A Guide to Unifying Enrollment:
The What, Why, and How for Those Considering It

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A Guide to Unifying Enrollment

Unified enrollment can help ease the burden and dramatically reduce the confusion families face when confronted with a slew of uncoordinated application deadlines, informational materials, and procedures across a city's charter schools, local district schools, or both. Such system inconsistencies and complexities can lead to families—particularly some of the city's most vulnerable—having unequal access to both information and choice. For schools, system inconsistencies can lead to greater unpredictability around student mobility and enrollment, making it harder to strategically plan in key areas like budget and staffing. Denver, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, Camden, and Newark have already unified their enrollment systems across district and charter schools in their cities, and Indianapolis is starting theirs in 2017. Several of these pioneering cities have seen their unified enrollment systems lead to greater transparency and consistency around admissions, better school information, and a more manageable and efficient enrollment process.

Q ▶ What is a unified enrollment system?

▶ **Answer:** A fully unified enrollment system includes these four elements across a given school sector, multiple sectors, or possibly all schools in a city:

1. Common timeline for procedures (e.g., submitting applications, announcing acceptances, and registering for school).

2. Common application materials.

3. Centralized mechanisms to match students to schools (e.g., lotteries, selection committees, zoned assignments). Recently, cities have been adopting a "single best offer" lottery procedure: students list their schools in order of preference and the lottery provides a single match to each student that accounts for their preferences and their random lottery number.

4. Comprehensive information systems for families that explain the enrollment process, list participating schools and what they offer and, sometimes, how they perform.

Coordinating Enrollment Across School Sectors: An Overview of Common Enrollment Systems offers more background on unified enrollment.

Q ▶ What are the variations in unifying enrollment?

▶ **Answer:** Given that education, governance, and political landscapes vary wildly, cities start at different places when considering how to begin unifying enrollment. A fully unified system would align timelines, application materials, mechanisms to match students, and accompanying information. In reality, each city's efforts to unify their enrollment systems begin at different points along a spectrum.

Efforts to coordinate enrollment vary around two basic questions:

• **Which agencies and school types will coordinate?** Will the system coordinate across just district schools or just charter schools or across both sectors? Will it include local private schools? Does the city, local school district, or some third-party entity govern and manage the system? (We cover governance in more detail later in this guide.)

- **How many elements will the system coordinate?** Will the city only coordinate a unified enrollment timeline or will it also align application materials? Will it also include a centralized matching system, where a computer algorithm matches students to schools based on locally determined elements, such as families' ranked school requests, schools' admission priorities, and seat availability?

TABLE 1. SPECTRUM OF PROGRESS TOWARD UNIFYING ENROLLMENT

Key Element	Minimally Unified Enrollment (single-sector, procedural alignment)	Moderately Unified Enrollment (multiple-sector, procedural alignment)	Fully Unified Enrollment
Who participates?	Enrollment is unified within one sector.	Some participation across sectors, but possibly not all district or charter schools are involved.	Enrollment is unified among ALL district and charter schools, and possibly private schools. School or district participation is often voluntary, though there are cases where state law has compelled participation.
What are they coordinating?	System coordinates enrollment timelines, school choice marketing, information tools for parents, and/or an aligned application in a single sector, allowing families to provide similar information and documents to different schools. *(Note: In some cases, a single-sector system has adopted a "single best offer" matching algorithm within the sector.)*	System coordinates enrollment timelines, school choice marketing, information tools for parents in multiple sectors and/or an aligned application allowing families to provide similar information and documents to different schools.	System unites schools on enrollment timelines and deadlines AND all schools across sectors use one application AND use a centralized matching system.
What problems does this solve?	• Fewer deadlines. • Somewhat consolidated school information. • Somewhat reduces the burden of submitting multiple applications.	• No multiple deadlines. • Consolidated information on school choice. • Reduces the burden of submitting multiple applications.	• No multiple deadlines. • Reduces the burden of submitting multiple applications. • Ensures consistent application of student assignment policies. • Reduces waitlists and student reassignment through waitlists (the wait list shuffle).

Based on family needs and interest, cities create a system that falls somewhere on the spectrum shown in Table 1. A city wanting to simplify messaging around when families engage in school choice activities might choose to coordinate timelines across all schools citywide. A city worried about fair distribution of high-demand seats in a handful of district magnet schools might opt to build a system with centralized matching, but only with district schools. As shown in Table 1, the most comprehensive systems to date coordinate nearly all public schools into a single application with centralized matching systems, such as Washington, D.C.'s My School DC, and Denver's SchoolChoice. The OneApp, which is administered by EnrollNOLA in New Orleans, also includes access to private schools that accept school vouchers. The benefits gained from unifying enrollment expand as the system becomes more fully unified: families have a more streamlined application process and much better assurance that the stated policies and procedures for student assignment will be consistently enforced. In addition, the fully unified system offers the city and its district and charter leaders with information on parents' school preferences—information that can be used in decisions to open, expand, and site schools.

Q ▶ Where does a city start with unifying enrollment?

▶ **Answer:** Where a city starts doesn't have to be where it ends up. Many cities treat unifying enrollment as an evolution, eventually adopting more comprehensive systems after starting modestly. For example, before Washington, D.C., created a centralized system for applications and matching, most schools within its charter sector had already coordinated their timelines and application materials. My School DC took the next step to unify both district and charter school enrollment. Denver started by coordinating timelines and application materials across charter and district schools before launching its SchoolChoice single application and centralized matching strategy. Newark initially operated a single application with a centralized matching system for district schools before adding charter schools. Different cities have different needs: those with growing enrollment and tight school capacity may want to plan to fully unify. Cities with shrinking enrollment and excess school capacity may not need unified matching right away but would still benefit from unified timelines and good information for families.

Q ▶ What do families gain with a fully unified enrollment system? What do they give up?

▶ **Answer:** Families gain:

- **Simplified paperwork and deadlines.** With coordinated enrollment timelines and a single application, parents face less paperwork and legwork compared to participating in a system that requires them to submit multiple applications and track multiple deadlines.

- **Aligned requests for application materials and documents.** When all schools request similar information on similarly organized forms, families have less to gather, making it easier for them to apply to multiple schools.

- **A more transparent, neutral process.** When all schools follow the same enrollment procedures, it can level the playing field for all families, not just the best-connected or those most able to navigate an overly complex system. (This also surfaces in what families give up, as explained in the "opportunity to influence admission" bullet below.)

- **A greater chance of getting into a top-choice school and less exposure to a waitlist shuffle.** A single best match means no student will have multiple offers that they hold onto until the last minute—an action that typically sets off a waitlist shuffle early in the school year. As a result, more students will be matched to their preferred schools right away and fewer students will be moving schools two to four weeks into the school year.

  All these scenarios can contribute to greater participation in choice and enrollment systems and better access to a city's school options for all families.

Families give up:

- **Flexibility and control.** Families must follow a specific application timeline and wait until all school matches are made and announced centrally. Instead of potentially receiving multiple offers of acceptance, students are matched to one school. In some cities, students not matched to their top school are automatically waitlisted for all the schools they listed with higher preference than their match school.

  Depending on demand for the schools requested and the student's random lottery number, some students may not be accepted to any school. These students must then seek enrollment through a second-stage process. Notably, compared to a traditional decentralized lottery system where some students will receive and hold multiple offers through the summer, a single best offer matching system allows more students to receive an offer to one of their listed schools.[1]

- **Opportunity to influence admission.** Evidence suggests that moving to a centralized matching system dramatically reduces the chance for students to gain a school spot through family influence.

  An enrollment analysis done by the Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice before Denver started using a centralized matching system showed that roughly 30 percent of students attending schools other than their neighborhood school seemed to have gained a spot through the back door.[2] In other words, these students managed to enroll without living in the assignment zone or being placed through a lottery or waitlist. After Denver fully unified its enrollment system with a centralized match, we found these students were now under 5 percent. (It is likely that in many such cases that 5 percent could be explained by administrative transfers and special needs placements that were not recorded in the researcher's data set.)

  At first blush, removing family influence would seem to impact primarily better-connected, more economically advantaged families. But low-income families in one Northeast city also expressed concern about losing a potential edge to garner a school spot they felt they had earned by doing all the things choice advocates ask for: informing themselves, showing up, and engaging in the choice process. They were unhappy with the idea that even if they advocated for their child, volunteered at the prospective school, and committed to everything a school asked for, a centralized matching system might box them out of their desired school and place a family ahead of them who had done none of those things.

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1 This comparison assumes that students would apply to the same number of schools in the decentralized and centralized systems. If the stream-lined centralized application process dramatically increases the number of students making school choices, and/or increases the number of schools students apply to, it may turn out that fewer students receive offers after the adoption of the centralized matching system.

2 Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice, An Assessment of Enrollment and Choice in Denver Public Schools (New York, NY: Institute for Innovation in Public School Choice, 2010).

- **An established process some parents see as simpler, in some cities.** Parents' experiences with and attitudes toward unified enrollment are shaped by the experiences they had in the "old" system. In Denver, we found parents were less likely to report difficulty with administrative requirements around enrollment under the city's unified system than parents who enrolled before the unified system took hold. In New Orleans, we found the opposite. Proactive student recruitment and a relative abundance of school openings meant that, prior to the unified OneApp system, many families enrolled their children by simply walking into their desired school or by registering with school recruiters visiting their neighborhood. For New Orleans families, the unified system imposed a new process with new deadlines and the need to work with a central enrollment office that previously didn't exist. Importantly, however, the new system allowed families to apply to schools citywide, including highly sought-after schools, without having to physically get there to apply (eliminating a previous barrier for families).

Before initiating enrollment system changes, policymakers and school leaders must understand what processes parents currently participate in and whether—and in what ways—the new process will improve parents' experiences. For more on family experience, see *Common Enrollment, Parents, and School Choice: Early Evidence from Denver and New Orleans* and *An Evaluation of Denver's SchoolChoice Process, 2012–2014: Is the School Enrollment System Working for Families?*

Q ▶ What do charter school and district school system leaders gain with a fully unified enrollment system? What do they give up?

▶ **Answer:** Both charter and district schools gain:

- **Potential for less student mobility.** Because students receive only one matched school, more openings should be filled earlier, allowing schools to more accurately predict and plan for their actual fall enrollment. Fewer students shuffle through summer and fall waitlists so enrollments should settle more quickly when school begins. How much cities can realize these benefits depends on how easily families can follow through with the school registration process once matches are made. And it relies on students actually registering and showing up at their matched school in the fall. Families need support around registration and transportation to make that happen.

School district and city education leaders gain:

- **Clear demand data.** Coordinating elements of the enrollment system can reduce the burden of applying to schools, potentially improving equal access to school choice. Any central collection of applications can improve information about demand. However, a single best offer matching mechanism, which allows families to safely list their priorities in order of true preference, will provide more precise and detailed information on parent demand for the existing supply of schools than will decentralized systems. These data can be valuable to district and city leaders as they assess the overall mix of schools in the city.

Charter schools give up:

- **Control that can grant them competitive advantage.** Aligned timelines eliminate schools' strategic efforts to time their applications and acceptance dates in a way that forces parents to select schools without knowing the lottery results from other schools to which they have applied. Charter schools may also give up some control over recruitment strategies and messaging to families.

School districts potentially give up:

- **Some protection from parents opting out of zoned (assigned) schools.** A fully unified system removes some barriers families face in applying for schools. As a result, families that may have found the previous, more complex application procedures too daunting to navigate may now decide to apply to schools of choice. This effect is illustrated by the increase in Boston's charter school applications after 15 of 16 charter schools launched their own online enrollment system.[3]

Q ▶ Does a fully unified enrollment system favor charter or district schools?

▶**Answer:** Nothing about aligning timelines, applications, or centralized matching systems per se favors one type of school over another. (Cities currently operating matching algorithms in centralized school matching systems have designed them to be agnostic as to school type.) Unified enrollment tries to simplify for families the enrollment process in any school and make it more consistent. As mentioned above, to the extent that administrative barriers kept parents from choosing something other than their district neighborhood school, unified systems may increase the number of students seeking to attend a non-neighborhood school, whether district or charter. In cities with excess capacity, district and charter schools often worry that students will be encouraged to apply to schools in one sector at the expense of the other. Setting up strong and transparent governance for how the system is run should help alleviate concerns about unfair persuasion.

As more parents participate in choice systems, cities can expect interest and enrollment to be shaped by the factors that matter most to parents. Research shows that parents tend to favor schools that receive high performance ratings when all else is equal. We expect a city's higher-scoring schools will continue to be in high demand and relatively low-scoring schools will continue to see less demand. Research from Denver, D.C., and New Orleans bears this out: in all three cities, the highest-scoring schools have the highest demand and low-scoring schools are among the least selected.

That said, myriad other school factors, like transportation to the school, before- and after-school care, extra-curricular activities, and specialized curriculum or instructional programs also influence demand for any given school. A lack of transportation and before-school and/or after-school care can be significant barriers for lower-income families and may push some good schools further down (or off) their list of options.

Q ▶ What does it take to get a more unified enrollment system off the ground?

▶**Answer:** Unifying enrollment is about much more than technical details and administrative procedures. Strong stakeholder engagement is required, including charter school and district leaders and families. The time and topics of engagement depend on how comprehensive the city aims to be in unifying its enrollment system. Streamlining only the enrollment timelines across schools, for example, tends to take less engagement time than implementing more comprehensive systems.

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3 James Vaznis, "For Boston charters, a record spike in applicants," *Boston Globe*, March 6, 2017.

Denver and New Orleans leaders' efforts to engage stakeholders and manage the potential for conflict and controversy proved crucial to the success of their ambitious initiatives. They framed the problems and solutions around enrollment in ways that resonated with stakeholders—clearly documenting that the status quo system in both cities was needlessly complex for parents and created far too much uncertainty for schools. From the beginning, city leaders continually worked with district leaders, charter school leaders, and community groups and advocates to grow trust and ease resistance. And they strategically tackled areas of relative consensus first, leaving more controversial enrollment issues for later, after trust had been built. (For more details, see *Stakeholder Engagement for Common Enrollment Systems*.)

Initiatives to fully coordinate all enrollment system components, including launching a centralized matching strategy, typically need a full year of engagement. They also require a skilled moderator who is familiar with school choice systems to guide the design process, and a technical consultant to build the data and matching systems to city specifications. Cities wanting to build comprehensive systems generally seek dedicated funding for thorough, quality outreach and engagement.

In tandem with an improved enrollment system, cities typically produce (or have others produce) companion information on schools and procedures and create support systems to help families through enrollment. This can include citywide marketing strategies on how to participate in school choice, comprehensive guides to the city's schools (sometimes with interactive tools to help parents choose a school), and enrollment centers and/or hotlines to help parents with paperwork. (In Denver, the district produces the Great Schools Enrollment Guides, and a family SchoolChoice guidebook. In New Orleans, EnrollNOLA offers a school search tool. Washington, D.C., has multiple parent guides, and Camden Enrollment offers an online finder as well as a printed school guide.)

POTENTIAL START-UP COSTS FOR A FULLY UNIFIED ENROLLMENT SYSTEM

Start-Up Needs	Cost Drivers
Build the case for change	An external analysis of current enrollment procedures and families' experiences with the current system.
Stakeholder engagement	A project manager to engage stakeholders in and maintain communication about the planning process.
Design the school choice policies	A consultant to guide the steering committee through the enrollment policy design process.
Build the technology to support the policies	A technical team (often an external consultant) to design the matching software and information system to manage the applications.
Educate families	A series of activities to provide families with necessary information. Cities have included these activities: launching a school choice website, developing a citywide parent engagement process with targeted outreach in underserved communities, deploying earned and paid media to explain the marketing application process, creating and distributing branded materials and printed school guide.

Q ▶ If a city decides to use a centralized matching system, can't it just adopt someone else's? Why not?

▶ **Answer:** Centralized matching systems can—and should—be customized to the local community. Although several cities have already developed matching models and algorithms, each city's enrollment system should reflect that city's values and goals for its public education system. A local community should define those values and goals and design the local centralized matching system, as well as the enrollment system as a whole, around them.

For example, cities that value neighborhood schools, even as they give families more chances to choose non-neighborhood schools, could design the centralized matching system to give students priority to their neighborhood school or guarantee access to their neighborhood school.

Centralized matching requires that cities decide on a slew of factors about how the system will assign students to schools, all of which carry implications for families and schools. Such issues include:

- Will students have a school they will be assigned to if they do not submit an application?

- Will this assigned school be a neighborhood school or one of a cluster of schools?

- Will schools be allowed to give priority to certain students, such as those with siblings already enrolled in the school or those who live nearby?

- Will schools be expected to reach some minimum threshold for enrollment of low-income or minority students?

- Will students with special needs and requiring specific instructional services be given priority?

- Will students who must transfer out of a closing school be given priority?

- Will students be placed on a waitlist for any school they prefer more than their matched school?

A centralized matching system can incorporate all the above, and more. Cities are advised to treat it as a tool for articulating local values and goals—not as an isolated technical project.

Q ▶ If a city decides to implement a fully unified enrollment system, what funding and functions are needed to maintain the centralized matching system?

▶ **Answer:** Once launched, the centralized matching system requires execution of the annual enrollment cycle, evaluation, and policy revision, all of which carry financial costs. Here is a general overview of these activities:

- **The annual enrollment cycle.** An office that typically includes a director, analysts, and any parent support staff is required to process applications, run the match, and manage communication with families about match.

- **Evaluation.** Cities generally contract with independent organizations to evaluate how the enrollment system is working, determining if the match was executed accurately and if families of all backgrounds are participating equally. This typically involves analysis of the application and match data as well as parent surveys and focus groups to gather more detailed feedback on which aspects of the enrollment system work and do not work for families. Cities use these evaluations to better understand what kinds of schools and approaches are most in demand.

- **Policy revision.** Central matching and unified enrollment are not a "once and done" proposition. Tweaks along the way are to be expected, based on program roll-out, evaluation results, and other city-specific factors (like demographic shifts or changes in the city's school supply).

We, unfortunately, cannot offer financial estimates and there is no research that has catalogued this. Cities that have undertaken this work are a good resource for getting a range of costs, as are foundations that have funded this work.

Q ▶ What are the options for governing a fully unified system long term?

▶ **Answer:** Governance arrangements vary city to city and are based on local resources and relationships. That said, we generally see two approaches to governing and operating centralized application and matching systems.

- **District operated.** In many cities, the district is the only agency prepared to meet the capacity demands of a centralized application and matching system. Cities like Denver and Newark run their systems out of the local school district. Charter schools in these cities can opt to participate.[4] In Denver, a committee of representatives from the school district, charter schools, and parent organizations orders enrollment system evaluations, reviews enrollment system outcomes, and advises on any proposed system revisions.

- **Externally operated.** In New Orleans, the enrollment system was launched and has been operated by the Recovery School District (RSD), a unit within the state Department of Education. At the time of launch the RSD oversaw the majority of charter schools in the city and RSD schools were required by law to participate. Since the launch, direct-run and charter schools overseen by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) have entered the enrollment system. Though the RSD launched and has managed the operation of the enrollment system, a steering committee of several school leaders and community agencies participated in the design of the system. The RSD routinely seeks input from these stakeholders when revising the system. As the city's schools exit the RSD and return under OPSB's oversight, discussions are underway to shift management of the enrollment system to OPSB.

In Washington, D.C., the lottery program has been housed in the Deputy Mayor of Education office but is overseen by the Common Lottery Board, an independent public board. The board consists of seven voting members: the deputy mayor for education, who serves as the committee chair, three D.C. Public Schools representatives designated by the chancellor, and three charter school representatives elected by charter leaders. There are three non-voting members of the board: the chairman of the

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4 In New Orleans, the state-run Recovery School District launched and currently operates the OneApp process; this will likely change as the city's schools are folded into the Orleans Parish School Board.

Public Charter School Board, the state superintendent for education, and the executive director of the common lottery program. (Beginning in the 2017–18 school year, the system will be housed in the Office of the State Superintendent for Education but will continue to be overseen by the same independent public board.)

All decisions made by this board require support from both sectors. The board ratifies key policy decisions, reviews long-term strategic plans for the common lottery program, encourages participation (which is optional for local education agencies), and determines data sharing policies.

The governance of an enrollment system will ultimately need to account for local context and capacity. Here are useful questions to consider when exploring governance possibilities:

- What type of arrangement would have the ability to accept public and philanthropic funds?

- What type of arrangement will allow for clear public accountability?

- What type of arrangement will best leverage existing infrastructure (e.g., staffing, organization, and technology systems)?

- What type of arrangement will provide long-term continuity in governing (e.g., withstand leadership changes, receive feedback and direction from key stakeholders)?

For more on governance, see *Working Together to Manage Enrollment: Key Governance and Operations Decisions*.

As city education landscapes grow more complex with school choice options, so grows the need to create shared enrollment systems and help families make sense of their options. Roughly half a dozen cities have unified their enrollment systems and continue to refine them, with others starting to follow their lead. Find more information about unified enrollment on our website.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Acknowledgments

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