



**PRACTITIONER
BRIEF
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Missing from the Start

ENGAGEMENT IN NEW YORK CITY'S KINDERGARTEN APPLICATION

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When many of today's parents were students, the process of applying and enrolling in school was fairly simple and involved few choices. In many cases, a family visited the neighborhood public school at the start of the school year and enrolled the child at the school's office. But now, the proliferation of school-choice policies in districts across the country is turning school selection and enrollment as early as kindergarten into a multistep process that begins long before the school year begins. The confusion associated with this complex process can result in dissatisfaction with and a lack of engagement in the school system among parents. This brief describes lower-than-intended application rates to kindergarten in New York City, as well as differences in those application rates among different types of families and communities.¹

Parents applying to kindergarten today must follow multiple steps in a specific sequence and on a specific timeline, all while searching for options that fit their needs. Not surprisingly, some families may intend to enroll in school but not complete school applications because they lack essential information or misunderstand the process, among other reasons.² Not applying puts families at a disadvantage in the school admission process and creates inefficiencies for school districts that must process late applicants or enrollees.³

Pinpointing where and why some families do not apply can help a school system identify aspects of its process that may need simplification or clarification, and can help it target those families or communities most at risk of not completing the process. MDRC partnered with the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) Office of Student Enrollment to conduct this sort of diagnosis and description of pathways to kindergarten enrollment. The partnership focused on kindergarten because it is when many families first encounter school application and selection processes. An analysis of application and enrollment data for New York City public school students entering kindergarten for the 2016-2017 school year shows the extent to which families miss application opportunities at the starting gate to the largest school district in the United States. Furthermore, the analysis shows that some communities and populations miss these opportunities more than others. This brief describes the patterns identified in New York City and in so doing provides a model for how other school systems could use their application and enrollment data to improve their processes and outreach.

KINDERGARTEN APPLICATION GAPS: WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

The analysis in this brief conceives of the kindergarten application gap as the difference between the number of families who are eligible and interested in attending a school system and the number who apply following the system's timeline and procedures for school application. Because a school

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¹Findings in this brief are consistent with recent analyses published by Fong and Faude (2018) about late registration to Boston Public Schools.

²DeArmond, Jochim, and Lake (2014); Fong and Faude (2018).

³Fong and Faude (2018).

system often cannot directly measure interest in and eligibility for kindergarten, application gaps must be estimated using available data. In this brief, kindergarten application gaps are estimated as the proportion of students who eventually enrolled in kindergarten (demonstrating interest in and eligibility for kindergarten) without having participated in the centralized application process.⁴

In systems where all children are guaranteed seats for kindergarten whether or not they submit applications, a child can still be enrolled in kindergarten *somewhere* even if the parent misses steps of the application process. However, parents who do not complete applications (who fall into the application gap) in overcrowded school systems or in systems with an element of school choice are less likely to be able to enroll their children where they want, which may relate to dissatisfaction with the application process and possibly the public school system itself. In addition, parents' frustration with or disengagement from the kindergarten application process may extend into the application cycle for the next relevant grade level if their understanding — or the process itself — does not improve. Late or missing kindergarten applications also have negative implications for district-level planning processes. When parents wait until the start of the school year to enroll their children, district and school administrators cannot plan appropriately and allocate enough staff members to schools in advance.⁵

KINDERGARTEN APPLICATION GAPS IN NEW YORK CITY

Using application and enrollment data from NYC DOE, MDRC estimated the application gap for kindergarten for the 2016-2017 school year. This brief presents the gap as a proportion, using all students who ultimately enrolled in kindergarten as the denominator and those who enrolled without participating in the centralized application process as the numerator, for reasons discussed above.⁶ (See Box 1 for more on the New York City application process itself.)

Box 1

New York City's Kindergarten Application Process

In New York City, parents apply to kindergarten in January of the year that their children turn five (eight months before the start of the kindergarten school year). Parents can list in order of preference up to 12 schools on a child's kindergarten application and the child will be offered one seat. There are 32 community school districts in New York City. In 29 of those districts, there are multiple zones, or neighborhood boundaries, in which residents have priority for admission to the local public school. These zoned schools also give admissions priority to students who meet other criteria including living elsewhere in the school's community school district (the neighborhood surrounding the zone), having a sibling who attends the school, having attended that same school for pre-K and, for some schools, belonging to an underserved group. Families can also apply to unzoned schools that admit students based on a lottery while giving certain students priority based on factors such as those listed above.

⁴Measuring an application gap in this way could underestimate the true gap because it relies on the number who enroll, while there are probably families who are interested in applying and eligible to apply, but who neither enroll nor apply. On the other hand, measuring the gap in this way could overestimate its true size because students who were not living in the school system during the kindergarten application period, and thus were not eligible to apply at that time, can still enroll once they move to the district. Application gaps are easier to measure in the upper grades, when a district can more easily estimate the population of eligible children at the time of the application using enrollment data from lower grades.

⁵See Fong and Faude (2018) for a more detailed description of the consequences of missed applications in Boston.

⁶Students who ultimately enrolled in New York City public schools that only served students with special needs and those who ultimately enrolled in New York City charter schools for kindergarten are not included in this analysis because those schools have separate application and assignment processes. Additionally, students enrolled for kindergarten who were not eligible to apply

Among the 65,297 students who enrolled in a New York City public school kindergarten program for the 2016-2017 school year, approximately 28 percent did not submit an application to kindergarten during the application period (November 2015 to January 2016).⁷ That percentage represents 18,313 kindergarten students, which is itself equivalent to the size of the elementary school student population in other midsized school districts. In a large and transient city like New York, one may expect a number of families to move in and out of the district, so a small application gap will always exist since some children who eventually enroll in kindergarten may not have lived in New York City at the time of the application. However, district systems can develop new approaches to narrow the gap among eligible families who are living in the school district at the time of the application and intend to stay in the district for the upcoming school year.

WHO IS IN THE GAP?

Understanding the background characteristics of students who do and do not fall into the application gap is an important first step to determine where to target outreach. The data for the 2016-2017 school year demonstrate that certain groups of families are less likely to apply than others. For example, as shown in Figure 1, among kindergarten students enrolled in New York City public schools for the 2016-2017 school year who ended up classified as English Language Learners, 35 percent did not participate in the application process, compared with 26 percent among those not classified as English Language Learners. Figure 2 shows that among the students identified in the 2016-2017 school year as living in temporary housing at some point during their kindergarten year, 39 percent did not participate in the application process compared with 27 percent among those who were not reported to be living in temporary housing.⁸ Findings that student characteristics such as English language proficiency and housing status are associated with the application gap are consistent with past research on school choice, which has shown that families with less access to information face additional challenges in the school-selection process.⁹

Those who faced challenges with application processes in one year may continue to face challenges in subsequent admissions cycles if the factors that contributed to those challenges are not addressed. In New York City, less than a year passes between applying for prekindergarten (pre-K) and kindergarten. As in the kindergarten application process, parents applying for pre-K use a NYC DOE centralized system in which they can rank up to 12 pre-K programs; they are then matched to one program by a lottery-based system. As with kindergarten, the school district will serve a child for pre-K even if the parent does not complete an application, but high-demand programs fill up during the main application period and thus are not available to those who do not apply.

As shown in Figure 3, over the course of just 18 months, New York City parents with children eligible for and interested in attending New York City public schools for pre-K in 2015-2016 and kindergarten in 2016-2017 needed to engage in four application and enrollment steps: (1) apply to pre-K (March 2015), (2) enroll in pre-K (September 2015), (3) apply to kindergarten (January 2016), and (4) enroll in kindergarten (September 2016). Figure 4 shows the proportion of parents who completed all of these steps and the proportions who followed different pathways to kindergarten.

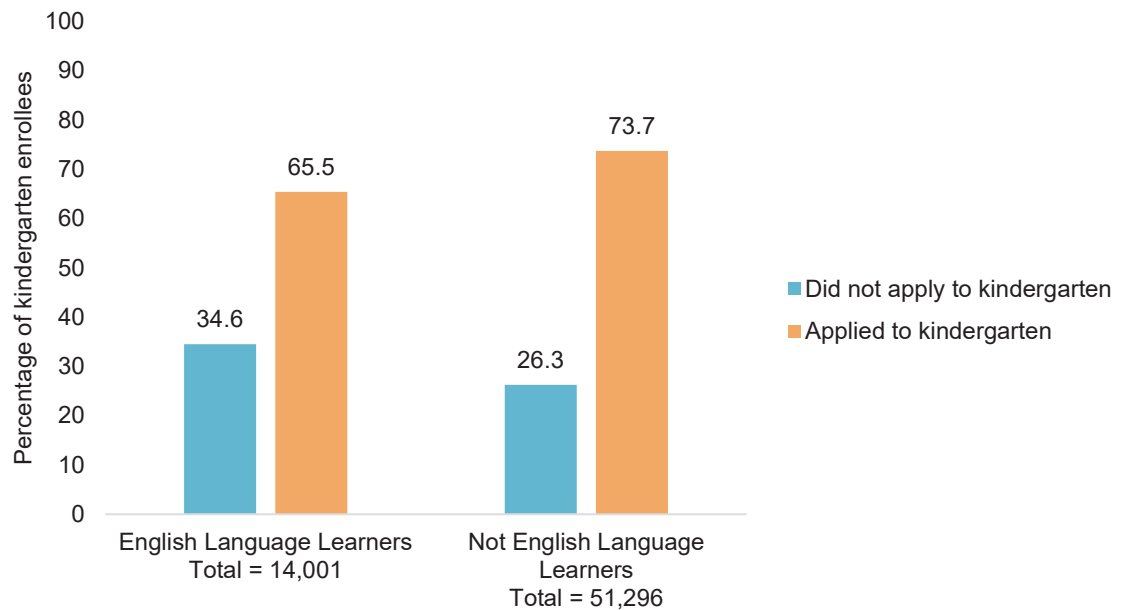
(students born in a year other than 2011 and students repeating kindergarten for a second time) were not included in the analysis. Finally, students who enrolled in kindergarten after 10/31/2016 were not included in the analysis.

⁷Fong and Faude (2018) also estimate a kindergarten application gap in the city of Boston by identifying students who registered for kindergarten late. They find that more than a third of Boston kindergarten registrants between 2014 and 2016 missed the first registration deadline.

⁸A student is designated as living in “temporary housing” if a school reports that the student lived in a shelter or another temporary housing situation (for example, “doubled up” or in a hotel/motel) at some point during the school year. This information is reported to NYC DOE by families and students.

⁹Sattin-Bajaj (2015); Rhodes and DeLuca (2014); Neild (2005).

Figure 1
Kindergarten Application Rates Among 2016-2017 Kindergarten Enrollees, by English Language Learner Status



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from NYC DOE, specifically kindergarten application and enrollment data and English Language Learner designations for the 2016-2017 school year. Students who enrolled in New York City public schools for kindergarten after October 31, 2016 are not included in the analysis.

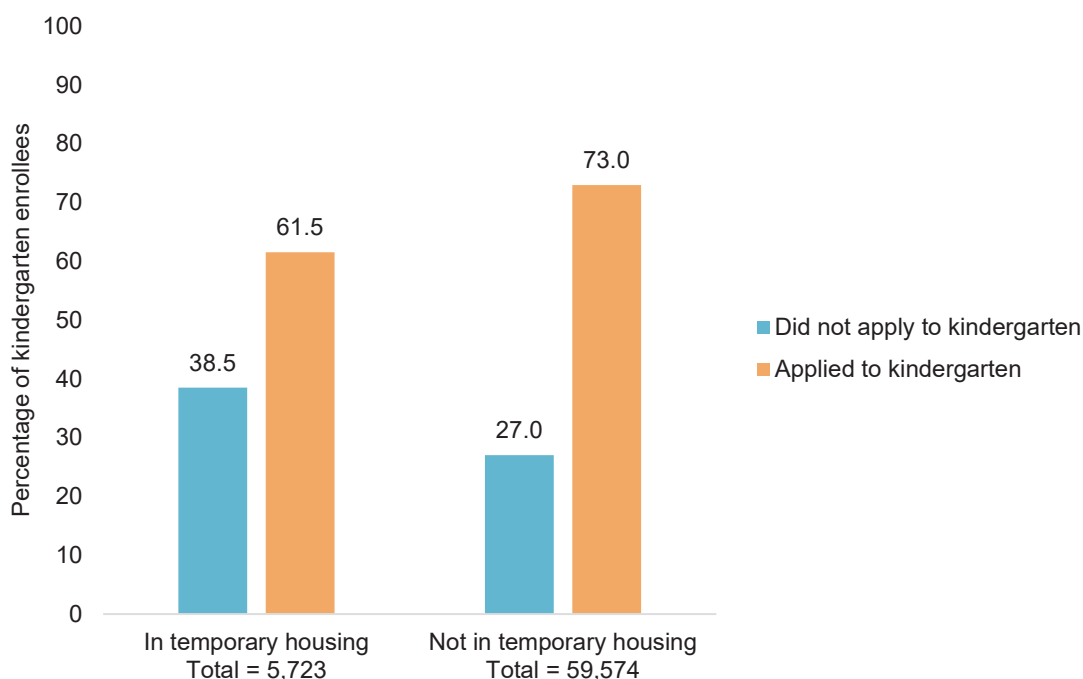
NOTE: Students who ultimately enrolled in New York City public schools that only serve students with special needs and those who ultimately enrolled in New York City charter schools are not included in this analysis because those schools have separate application and assignment processes. Additionally, students enrolled for kindergarten who were not eligible to apply (students born in a year other than 2011 and students repeating kindergarten for a second time) were not included in the analysis.

Among the 65,297 families who enrolled their children in kindergarten for the 2016-2017 school year:

- Half (50 percent) completed all four steps
- 24 percent did not complete the pre-K application or enrollment step or both, and subsequently did not complete the kindergarten application step before enrolling in kindergarten
- 22 percent did not complete the pre-K application or enrollment step or both but submitted a kindergarten application before enrolling in kindergarten
- 4 percent completed both steps of the pre-K application and enrollment process, but enrolled in kindergarten the subsequent year without submitting an application

The data suggest a relationship between application and enrollment behaviors in pre-K and kindergarten. The fact that the vast majority of families in this year who followed the steps for pre-K application and enrollment also followed those steps for kindergarten prompts a few considerations. Such families may be predisposed to participating in the pre-K and kindergarten applications, and may also be gaining knowledge about the application process by applying to pre-K and as a result

Figure 2
Kindergarten Application Rates Among 2016-2017 Kindergarten Enrollees, by Housing Status



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from NYC DOE, specifically kindergarten application and enrollment data and temporary housing designations for the 2016-2017 school year. Students who enrolled in New York City public schools for kindergarten after October 31, 2016 are not included in the analysis.

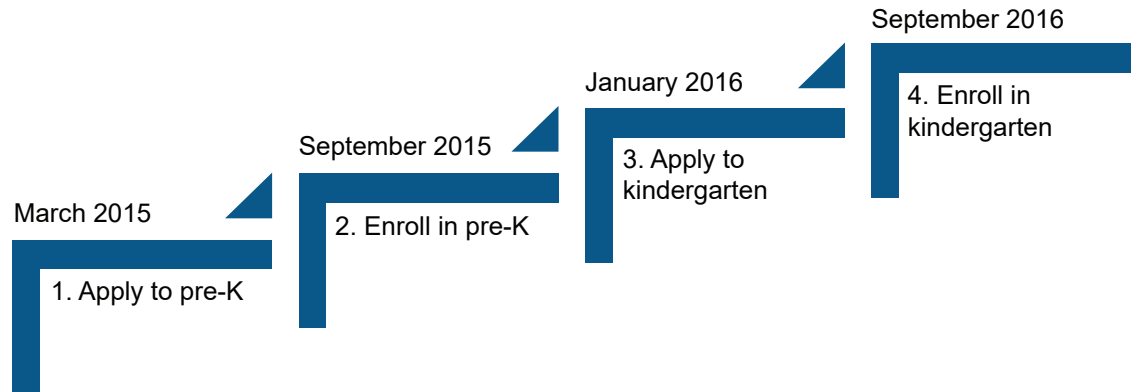
NOTE: Students who ultimately enrolled in New York City public schools that only serve students with special needs and those who ultimately enrolled in New York City charter schools are not included in this analysis because those schools have separate application and assignment processes. Additionally, students enrolled for kindergarten who were not eligible to apply (students born in a year other than 2011 and students repeating kindergarten for a second time) were not included in the analysis.

of their involvement in pre-K.¹⁰ On the other hand, the sizable number of families (15,473 students) who did not complete one or both steps in the pre-K process and subsequently fell into the kindergarten application gap suggests that the reasons families did not complete the steps for pre-K in 2015 may not have changed by the time of the kindergarten application process in 2016. While some of the reasons families might not complete the steps for the pre-K process cannot or should not be avoided or addressed by a school district (for example, a family’s living outside the school district or a family’s preferences regarding pre-K application and enrollment), factors such as limited access to information or misunderstanding about the process can be addressed with interventions if districts can identify who needs additional support.¹¹

¹⁰For example, parents whose children are in pre-K programs will probably have increased access to information about the kindergarten application process and relevant deadlines. Past research in New York City has noted the important role that schools and other neighborhood institutions can play in helping families navigate school selection. See Sattin-Bajaj et al. (2018); Small (2006).

¹¹A number of recent studies have demonstrated that informational interventions can improve students’ experiences with the school-choice process. See Corcoran, Jennings, Cohodes, and Sattin-Bajaj (2018); Hastings and Weinstein (2008); Loeb and Valant (2012).

Figure 3
Kindergarten Application and Enrollment Steps



This analysis suggests that districts can use information about families' participation with the pre-K process to identify families who are at risk of not applying to kindergarten at all or of encountering challenges with the admissions process. In this specific example, the school district would not have information about families who missed both steps of the pre-K process (that is, families who did not apply for or enroll in pre-K). However, the school district could use pre-K application and enrollment data to identify students who fell into a pre-K application gap (9,501 students) and target those families for follow-up at the time of kindergarten application. Moving forward, when a family attempts to enroll in pre-K without having completed a pre-K application, the district could at that point offer the family information and guidance about the upcoming kindergarten application process.

WHERE ARE GAPS MOST PREVALENT?

Factors that contribute to application challenges such as a lack of access to information may be influenced by neighborhood context. As is the case in many urban areas,¹² New York City neighborhoods are highly segregated by income and race, which are factors often correlated with uneven access to information and support regarding school selection.¹³

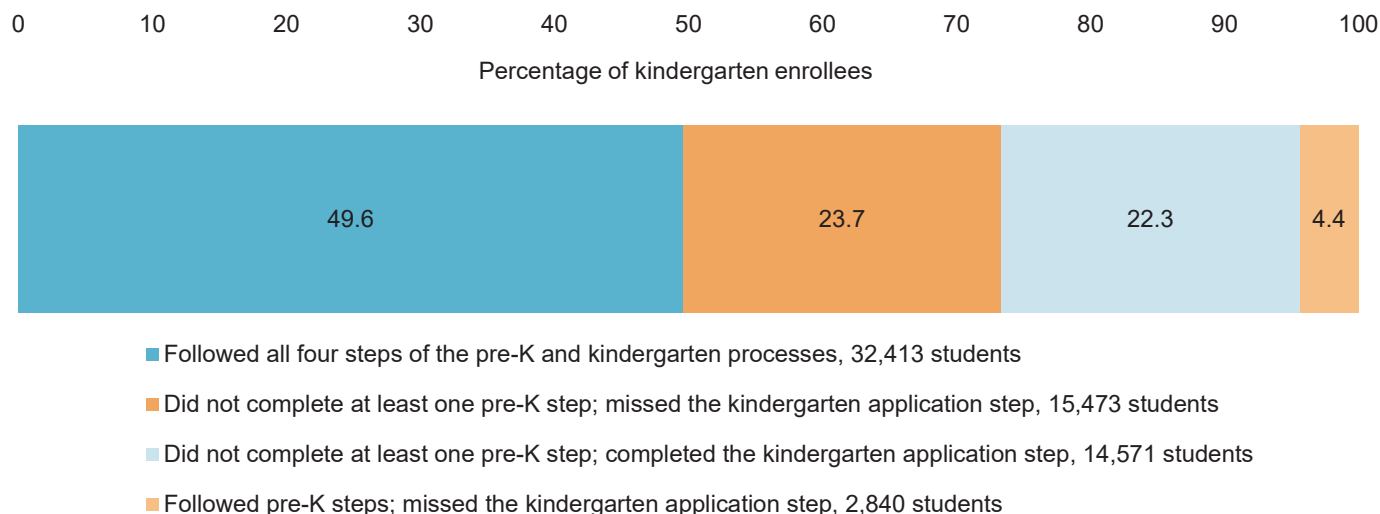
Indeed, the kindergarten application gap varies substantially among regions in New York City. Across the 32 community school districts in New York City, the kindergarten application gap for the 2016-2017 school year ranged from 16 percent to 45 percent, showing that some communities are in much greater need of kindergarten application support than others. Districts can use data from past and current years to identify families or neighborhoods where application gaps are likely. For example, data about applications for past years of students can identify neighborhoods where gaps tend to be the largest, which can help districts target those areas with information and outreach campaigns. They could, for example, canvass in those neighborhood to spread awareness among parents, or forge partnerships with community-based organizations to provide application support to parents they serve.¹⁴

¹²Krysan, Crowder, and Bader (2014); Owens, Reardon, and Jencks (2016).

¹³Bell (2009); Condliffe, Boyd, and DeLuca (2015); DeLuca and Rosenblatt (2010); Sattin-Bajaj (2015).

¹⁴DC School Reform Now's High Quality Schools Campaign is one example of an intensive outreach effort. See Jochim, Gross, and McCann (2017) for an overview of this model as well as lessons learned from its implementation.

Figure 4
Pre-K to Kindergarten Application and Enrollment Pathways Among 2016-2017
Kindergarten Enrollees



- Followed all four steps of the pre-K and kindergarten processes, 32,413 students
- Did not complete at least one pre-K step; missed the kindergarten application step, 15,473 students
- Did not complete at least one pre-K step; completed the kindergarten application step, 14,571 students
- Followed pre-K steps; missed the kindergarten application step, 2,840 students

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from NYC DOE, specifically pre-K application and enrollment data for the 2015-2016 school year and kindergarten application and enrollment data for the 2016-2017 school year. Students who enrolled in New York City public schools for kindergarten after October 31, 2016 are not included in the analysis.

NOTE: Students who ultimately enrolled in New York City public schools that only serve students with special needs and those who ultimately enrolled in New York City charter schools for kindergarten are not included in this analysis because those schools have separate application and assignment processes.

TURN INSIGHTS INTO ACTION

Whether a school system is increasing district-wide choice, moving to a centralized application system for parents to select schools, or unifying public and charter admissions, a first step is ensuring that parents apply on time and enroll their children before the school year starts. Pinpointing when some families drop out or become confused by the process can help a school system start to identify aspects of its process that may need simplification or clarification, and can help it target those families or communities most at risk of not completing the process as designed. This brief shows examples of how districts can use application and enrollment data to illuminate the extent to which families are struggling with admissions processes.

A next step, though, is for a district to understand *why* families are struggling with the application and admissions process, so that the district can design interventions or change elements of the application to help them. Previous briefs in this series have described how insights about human behavior drawn from psychology, economics, and marketing, as well as lessons from other policy areas such as housing choice, can help to explain why families may struggle with school selection.¹⁵ Motivated by the patterns described in this brief and its ongoing commitment to improving the admissions process for vulnerable families, the NYC DOE Office of Student Enrollment partnered with MDRC’s Center for Applied Behavioral Science to identify specific “bottlenecks” — places where families stall out in the kindergarten application process. The two institutions then designed and tested an information and planning intervention for the 2019-2020 school year to address those challenges. Future publications will describe the intervention, share lessons learned from its implementation, and report its effects on families’ school-selection experiences.

¹⁵See Balu and Condliffe (2017a and 2017b).

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