for families to keep track of these elements, as well as waitlists that can remain active for weeks into the school year. Instead, common enrollment allows families to participate in a single process in which they list the schools they prefer for their child (regardless of whether the school is operated by the district or not) and receive a single match that accounts for the family’s preferences and different schools’ admission standards, if they exist.

WHY IS COMMON ENROLLMENT (POTENTIALLY) CONTROVERSIAL?

As the [first brief in this series](#) argued, common enrollment initiatives have the potential to benefit families and schools by creating a streamlined and transparent enrollment process in cities with a wide range of school choices. But these reform

initiatives also have the potential to create conflict because the changes they call for threaten benefits that some families and schools enjoy under status quo enrollment systems.

For example, savvy families who can successfully navigate a complex and fragmented enrollment system, or who benefit from geographic or other enrollment preferences, may be wary of efforts to change a system that, despite its flaws, seems to work for them. Likewise, charter schools and selective public schools accustomed to controlling their enrollment processes may balk at common enrollment, fearing a loss of control over how students enroll in their schools and, perhaps more concerning, the prospect of becoming more dependent on their local district and other schools. Understanding how these and other stakeholders are likely to respond to the reform, and engaging them in a way that leads to support instead of resistance, is a crucial task for leaders interested in reforming their enrollment systems across sectors.

HOW CAN LEADERS ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS?

Stakeholder engagement in any city is highly contextual. The political and policy environments in Denver and New Orleans, unsurprisingly, differ in important ways. For example, state legislation compelled the participation of schools in the Recovery School District (RSD) in New Orleans, which was the initial cohort of schools in the common enrollment system. In contrast, Denver’s school district had to persuade charter schools to voluntarily opt in to a common enrollment system.

Nevertheless, a broad look at the early years of common enrollment design and implementation in Denver and New Orleans suggests that reform leaders engaged stakeholders and managed the potential for conflict and controversy in similar ways—ways that participants said were crucial to the success of these ambitious initiatives. In particular, leaders did two things to marshal support for the design and implementation of common enrollment:

- Leaders framed the policy problems and solutions associated with enrollment in ways that resonated with stakeholders and delayed debates about the most controversial enrollment issues.

1. This brief is based on document reviews as well as 27 interviews with district, school, and community leaders in Denver (10 interviews) and New Orleans (17 interviews).

- From the very beginning, leaders used formal and informal means to strategically and continually engage a wide range of stakeholders to build inter-organizational trust and mollify resistance to the reform.

Of course, leaders elsewhere who are interested in moving toward a common enrollment system need to consider the stakeholders and unique political dynamics in their own context; the particular groups, interests, and resources that will shape the prospects of common enrollment will undoubtedly vary in different cities. And yet, the experiences in Denver and New Orleans show that leaders who are serious about the politics of common enrollment cannot ignore the importance of problem framing and engagement, two tasks that are just as crucial to success as getting the technical details and mechanics of these systems to function properly.

TASK #1: FRAMING THE PROBLEM AND THE SOLUTION

From early in their reform efforts, leaders in Denver and New Orleans addressed stakeholder concerns and the potential for conflict by intentionally defining the problems and solutions in ways that resonated with stakeholders while keeping some of the most controversial enrollment issues off the agenda during early implementation of the reform.

Framing the Problem

Although some families and schools had advantages under the status quo enrollment systems in both cities, district and some charter school leaders in Denver and New Orleans also had abundant anecdotal evidence that it created lots of problems. Leaders in both cities understood, for example, that the status quo system was difficult for all but the most savvy families to navigate. As a district administrator in New Orleans said,

“Some parents would walk away from a lottery process with four offers, some with ten, some with zero. If you had zero... there was no one to go to, to then say, ‘Well, what do I do now?’”

School leaders also understood from their experiences that multiple school-level lotteries and waitlists created uncertainty for schools at the beginning of the school year, making it difficult to plan and budget for the coming school year. As a charter leader in Denver said, under the status quo enrollment system,

“Schools thought that they were going to open with 100 kids, and on day one, 60 would show up because 40 of those kids were enrolled in two schools, and they ended up going to a different school.”

Early on, a coalition of education and community leaders in both cities took these anecdotal accounts about the dysfunctions of the status quo, bolstered them with

more systematic assessments of what was not working, and painted a compelling picture of why the system needed to change. In Denver, for example, community advocates of common enrollment commissioned a study that systematically documented the shortcomings of the status quo, especially its lack of transparency. In New Orleans, leaders within the RSD conducted a series of community meetings where parents voiced their concerns about the existing enrollment system.

In the end, these and other preliminary efforts to document and characterize the shortcomings of the status quo resulted in a clear message in both cities that the current system was needlessly complex for parents and created far too much uncertainty for schools. According to participants in both cities, framing the problem in this way resonated across stakeholder groups and was rarely disputed.

Framing the Solution

Once leaders developed a consensus definition of the problem, they steered the framing of the solution in ways that strategically kept the most controversial enrollment issues off the agenda.

For example, leaders in Denver framed common enrollment as a change in process, not policy. Especially when explaining common enrollment to school leaders, advocates in Denver framed the reform essentially as a cleanup effort that would rationalize the hodge-podge approaches to enrollment that operated across the city.

However, these advocates also assured everyone that common enrollment would not affect school-level enrollment preferences and criteria in both the charter sector and in some special admission district schools. A school of the fine arts, for example, could still have a policy that required prospective students to audition as part of its enrollment process, even as the city moved toward common enrollment.

This process-not-policy framing was especially important for Denver because its common enrollment system was an opt-in reform. One charter leader said,

“I don’t remember there being anyone who was strongly advocating that schools be pushed to change their priorities. I don’t think anyone thought that was doable... the only reason... [common enrollment]... happens is because they took a pass on the policy questions...”

Similarly, advocates said that the common enrollment solution would not change geographic preferences that guaranteed some families (primarily in advantaged areas of the city) a spot in their neighborhood school.² As one community leader said,

“We didn’t change any preferences from what they currently were, so if you had a boundary, you kept the boundary. You didn’t want to take too many issues on to try to get the system right at the get-go.”

Unlike in Denver, legislation mandated the participation of RSD-affiliated schools in New Orleans. In one sense, this meant that those leading the effort faced less pressure to frame common enrollment in a way that avoided scaring off schools or other groups from opting in. But in another sense, leaders in New Orleans still framed the common enrollment agenda in a way that avoided unnecessary conflict, just as leaders in Denver did. They did so, however, to avoid conflict with groups outside of the RSD.

The main example of this conflict avoidance was that the RSD took an initial pass on the question of whether or not schools overseen by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and so-called Type II charter schools would be in the common enrollment system. These additional groups of schools may have openly resisted common enrollment because they did not necessarily trust the RSD and because they served students who were relatively advantaged compared to students in the RSD. For schools outside of the RSD, the status quo system appeared to work reasonably well. By initially deferring questions about OPSB and Type II charter school participation, advocates of common enrollment avoided a potential struggle that could have derailed the entire effort.

In sum, when districts think about framing common enrollment problems and solutions, it is important that they articulate the shortcomings of the current system in ways that resonate with the experiences of schools and families. It is also important to frame solutions in ways that do not create high degrees of conflict from the start. Interestingly, once Denver and the RSD implemented their first iterations of common enrollment, some of the issues leaders avoided early on made their way onto the agenda—and they did so without unsettling the reform (e.g., school-level preferences in Denver and the inclusion of other school sectors in New Orleans surfaced as issues after each city’s initial move toward common enrollment).

TASK #2: ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

From the very beginning, leaders in both cities strategically engaged a range of stakeholders to ease mistrust and skepticism that had the potential to thwart the reform. In both cities, key stakeholders included four groups: district leaders, charter school leaders, community leaders and advocates (e.g., the Urban League in New Orleans and A+ Denver in Denver, as well as local education organizations), and parents.

Engaging Parents

In both cities, third-party community groups that supported common enrollment played an active role in parent engagement, gathering information from parents

about the shortcomings of the status quo system, seeking their feedback on proposed changes associated with common enrollment, and, during the rollout of the reform, disseminating information about what the reform would mean for parents and their children.

In New Orleans, for example, district and community leaders said that the Urban League played an important role in engaging parents, conducting over 600 parent focus groups about school enrollment. The focus groups provided a way for parent voices to reach the core group of leaders responsible for designing the new common enrollment system. Once the new system was in place, the Urban League and other groups (e.g., OpenNOLA) worked to inform parents by advertising on billboards, holding events, and reaching out through other media. Similarly, community groups in Denver, such as Stand for Children and Metro Organizations for People (now known as Together Colorado), conducted parent focus groups to both communicate information about the enrollment system and provide opportunities for parents to voice their concerns.

As we describe in the next section, community and educational leaders from both the traditional and charter sectors spent most of their time working together on nuts-and-bolts design and implementation decisions.

Engaging Community, District, and School Leaders

Steering committees | Community, district, and school leaders were the most deeply engaged stakeholders in the design and implementation of the common enrollment systems in both cities. Steering committees were the main mechanism for their engagement. Several features of these committees supported productive engagement across stakeholder groups:

- Committees included representatives from all school sectors, and community advocates. In Denver, district leaders invited all charter school leaders to participate in a series of conference calls; they also recruited specific charter schools and charter management organizations who were seen as thought leaders in the sector to participate in the calls. Likewise, the enrollment committee in New Orleans included charter leaders, RSD leaders, and community partners.
- Committees met regularly, both during the planning and the early implementation stages of common enrollment. In Denver, a separate committee to review early implementation results replaced the city’s original steering committee, with some overlap in membership. But in New Orleans, a design-focused enrollment committee continued to meet weekly during early implementation to review implementation results and consider improvements to

2. Preserving geographic preferences may have eased tensions in Denver, but it also preserved some of the inequities associated with the prior system.

the system. In both cases the committees were actively and continually engaged in the rollout of the reform, rather than simply receiving periodic updates.

- Committees were seen as resources for what one stakeholder in Denver called “genuine” engagement. During both the design and implementation phases of the reform, committee meetings were, according to several participants, places where the common enrollment operators solicited feedback and concerns from stakeholders (namely, school leaders) and gained a reputation for taking feedback seriously and, over time, offering responsive adjustments in the new system.

A charter leader in Denver summed up the importance of engagement with the common enrollment process this way:

“ I think the district did really well to solicit feedback, hear people’s input and concerns, and then try to address them. There were some substantive changes made that really helped ease people’s concerns, helped people wrap their head around how this was going to work.

Informal engagement | In addition to the formal engagement provided by multi-member steering committees, common enrollment leaders also engaged with school leaders informally to talk about the new system and respond to concerns. One leader in Denver said that these informal interactions were critical for winning the support and trust of school-level leaders. In addition, some participants noted that these informal engagements were supported by the fact that, in one case, a well-respected charter school leader was working for the district and was seen as a particularly credible source of information by charter leaders.

In Denver, leaders also made a strategic decision to include in their conversations district, charter, and community partner leaders who were skeptics and constructive critics. But they did not engage community members perceived to be openly hostile to school choice (and perhaps common enrollment), fearing that intense resistance from a few individuals would derail work that otherwise could address the concerns of the majority—even the skeptics among them. Remarkably, reformers in Denver also succeeded in framing, designing, and rolling out the common enrollment initiative without attracting the attention, or requiring the approval, of the district’s elected official

Delivering a working system | Finally, it is worth noting that overcoming initial mistrust between school-level leaders and the district was perhaps the overwhelming challenge facing the formal and informal engagement efforts described in the previous two sections. Cross-sector mistrust had at least two dimensions in both cities.

First, some school-level leaders worried that the school district might engage in “dirty tricks” under the new system. They feared, for example, that the district might steer students away from enrolling in particular charter schools. Second, some school leaders simply mistrusted the district’s technical and management capacity to administer and oversee the system successfully.

While formal and informal engagement helped address worries about “dirty tricks,” the district leaders also mitigated concerns about their ability to successfully implement a common enrollment system by ensuring that, for the most part, the system worked as advertised. Both cities enlisted the expertise of external consultants to design and implement the system, ensuring that the underlying mechanics of the system were state-of-the-art. In addition, local actors kept stakeholders’ confidence and support by managing the system competently. In both cities, charter leaders said the district’s successful management of the system was a pleasant surprise. As one charter leader from Denver said,

“ I was nervous about the district’s capacity to run the common enrollment system effectively. And I was totally persuaded that I was wrong about that. The district has run the system very effectively—I’m a big fan.

In sum, when districts think about engaging stakeholders to support the design and implementation of common enrollment, they need to develop formal mechanisms that provide honest and ongoing opportunities for engagement; create informal activities that manage the behind-the-scenes and retail-level concerns of various parties; and address deep levels of mistrust by investing not just in engagement activities that arguably accompany any successful policy adoption, but also the technical and managerial capacity to ensure that the systems work as promised.

SUMMARY

When city leaders, either under the auspices of a school district or some other agency, start thinking about moving toward common enrollment, it is important that they pay attention not just to the technical aspects of the policy, but also to its political aspects. In particular, the experience of leaders in Denver and New Orleans suggests the political challenges of common enrollment can be addressed, at least in part, by framing the problem in a way that resonates with people’s experiences of the dysfunction of a poorly managed system and framing the solution in a way that does not create unnecessary conflict that can derail the initiative.

Once common enrollment is on the agenda, it is equally important for leaders to actively and continually engage stakeholders from all sides: the district, charter schools, and parents (community groups may play a particularly important role in parent engagement). Ongoing and honest engagement—what one charter leader called “genuine” engagement—was critical to the successful design and

implementation of common enrollment in these cities. Embracing substantive and ongoing steering committees, and working with individual charter school leaders and authorizers, were key elements in this success. Moreover, the benefits of genuine engagement—namely, a lack of resistance to the policy—ultimately rested on the managerial and technical competency of the agency overseeing the common enrollment system. In the end, leaders must pay close attention to both the technical and political aspects of these reforms; neither set of issues alone is enough to see through the ambitious changes common enrollment promises to bring to school choice.

This is the second in a series of issue briefs on common enrollment.

Funding for this project comes from the Walton Family Foundation. We thank the Foundation for its support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented here are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Foundation.