

Context:

Head Start (HS) is the flagship federal investment in early childhood education (ECE) programs for low-income families. Though research shows that HS can improve children's short-term outcomes (Puma et al., 2010) and parents' outcomes (Sabot & Chase-Lansdale, 2015), these benefits are only realized to the extent that parents successfully enroll their children in these programs. Notably, applicants to HS and other public ECE programs typically confront a complex, multi-step process—search, apply, verify eligibility, and enroll. This series of steps creates a leaky pipeline (Klasik, 2012). Dropping out of the process on any step can mean losing a slot in a publicly funded program.

In the fall of 2017, our research team worked with New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS), who oversees and manages the city's enrollment process, to test the effects of text message supports on early childhood applicant verification rates. Beginning four weeks after the application period opened, unverified applicants were randomly assigned to a group, and either received (1) no regular text-message communication; (2) automated one-way text reminders about the verification step; or (3) personalized texts with an invitation to respond to a NOLA-PS staff member.

These text message supports did help parents overcome the eligibility verification barrier in the ECE enrollment process, but only for parents applying for school-based pre-K (pre-K). Text message supports did not significantly increase verification rates for the subset of parents applying to HS programs. Given the positive benefits of these HS programs, it was important to understand this gap in effectiveness for HS applicants.

Objective:

The aim of our work was to partner with NOLA-PS to understand why this texting intervention wasn't effective for HS families, and to use that information to improve the ways in which the district supports HS families through the application and eligibility verification process.

Setting:

The study took place in New Orleans, LA, where a centralized ECE enrollment process facilitates easy identification of and communication with parents applying for any publicly funded ECE seat, including HS and pre-K. Families first apply for their desired early childhood program(s) through an online portal, and then must verify their eligibility, in person, before being assigned a seat. This verification process differs for HS and pre-K applicants. HS applicants are required to visit a HS center to complete an additional interview component not required of pre-K applicants.

Though the centralized application should simplify the process for parents, the in-person verification step remains a practical barrier. One third of 2016-17 applicants did not complete this verification step. Our findings show that text supports can increase verification rates for families, but also indicate that the process is more difficult for HS families.

Research-Practitioner Collaboration:

This first project in what has become an ongoing partnership with the NOLA-PS team presented us with several unique opportunities. First, the NOLA-PS team enabled us to access data that provided for a more in-depth understanding of applicant experiences. Secondly, the partnership encouraged candid conversations with the NOLA-PS about improving methods of communicating information to parents and families.

The district's willingness to share the de-identified content of the text messages exchanged between their staff and applicants allowed us to better understand the experiences of the two groups of applicants. Parents, especially HS parents, were confused about where to go, and what documentation was required. It also highlighted for us several places where simple revisions to communication materials could help clarify the process. For example, text communications were directing families to a document that highlighted the verification process for pre-K seats at the top of the page. Families applying for HS seats had to first, recognize that there were two different verification processes, and second, search to find the relevant HS information at the bottom of the document.

Based upon our findings, we presented several recommendations to the NOLA-PS team aimed at addressing confusions that HS applicants were experiencing with the verification process. First, we suggested several revisions to the online resources that parents were directed to for information on the verification process. In response, NOLA-PS combined information on how and where to verify into one document, to limit the amount of navigation required to find relevant information. They also re-formatted the document to more clearly differentiate between pre-K and HS verification processes. Secondly, we worked with the district to revise the language of the text messages. The texts were re-written in such a way that HS parents were directed to HS specific materials in an effort to limit the amount of searching they needed to do for information.

Given the promising results for pre-K families, and the additional insight the text content provided around difficulties that HS families face, we partnered with NOLA-PS on a follow-up study aimed specifically at HS applicants.

Text Intervention – Part II:

The follow-up intervention was structured identically to the initial study, but targeted just HS applicants. With the revised website materials and text language, text-message communications were effective. Parents receiving text reminders, either automated or personalized, verified eligibility at significantly higher rates (58.8% and 58.2%, respectively) than parents not receiving texts (48.6%).

Conclusion

The complexity of enrollment and income-verification processes for ECE creates a substantial burden for low-income parents. Our partnership with the NOLA-PS team created a unique environment in which research and practice coincided to drive improvements in the ways HS parents interact with the early childhood application and verification process.

Largely due to the success of this series of projects, we have developed an ongoing partnership with the NOLA-PS team. This includes a plan to expand our texting outreach to parents of young children who are eligible for, but not enrolled in, public early childhood seats, in addition to interviews with parents about their application preferences and behaviors. The expertise and support of the NOLA-PS team is essential to our success in this work. Through this partnership we are able to develop a more holistic view of education in the city, and a deeper understanding of how and why certain interventions work, and who they work for.