

How do New Orleans families choose between public and private schools?

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Low-income New Orleans families who are eligible for vouchers are more focused on public schools with strong academics than the average parent, according to a new study by the [Education Research Alliance for New Orleans](#) (ERA-New Orleans) at Tulane University.

“School vouchers programs encourage families to exit public schools for private schools,” said study co-author [Jane Arnold Lincove](#), ERA-New Orleans associate director. “Our goal is to understand how families make those decisions.”

The study uses data from the city’s OneApp system, a centralized application for public schools. Low-income families can also use the form to apply to selected private schools that offer vouchers through the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP). Eleven percent of applicants ranked both voucher and public schools, indicating a willingness to attend a public school if they don’t win a voucher in the lottery. Key findings regarding these families’ choices include:

- When comparing schools with similar student demographics and locations, the average family applying for a voucher will choose a private school over a public one, even if the private school’s voucher recipients have lower performance on state standardized tests.
- Families strongly consider public school academics, as indicated by state school report cards. The top public schools listed by these families have letter grades of B or C, in a setting where many schools receive D and F grades.
- Families eligible for vouchers must have incomes below 250 percent of the federal poverty rate, but they prefer public schools where fewer children are eligible for free lunch programs.

- Controlling for student characteristics and academic performance, voucher applicants are not drawn to public schools with extracurricular activities or special academic programs.

An earlier ERA-New Orleans report found that, among all OneApp applications, families preferred schools with higher grades but also considered a wide range of other factors, including extracurricular activities and proximity. Future research by ERA-New Orleans will help explore whether New Orleans school reforms have attracted students back to public schools, and to what degree this has been offset by the state voucher program.