

Special Education and School Choice in New Orleans

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The Center on Reinventing Public Education has long focused on making school choice work. We have found that parents of children with disabilities face greater barriers to choosing schools for their children.

This brief is the first installment in a series of reports examining how parents of children with disabilities experience the process of choosing schools. Our goal is to identify barriers and help school system leaders develop interventions that can guide parents to overcome them.

New Orleans has systems in place to provide information to parents and to assist with the process of enrolling children in schools. However, many of the barriers we identify intersect with the challenges facing the city's school system as a whole—such as the need to increase the overall quality of options available to families, and to recruit, train, and support educators to meet a broad range of student needs.

Background

The education landscape in New Orleans is unique in many ways, most notably in how it rapidly rebuilt its public education system after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Louisiana's Recovery School District (RSD) took control of most local schools in the midst of the devastation and in 2014 it became the nation's first school system made up entirely of charter schools. In 2016 the Louisiana legislature passed Act 91, which required all schools under RSD oversight to move to Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), recently rebranded as NOLA Public Schools. Act 91 also includes provisions to ensure the continuation of the school system's focus on autonomy, school choice, and accountability.

Many high-choice cities look to New Orleans because of their innovation and programs offered in a completely decentralized system. School decentralization opened up critical opportunity that has benefited children and their families, including those children with disabilities. Many schools in New Orleans emphasize high expectations combined with a high level of supports, a potential benefit to its students with disabilities. Innovative new programs have been developed to address specialized needs, such as the [Center for Resilience](#) and the [Collegiate Academies Opportunities Academy](#). Additionally, community organizations have popped up to support decentralized schools.

Enrollment in New Orleans schools, with the exception of three schools that are on a longer-term charter contract, is managed through a centralized common application system that is blind to a student's disability status to prevent any discriminatory practices. While decentralization has created many benefits, there are challenges—especially for parents of students with disabilities—which in turn has led to challenges in how parents choose a school. Parents work tirelessly to find a school that can effectively serve their children's needs. This challenge is not unique to New Orleans: throughout the country, many parents of children with disabilities are not able to find a best-fit school. However, a lawsuit by the Southern Poverty Law Center has pushed leaders to increase the focus on improving special education in the city.

How We Gathered the Information

To understand how families are dealing with these challenges and what support they need, we studied two “high-choice” cities: Washington, D.C., and New Orleans. We interviewed families who were either in the process of choosing schools or who had recently gone through the school choice process. The New Orleans parent focus group was held in late April 2019. In addition to parent focus groups, we conducted a landscape analysis of the special education school choice supports that are available to families. This brief provides a summary of the special education choice landscape in New Orleans, based on data collected through parent focus groups and interviews with New Orleans parent advocacy and support organizations, government officials, and community leaders. We offer recommendations for further steps that might be taken to strengthen the city’s support structure for parents of children with disabilities. It is important to note that, although we took care to interview parents with backgrounds similar to the broader New Orleans parent population, we are not suggesting that their views are fully representative. More details about the research study methodology can be found [here](#).

Strengths: Collaboration Among Stakeholders, Special Education Innovations, Weighted Funding Formula

Although immense systems changes have created a unique set of challenges associated with meeting the diverse needs of students with disabilities in a decentralized school system, leaders in New Orleans understand the challenges and are working collaboratively to improve outcomes for these students. Educators, school system leaders, and organizations in the city’s robust nonprofit sector have a common goal of creating a city where all parents have real choices, all students have teachers who understand how to meet their needs, and new schools and programs emerge to improve the options available to families.

The newly formed [Special Education Consortium \(SpEC\)](#) is developing an overarching shared vision for special education services in New Orleans. Co-chaired by [New Pathways New Orleans](#) and a representative of the school community, the SpEC includes [NOLA Public Schools](#), [New Schools for New Orleans](#), the [Center For Resilience](#) and the [Special Education Leader Fellowship \(SELF\)](#). Their primary charge is to improve and strengthen the continuum of available special education placements—in each school, and in the school system as a whole. To do this, the consortium members are taking a collaborative approach to first identify what special education programs are available and then identifying gaps. One of the inherent challenges the SpEC must address is how to provide quality placement options for students with more severe needs, leveraging economies of scale while continuing to offer choice to families. Additionally, the SpEC is faced with how to provide quality specialized programs at the more restrictive end of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) continuum without undermining New Orleans’ shared vision for inclusion.

[Several organizations](#) directly or indirectly provide special education support to help families find the right school, including a range of services from individual advocacy, legal representation, and Individualized Education Program (IEP) representation in schools. The organizations include [Families Helping Families](#), the [Urban League of Louisiana](#), [EdNavigator](#), and the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#).

In recent years the decentralized system has allowed new programs and innovations to emerge. For instance, some charter management organizations (CMOs) in New Orleans have started to create hubs of specialized expertise that families are asking for. Cohen College Prep, for example, has [created a dedicated program](#) for high school students with significant exceptionalities. New Orleans’ weighted funding model has helped with the creation of some of these more innovative programs. There is, however, more demand than supply, and schools fear if they advertise these

programs they will not be able to meet the overwhelming need and be forced to turn families away. New Orleans leaders must continue to find ways to encourage new programs and innovation—without that growth leading to financial and other disincentives.

Because traditional public school funding models do not fully cover special education, especially for those students with the most significant needs, OPSB and the former RSD created a differentiated, weighted funding formula for special education to help alleviate these problems. This [model has helped](#) align funding with student need. Along with other policies that centralized student enrollment, as well as the adjudication of expulsions, weighted funding has helped disincentivize the practice of counseling out students with greater needs. These systems were created under the former RSD and were extended to all schools during the return to local control. Each charter school serves as its own local education agency (LEA) and can request additional funding through both state and local risk pools to help cover additional costs for students with low-incidence disabilities. However, many schools still struggle financially to meet the needs of every student, despite revisions to the state funding formula.

Challenges: Innovation in a Decentralized System, Inclusion vs. Specialization, Families Lack Information, Lack of Quality Special Education Options, Rating System

The purpose of this research study was to gain insight into challenges parents face with the choice process. But most of the challenges parents shared in our focus groups were not challenges with the choice process itself. They were related to broader special education challenges, some of which are a result of the decentralized system.

Innovation in a decentralized system. Because each school in New Orleans operates as an independent LEA, each school has a responsibility under federal law to admit and serve every student with a disability. The citywide “OneApp” school enrollment system, [EnrollNOLA](#), is blind to disability status, so schools can and do expect to serve a wide range of student needs. As a result, the public schools in New Orleans have an array of philosophies and approaches to special education, but most lean toward inclusion.

There are inherent challenges to providing the services necessary to meet the needs of all children in a decentralized system, especially for those students who require more programmatic specialization. Every school has an obligation to serve all children. However, a school may not be properly equipped to serve all children for a variety of reasons. A weighted funding model may not provide sufficient resources to help each school—as independent LEAs—meet the individualized needs of every student. A system of blind enrollment may hinder schools’ ability to adequately plan for future special education programming and to ensure staffing and supports are in place.

Schools that are not part of a network of schools may not have the resources and capacity to create the depth of programs that meet the needs of every student. For example, because their funding allocations vary each year depending on the needs of the students who enroll, schools do not receive a predictable revenue stream that supports sustained investment in [specialized facilities](#) to meet the needs of students with low-incidence disabilities that cannot be adequately supported in a traditional classroom.

Inclusion vs. specialization. A few circumstances exist where charter school networks or independent nonprofits in New Orleans have successfully set up programming for students with highly specialized needs. But that is the exception, not the rule. While the parents we interviewed expressed an overall preference for inclusion, they told us they often found themselves opting for specialized programs because there were simply not enough schools providing a high-quality inclusion model, especially for those children with more intensive needs. Parents pointed to a lack of qualified special and general educators serving their children in an inclusive setting. One parent told us, “For the parents that want full inclusion, these schools have to start getting on board with hiring behavior therapists and teachers who know how to handle these [more significant needs] kids, because let’s face it, these teachers don’t know how to handle these kids.” Another parent continued, “The teachers [my son] has had were really not qualified

to teach him. They don't have a plan. They have inclusion. Inclusion will work for some kids, but you have to have a plan. That's where everyone is dropping the ball."

Because of these challenges, parents in our focus groups wished they could be given the choice of whether to disclose disability status up front when they apply to schools using OneApp. Parents felt that this "opting in" might help them better understand their continuum of alternatives. The parents of children with more intensive support needs we interviewed felt that schools try to fit students into their special education model, rather than adapting their special education continuum of services to their high-need children. These parents often learned after their child enrolled in a school that their child would be placed in an already existing specialized classroom that may not meet their needs, or that their child would be learning alongside their peers in a traditional classroom without individualized support. A school may not be able to serve all students in their least restrictive environment. Parents mentioned this as something that happened once their child was accepted to the school or even after they were enrolled.

Families lack information. The school choice process places an immense amount of pressure on New Orleans parents to be knowledgeable about special education and to understand their rights. Although school choice provides more opportunities for families, it is not easy to navigate a decentralized system where families are not assigned to any neighborhood school by default. Additionally, considering this challenge within a city with high poverty and low socioeconomic factors, this pressure falls on families with limited time and resources to navigate it. Some parents of children with disabilities opt to not even participate in the OneApp enrollment process; their children are directly assigned to schools, presumably because of the complexities of the process.

As a result of a [special education lawsuit](#) settled in 2015, more school-specific special education information was added to the EnrollNOLA website, such as the special education model for each school. However, parents told us that although that information is helpful, they want to know about special education program quality and the qualifications of the special educators in the school. Parents say that it is up to them to ask a school the right questions to try to determine if a school would, in fact, be a good fit for their child. Since the enrollment process is blind to disability status, parents also shared a concern that, once they get into a school, the school will not be able to meet their child's needs, or that the program their child encountered would be different from the one described by administrators or online. Parents in our focus groups shared that, from past experience, they felt they couldn't rely on schools to put programs in place, staffed by qualified special education personnel, that would meet the needs of their children.

Lack of quality special education options. When we asked parents during our focus groups about school choice, it led to answers about the lack of quality special education options. Several parents shared that they were unhappy with special education in their current school but they felt there were no better options. Instead, parents said they chose to stay with what they know, even if their child's needs weren't being met. One parent stated, "We don't have a choice. There is none," implying that the issue they face is more about quality, not about the lack of information to find a best-fit school. When we asked parents what would help them feel like there were more quality options, they mentioned staffing as the primary driver. Parents wanted to see more innovative programming staffed by qualified special educators. In inclusive settings, parents wanted both general and special educators to be trained on differentiation and inclusion.

In our national study of special education in charter schools, [we identified](#) this lack of available training in differentiation for general education teachers as a common challenge. Training all educators to support students with a wide range of academic and mental health needs is an especially salient challenge in New Orleans. Approximately 44 percent of the city's third graders [score below grade level](#) in English. Nearly 40 percent of high school students [have been retained](#) in at least one grade. One student survey found [one-fifth of the city's students](#) are affected with post-traumatic stress disorder—more than four times the national rate. Educator practices and student supports that would help schools serve students who are behind, and care for those affected by trauma, would also strengthen special education in inclusive classrooms.

School rating system. The Louisiana Department of Education rates schools on an A through F scale, based on student proficiency and growth on statewide assessments in English language arts and math, as well as graduation rates among high schools. The rating system was devised to help leaders decide which charter schools will remain

open and to help parents gauge performance. In order to attract families a school must have a good rating, and in order to get a good rating a school must have high proficiency rates. However, with this rating system there is no incentive for a school to be good at special education. It was evident by listening to parents in our focus groups that immense social pressure exists for their children to attend A-rated schools. Schools with A and B ratings often top [lists of schools with multiple times more applicants than spaces available](#). A parent advocate elaborated on the complexities parents face in looking at these ratings with a special education lens: “We, as a community, always look at the A school. I want the A school whether it works for my child or not. We need to change the narrative. Look into the school, the school finance, the school programs, the school model, especially for special education. An A school may not be a good fit, but we can’t change their minds.” Parents of children with disabilities not only face the social pressure of getting into an A school, they must also figure out how to interpret school report card data for the subgroup of students with disabilities. Parents want to know how students with special needs perform academically at each school, something that the current school rating system does not provide.

What Families Need

New Orleans has made considerable progress improving educational opportunities after Hurricane Katrina. Outcomes for students in the city—including those for students with disabilities—[have improved notably](#). However, the decentralized governance model that allowed for such rapid academic improvements has also brought new challenges for parents of children with special needs who now have expanded options. Much work remains to ensure continued innovation and outcomes in special education.

More High-Quality Options

Parents of children with more significant needs told us they want more high-quality, specialized programs. However, they also said they would prefer to see more opportunities for their children to be fully included in highly rated general education programs. Accomplishing this throughout the school system will require the school board, the charter school community, and community-based organizations working together to make the effort a citywide priority. CRPE has recently published [a report](#) that could provide a roadmap to improve the special education talent pool, authorizing, and professional development strategies in the city.

The school board cannot force improvement and innovation on autonomous schools, but they can incentivize and support it. They might, for example, change their approval and renewal process to focus more attention on quality inclusion plans. The state and school board should also continually evaluate the weighted funding model, ensuring that it helps provide incentives for innovation. Organizations such as New Schools for New Orleans could create challenge grants to support innovations in high-quality inclusionary practices. As Lauren Morando Rhim at the National Center on Special Education in Charter Schools [has suggested](#), schools should be required to develop at least one area of expertise. More specialized options for families need not be at odds with the long-term vision of inclusion.

Better Information

New Orleans families want more specific information to help them find a good fit for their children’s unique needs, such as details on special education staffing levels. Parents also want to have easier, searchable access to the special education programming offered at each school—referred to as the “special education model” on the EnrollNOLA website. Families also wish there was a way for school ratings to better reflect a school’s record on educating students with disabilities. Adjusting ratings, at least to lower the rating for schools with low-quality inclusion programs, would help change the narrative for families and incentivize improvements in schools.

Staffing and Supports

To address parent concerns about the lack of quality special education delivery, schools and supporting organizations such as New Pathways New Orleans and New Schools for New Orleans should step up efforts to recruit more specialized teaching expertise and provide ongoing professional development that schools and teachers can opt into. Creative thinking could lead to new ideas for leveraging community assets that may allow individual students to access academic courses, expertise, and services outside of what is offered in their building. New local teacher training programs should also ensure that the next wave of general education teachers are trained in effective ways to include students with disabilities in their classrooms.

Research has repeatedly shown that one of the biggest influences on quality special education is leadership at the building and CMO level. Local efforts to recruit and train leaders with a commitment to educating students with disabilities could yield immediate payoffs for students and families.

The decentralized system in New Orleans provides a unique opportunity for schools to continue to innovate and improve on behalf of students with disabilities. The “city of second chances” has proven it can reinvent the school system and innovate to solve educational problems. To address urgent family concerns, the community must build a unified and creative plan to meet the varying requirements of students with unique needs. Strong leadership will be required to bring together school, district, city, state, philanthropic, and nonprofit leaders.

All Students Stand to Gain

New Orleans has built a number of safeguards into its all-charter system to ensure equitable access to schools, including a citywide enrollment system designed to prevent “counseling out.” Louisiana has reconfigured the funding formula to ensure that money follows students based on needs. A growing number of CMOs are investing in programs to serve the full spectrum of special needs. And several local organizations, including innovative nonprofits such as EdNavigator, provide support to families in the process of choosing schools and advocate for their children.

Still, New Orleans families made it clear that they want more quality options. They hope their children can be fully included, but until inclusion is done well, they want more specialized programs and schools where staff are well equipped to meet their children’s needs. They appreciate the advocacy and navigator organizations that exist, but those organizations have very limited capacity, especially compared to Washington, D.C.

Compared to D.C., New Orleans families were more likely to report “counseling out” and refusal of services once their child enrolled in a school. This was especially true for students with high needs. New Orleans might consider implementing a version of D.C.’s “secret shopper” program to root out these practices.

In New Orleans, the school rating systems fuel high demand for “A” rated schools, but the ratings do not take special education services or outcomes in consideration, leaving many families feeling social pressure to send their children to A schools, even when a D school may meet their individualized needs better—suggesting families would benefit from more nuanced information about special education programming.

Finally, the relatively low per-student funding in New Orleans as compared to D.C. is apparent in terms of the actual infrastructure, expertise, and support available to students, families, and educators. The city’s concentrated poverty, lack of accessible social and mental health services, and relatively few specialized private school placements as compared to D.C. may help explain the sometimes desperate stories we heard from New Orleans families.

New Orleans, specifically, should consider policy changes or investments in:

- Parent education and advocacy, including peer-to-peer advocacy groups focused on special education.
- Dramatic changes to the pipeline and training of educators with expertise in high-quality inclusion and specialized supports. One parent suggested that a local university should open a lab school for Autism or

other disabilities as a way to bring more psychologists and other expertise into the system. This is similar to what the University of Washington’s [Haring Center’s Experimental Education Unit](#) does.

- An increased number of specialized schools and programs or microschoools that may provide temporary placements for students, but where their needs will be met until inclusion programs are more effective citywide.
- A hard look at the school rating system to ensure that it is reflecting how well a school serves students with disabilities. And, potentially adding a separate rating system for special education looking specifically at special education outcomes. Transparency is key.

The same decentralized system that creates new parent information and coordination challenges has also created the conditions where new kinds of schools and programs can emerge to meet the diverse needs of students. Educators have begun to launch new schools with models that support students’ diverse needs. Some of these efforts have failed, but others continue to show promise in diversifying the options available to students.

Launching new schools, developing new hubs of specialized expertise, and ensuring existing schools adopt effective practices all depend on a key ingredient—talent. Leaders in New Orleans have increasingly identified developing, training, and retaining more effective teachers and school leaders as urgent priorities.

These efforts can prioritize students with disabilities by ensuring all educators are hired and trained for their ability to differentiate instruction for students with complex needs. In this way, the challenge of improving options for students with disabilities is closely linked to the city’s broader efforts to overcome its recent plateau in student achievement.

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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.