

Connecting More Families to Early Care and Education Programs Through Streamlined Enrollment

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The New Practice Lab convenes the [Early Care and Education Implementation Working Group](#), a group of early care and education leaders from across the country. They are committed to delivering high-quality early childhood services to families—and know that implementation is everything.

When implemented well, centralized enrollment systems can boost overall enrollment in publicly funded care and education programs, decrease the burden placed on families, diversify enrollment across early childhood programs, improve and streamline communication with families and providers, and reduce the administrative load for providers. This second brief shares findings from the recently relaunched Early Care and Education (ECE) Implementation Working Group. Our first brief, [Family Outreach for Early Education Enrollment: A Powerful Programmatic and Political Tool](#), focused on family outreach. This brief answers an important next question: Once families understand their early childhood opportunities, how do we make enrollment as seamless as possible?

A Strategy to Improve Access

State and local governments are working to simplify the process by which families access early care and education services by deploying centralized enrollment platforms. Communities increasingly recognize the importance of high-quality early learning for children’s development due to growing investments in early care and education, popular demand for digital government services, and heightened interest in information about available early care and education options to support parent decision-making.

These are not the only drivers to improve the way families navigate enrollment, however. It is also a response to the **inherent complexity of the early learning landscape in America**. Unlike the well-established publicly funded K–12 education system, the early care and education “system” for preschool specifically and for children from birth to five broadly is largely a patchwork of provider types scattered across public schools, private schools, and community settings (like churches), and mostly funded by paying families. Just **35 percent of four-year-olds** in the U.S. are enrolled in state-funded preschool programs. Federal programs like Head Start and child care subsidies exist to help families access affordable care, with some states offering their own supplemental programs. However, these are not always integrated into cohesive, approachable systems for families, which can limit family participation. This, in part, is why only **15 percent of families** that qualify for child care subsidies under federal rules receive the support. Families want and need early learning opportunities for their children but often do not know where to turn until their children are kindergarten-aged.

Jurisdictions are developing centralized enrollment portals where families can learn about and potentially apply to early care and education programs. These platforms have emerged at the city, county, and state level and go beyond the online child care provider directories that families typically use to conduct their own searches and hunt for open seats. Centralized enrollment systems help bridge informational gaps, match families to programs with availability, and get young children enrolled. These systems most typically include publicly funded preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds in a range of settings, including school, center-based, and home-based programs, though may also include infant and toddler care depending on the jurisdiction.

Centralized enrollment systems are familiar in communities offering choice-based enrollment (“school choice”) in K–12 education, where these systems enable enrollment in both public and charter schools based on family preferences and other factors. For communities already implementing centralized enrollment, expanding the process to include pre-K is a natural next step. Even communities without K–12 school choice may still need a centralized system for pre-K, especially in mixed-delivery systems allowing families to enroll in school or community-based early learning programs.

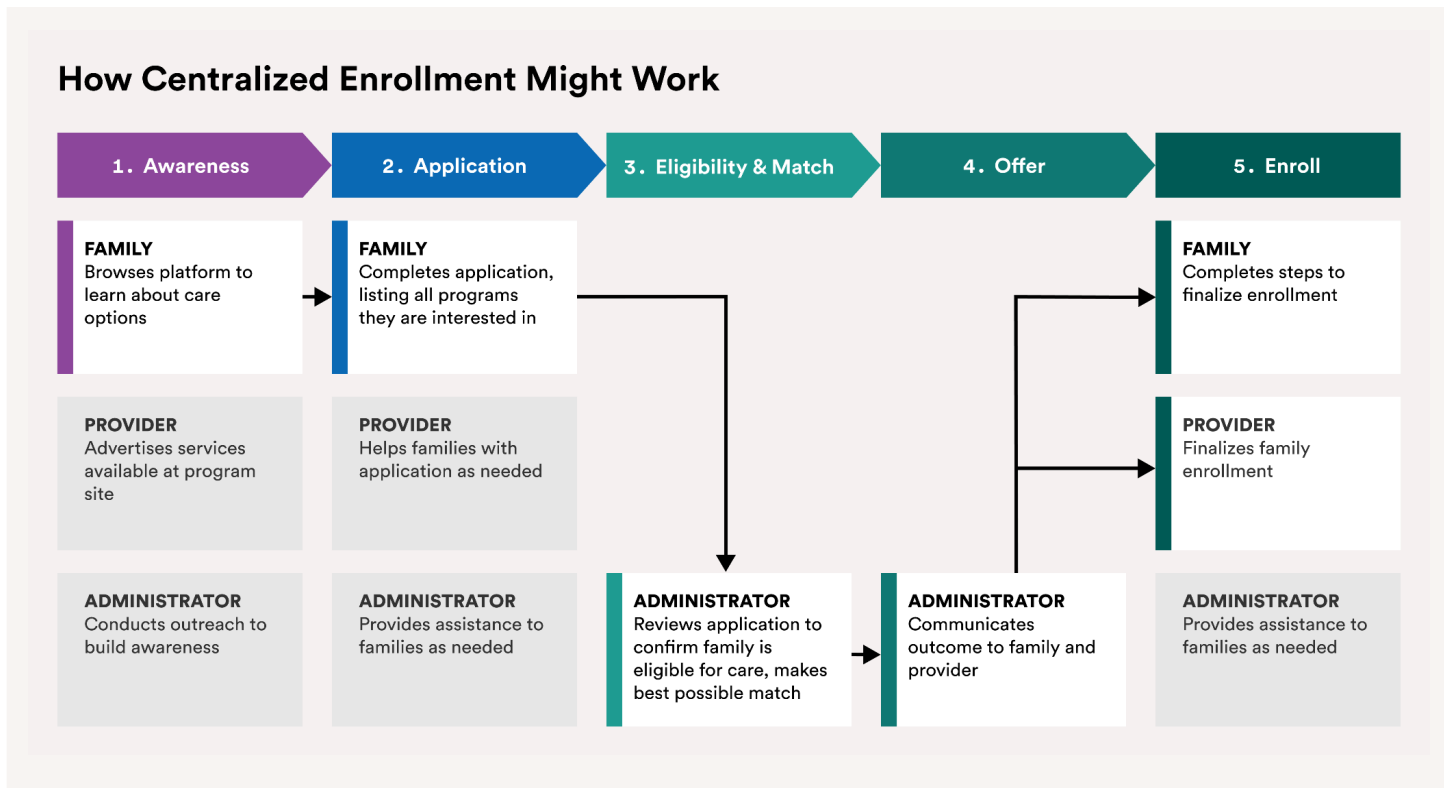
Regardless of the entry point and rationale for pursuing centralized enrollment, there are many design options and considerations for implementation. Critically, building a centralized enrollment portal is both a technical process and a political process. Further, there are important, transferable lessons to take from other jurisdictions that have been down this path.

Many members of the New America-facilitated ECE Implementation Working Group—**a community of local early childhood education leaders**—have developed centralized enrollment systems. Their journeys varied, but in discussions about their respective challenges and strategies, lessons emerged that resonate across geographies. Sharing these lessons with a broader audience is a core function of this working group, in hopes that their implementation experiences will inform the next generation of early care and education policy and program design.

This brief explores what centralized enrollment is and why early care and education leaders might pursue it. Then, it describes different approaches to implementing centralized enrollment and how lessons learned might apply to other communities.

What Is Centralized Enrollment?

Simply put, centralized enrollment systems are online platforms for families to learn about all of their options for care. Centralized enrollment systems exist for publicly funded care programs, like state or municipal preschool or child care initiatives, and for privately funded care, in the form of digital directories and application platforms for tuition-based early care programs. This brief focuses on local centralized enrollment for publicly funded care, though other kinds of portals are referenced.



Flowchart demonstrates a typical family's journey in a centralized enrollment process.

Source: Angelica Hom/New America.

In many centralized enrollment systems, families apply for care through a universal application that works across all programs or a single application where families list all options of interest in ranked order. In these models, system administrators review applications, check family eligibility, and match families with programs. Families typically receive a single best offer, usually from their highest-ranked option where space is available. In some centralized enrollment systems, families can still directly enroll with a provider face-to-face. In others, families must complete the centralized application to enroll, even if they apply through the provider.

Types of Centralized Enrollment Systems

System Type	Governance Level	Purpose	Who Is Included?	Who Manages Eligibility Verification + Matching?	Example
Local unified enrollment system ¹	Entity administering local early childhood program—city or county government or nonprofit intermediary	To enroll families in programs funded through the local early childhood initiative	Locally funded early childhood programs	Administering entity (in-house or with contracted partner)	Philadelphia
Local hub	City or county government or local nonprofit	To inform families about their options for free or subsidized care; may also include fee-based care	Programs that take public subsidy; may also include fee-based programs	Individual programs	Houston
Statewide enrollment system	State department administering early childhood program	To enroll families in state early childhood initiative	State-funded early childhood programs	State agency (in-house or with contracted partner)	Alabama
Statewide hub	State department with oversight of early childhood education or designated partner	To inform families about their options for free or subsidized care; may also include fee-based care	Programs that take public subsidy; may also include fee-based programs	Individual programs (in-house or with contracted partner)	New Mexico

¹Local unified enrollment systems are the primary focus of this brief.

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Examples of local centralized enrollment systems include the New York City Department of Education’s centralized application, which includes all school, center, and home-based programs funded through the city’s universal preschool program. The Denver Preschool Program hosts a centralized enrollment portal for any provider participating in the city’s preschool tuition credit program. In Philadelphia, [FreePhillyPreK](#) unifies the [family application process](#) for all publicly funded sites in one place, whether they are operated by the school district or by contracted providers.

Some cities without public pre-K use centralized enrollment hubs to bridge fragmented early childhood landscapes. In Houston, multiple school districts and private providers offer free or subsidized state-funded care; [Pre-K Houston](#) centralizes access to multiple publicly funded preschool programs across the city and spanning several school districts. Pre-K Houston serves as an access and education tool for early childhood programs and supports, but it is not explicitly an enrollment tool.

There are some statewide examples: In [Alabama](#), all preschool applications statewide are managed through a single portal. There are also examples of municipal and state platforms that help families identify early care and education, including those that take public subsidies and those that charge family fees. [New Mexico’s statewide child care](#)

[search platform](#) connects families with information about all child care providers in the state, allowing them to search for care, assess their eligibility, and learn more about how to apply for care; the site does not include an application.

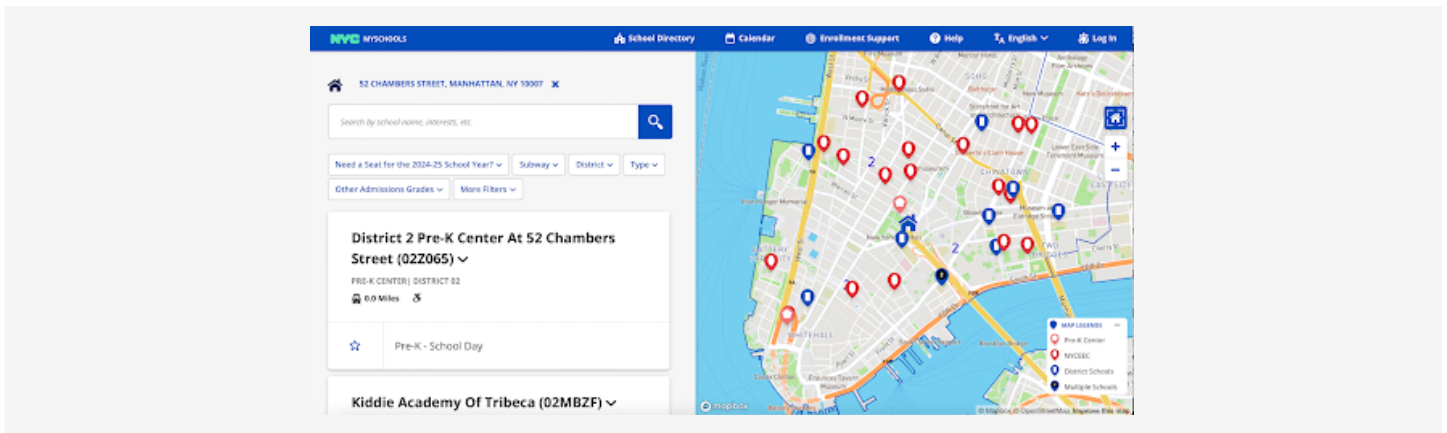
Why Centralized Enrollment?

Centralized enrollment systems offer many benefits to families, providers, and the overall early childhood ecosystem in a place. When implemented well, centralized enrollment systems can boost enrollment in publicly funded care and education programs, decrease burden on families and providers, diversify enrollment across early childhood programs, and improve communication with families and providers.

In their [review of state preschool programs with mixed delivery systems](#), the Learning Policy Institute found that coordinated or centralized enrollment systems were critical for communicating with families and ensuring equitable access. Here are some ways centralized enrollment can improve the family, provider, and administrator experience.

Creates a single point of entry for families.

Without centralized enrollment, parents must contact providers individually and navigate multiple application processes and deadlines. Families research separate programs and corresponding enrollment processes, make time for in-person visits, and submit repetitive applications. This disadvantages families who lack knowledge about the system, may not speak English, and have limited bandwidth and time. Centralized applications put all the information in one place and dramatically simplify the process steps. In traditional systems, families may be discouraged from seeking care at all if their top program does not have space. With centralized enrollment, families are routed to a wider array of provider options that may fit their needs.



Families can access all different types of preschool programs within New York City's MySchools platform, including public schools and community-based programs.

Source: Screenshot from New York Public Schools' MySchools website, <https://www.myschools.nyc/en/schools/pre-k/>.

Creating a single point of access also enables socioeconomic integration in early childhood programs. Many state and federal early care and education funding streams have income limits; as a result, early childhood programs have historically been very segregated, [even more so than elementary schools in the same community](#). By creating a single entry point, administrators can present families with an array of options, help them understand

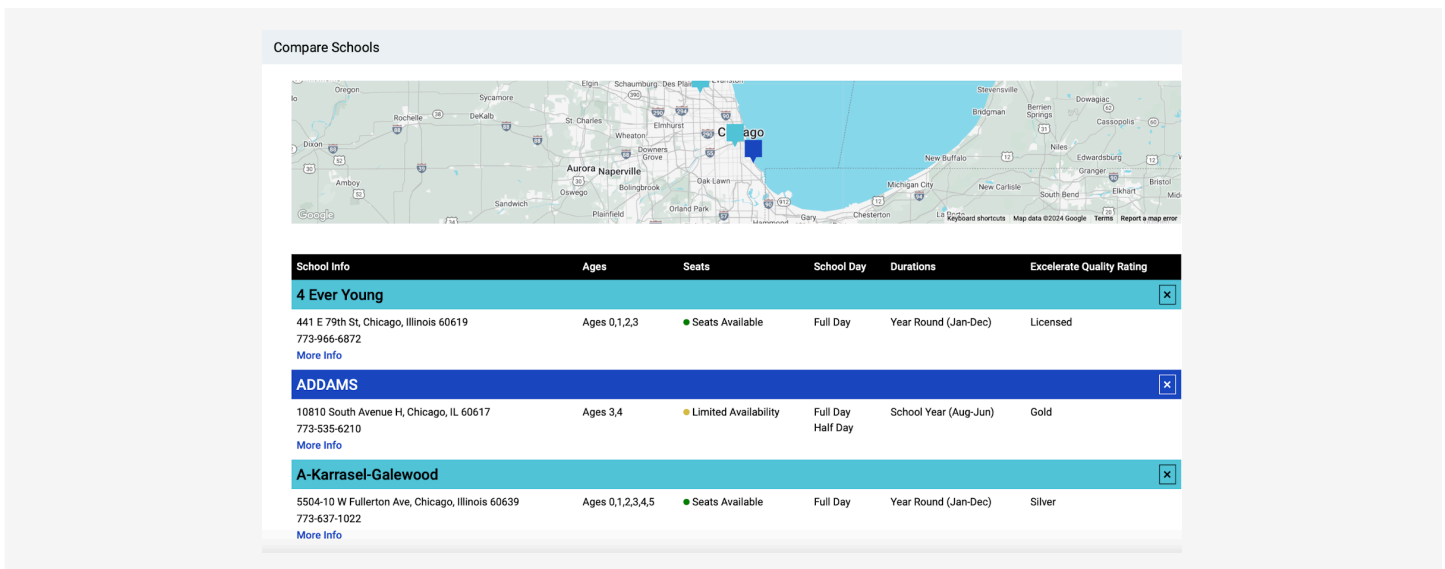
what they are eligible for, and seamlessly enroll children in the same classrooms, even when seats are funded by different revenue sources, given successful **braiding and blending of funding sources**.

Meets families where they are with automated, digital processes.

Centralized enrollment is primarily a digital experience. Without it, parents may need to apply for care in person and during business hours, which can be burdensome depending on work schedules, transportation access, and language skills. Before Philadelphia launched its centralized enrollment system, **families complained** the application process for pre-K was “opaque.” Families seeking help in-person could only be assisted between 9 a.m. and noon—impractical hours for many working parents. Centralized, digital processes are available to families at any time of day, on the devices that are most accessible to them, and often with embedded translation support. While centralized enrollment systems should not replace the in-person or phone-based interactions that some families need, digital systems can promote access for many.

Makes information about quality and program features easily available.

Under traditional systems, families may struggle to gather information about program quality or compare program features like multilingual services, after-school care, and instructional philosophy. Centralized applications help bridge the information divide, presenting information about all participating programs in one place with search tools and maps to help families find and compare options. To give families information about program quality, these systems may include quality ratings from a state’s quality rating system and information from family and teacher surveys.



The Chicago Early Learning site includes a ‘Compare Schools’ feature for families to look at program details side-by-side.

Source: Screenshot from Chicago Public Schools website, <https://www.cps.edu/ChicagoEarlyLearning/school-search-page/>.

Levels the playing field for providers.

Smaller early care and education providers don’t have big marketing budgets. They may not have a website. Centralized enrollment platforms give providers a way to communicate with prospective families about their offerings in a way that feels comparable and consistent with other providers. Families typically find early care and education programs by word of mouth, but a centralized enrollment system may expose them to programs beyond their networks.

Simplifies management.

For administrators of large early care and education programs, centralized enrollment can more efficiently coordinate and manage enrollment into programs. Administrators can navigate families toward services they may be eligible for, maximizing program revenue use and helping families access benefits. For example, a centralized application can steer eligible families towards Head Start services, even if the family was not originally aware of or looking for those particular programs. Centralized enrollment also enables administrative tools like coordinated waitlists to help direct families toward program vacancies, maximizing enrollment across the system.

Improves data for program administration.

A centralized application can provide new information about family demand, which can inform how cities shift and expand system capacity over time. At a macro-level, the demand data helps make the case for increased investment in services. At a micro-level, the data helps administrators understand family preferences and commuting patterns and helps inform decisions about preschool program location.

What It Takes to Build Centralized Enrollment Systems: Learning from Communities

Leaders who have implemented centralized enrollment platforms have lessons to share, and these lessons are both technical and political. The technical work of making the systems, technology, and business processes function well often collides with the political work of building trust with the end users: both providers and families who will sustain the system. Ultimately, the most efficient way to build an application may not account for the complex needs of providers and families, and even the best technical solutions do not work without buy-in.

The tactical lessons surfaced by the first cohort of the ECE Implementation Working Group may apply to other locations planning for centralized enrollment systems.

1. Allocate sufficient resources to build and maintain the system.

A key lesson across all implementation topics is the importance of allocating sufficient resources to support back-end operations that enable effective early childhood systems. There are plenty of cautionary tales against underinvestment, and program trust erodes when families still struggle to access care after big-time investments because enrollment is just too hard. Policymakers need to adequately fund program infrastructure alongside direct services and push for continuous funding for system maintenance and growth. Researchers at Harvard who studied the roll-out of New York City's pre-K program, including the application launch, noted the importance of **investing in data systems and staff capacity** with the skills and commitment to execute.

Dedicated public funding is necessary to sustain centralized enrollment systems, but outside funders can be instrumental in helping to develop them, and creative funding models can be developed. Philadelphia received foundation dollars to support the development and first year of operational costs for its new centralized enrollment system, with future costs to be shared between the city and school district.

2. Map out the ways providers and families navigate enrollment, and design systems that will meet their needs.

Prior to system design, program leaders should engage each type of future users—public employee administrators, providers, and families—and build a deep understanding of how different people might access and use the system, using **direct outreach campaigns** to engage hard-to-reach groups. This feedback could be collected through a

variety of methods, including focus groups, interviews, job shadowing or diary studies of the current state, and co-design sessions. The feedback will inform system requirements and ideal features, process steps like deadlines, and provide potential technical support for all users. It is important to design applications that meet the needs of families and providers, rather than asking them to conform to an “ideal state” that is largely driven by the demands of a system.

Administrators in Philadelphia found that inviting families and providers to attend meetings and share feedback was insufficient. To gather provider feedback, administrators approached provider organizations and asked to attend their meetings. To gather parent feedback, the city’s chief of early childhood education joined every neighborhood’s Facebook group and posted questions to understand how families experienced the city’s existing early childhood enrollment processes.

Once early education leaders understand parent and provider needs, they can begin to design a system that will support them. For example, many city preschool applications open for a limited time, but not all families apply during that window. Some are unfamiliar with the process, are not quite ready to commit, or move homes or jobs closer to the start of the school year. These patterns require administrators to balance the needs of families who want placement decisions months in advance and those who need flexibility. In Colorado, where the state runs a statewide application and match process for its new universal prekindergarten program, initial challenges led the [system to allow ‘walk-in’ enrollment](#) outside of the application period to meet family and provider needs.

Local provider dynamics also drive some aspects of process design. New York City and Chicago have very similar enrollment systems, but in New York, families indicate up to 12 choices for preschool programs, whereas in Chicago, [families select up to five](#). This difference is based on past enrollment and application behavior, density and transportation patterns, and volume of program options in each city.

3. Integrate early childhood applications into existing, familiar processes like K–12 enrollment.

Connecting early childhood applications to other family programs can increase service uptake. One logical pathway is enabling families with multiple children to apply for early childhood and K–12 programs simultaneously, leveraging technical synergies while reducing mental load for families.

New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA-PS) was already running a K–12 unified enrollment system in 2012 when state legislation required localities to implement a similar system for early childhood education. Because NOLA-PS had the economy of scale and experience running a unified enrollment system, they took it on and closely adapted K–12 system rules to early care and education. When New York City launched universal preschool in fall 2014, choice-based enrollment had been in place for a year via online kindergarten applications. The new pre-K application was built into the same system, largely following the same logic and processes but with important modifications to include community providers.

In Chicago, the school district manages the website for preschool enrollment, but it is a partnership between the district, the city’s social service agency, and the mayor’s office. The [Chicago Early Learning](#) site is a [gateway for services](#) for pregnant people, child care programs for infants and toddlers, and the city’s universal pre-K program, exposing families to multiple relevant programs as they ladder up to public school.

4. Take steps to ensure access for families like mobile-friendly applications, embedded translation, and multiple options for help applying.

In New York City, families can apply to pre-K online, in person at a centralized help center, or over the phone with language support available. Providers are trained to help families complete applications, and many make paper copies available or allow families to use computers to apply on-site. The overwhelming majority of families across all income levels (80–90 percent of total applicants) choose to apply online. Features like [embedded translation services and mobile accessibility](#) support successful online applications.

Building in functionality that guides families through the application and enrollment process informs their decision-making and increases the likelihood they will get an offer to a desired program. Many systems include screening tools to help families understand whether they qualify for additional programs and services. Others include prompts and nudges to educate parents about programs they might not otherwise consider—for example, by reminding families to rank additional schools to increase the likelihood of receiving an offer.

Despite the conveniences of online applications, there is still no replacing robust, hands-on, human support. Even the most tech-savvy parents and providers may need help troubleshooting, and some families require high-touch support to complete applications. Administrators need to have a sufficient number of well-trained people who can pick up the phone and engage with families directly.

5. When outsourcing application development, look for vendors with specific and relevant experience.

Many municipalities work with outside vendors to build their centralized enrollment systems. This approach maximizes technological capacity during system build-out without requiring new permanent staff. Vendors can bring specialized expertise and skills, offer flexible staffing, and may be able to work at faster speeds.

Working group members characterized these partnerships as successful when vendors (1) brought specialized knowledge to the table, (2) allowed for system customization, and (3) supported a long-term management plan that made sense to the organization running the program. Many wanted to take over management of the system after build-out, with the flexibility to make changes over time.

Some cities used vendors with existing contracts for other projects to expedite system development. However, some shared that this strategy backfired in situations where the vendor did not really understand the mechanics of enrollment. Though public procurements can be time-intensive, they can help identify the right fit-for-purpose vendor, as opposed to the first available support. In some places, there may be a two-stage process to find the right solution. For example, Multnomah County, Oregon, built a very basic one-year technical solution for the first year of their program. Though it had fewer bells-and-whistles and required more manual work to implement, it got the program off the ground. That gave the team time to work in parallel with a contracted vendor to build out their “future state” system.

Regardless of whether systems are developed in-house, with vendors, or by a hybrid model, it is important to designate a product manager or owner within the implementing agency or nonprofit to manage the process. This person should have (1) deep knowledge of the program, (2) authority to make decisions about system functionality, and (3) work closely with the vendor to have final say in how the product is designed. Finding a vendor with policy know-how and technical chops is ideal, but engaged, enthusiastic participation from within the agency or organization matters more.

Leaders should also consider the full list of tech needs upfront, ensuring that both the family application and the back-end administrative side of the solution are prioritized. Smoothing the family experience is not possible if the underlying system is technically insufficient and does not support program staff needs.

This is a complicated space with considerable nuance that exceeds the scope of this brief, but [resources exist](#) to help implementing entities understand and navigate the complexity.

6. Consider integrating other data systems and sources to reduce burden on families and staff.

System leaders try to limit repetitive data entry requirements for families, particularly for programs with eligibility requirements. For example, administrators in New Orleans use SNAP and Medicaid data to confirm family eligibility for child care assistance programs. Many cities maintain a ‘family profile’ in their enrollment systems, so parents only have to enter certain types of data once for multiple children.

When Philadelphia built its centralized application, administrators wanted families to answer just one set of questions to determine eligibility for Head Start, state-funded pre-K, and locally funded pre-K. Leaders with deep knowledge of each funding stream and its requirements spent hours in planning sessions until they arrived at a single, unified form.

In most cities, though, families [still go through multiple steps](#) to apply for care, which can feel needlessly complex and leaves [low or no-cost seats under-enrolled](#) compared to universal seats because of the barriers families face when verifying eligibility. These challenges cannot be fully rectified as long as state and federal funding streams require that families verify eligibility before enrolling in certain seat types. Data-sharing agreements can reduce the burden of income verification and improve family uptake of useful programs, but they take considerable time and effort to put into place. Start conversations early and get familiar with the [particulars of data-sharing agreements](#) when considering them as a tool for burden reduction.

For providers, centralized enrollment may increase the burden of data entry and verification if they’ve already been using their own enrollment software. Some system administrators put incentives in place to ensure that providers entered data at the cadence necessary to sustain the centralized enrollment effort, and where possible, administrators linked applications with other data systems that providers already use.

In many cities, integrating systems that support children with learning delays and disabilities remains an unsolved challenge. Families often have to go through a completely separate process to be evaluated for preschool special education and receive an appropriate placement. This is an area that requires technical and process innovation to better meet family needs.

7. Anticipate political challenges like provider tension and mistrust in the system and actively work to address them.

Building a successful centralized enrollment system is not just a technical problem. Unlike a typical interaction between a member of the public and a government representative, enrolling families in early care and education services requires coordination with the families of young children, as well as the providers who will be responsible for caring for and educating them. A [previous brief](#) explored how to build interest and trust through family outreach, but trust must be established with providers as well. Systems launching centralized enrollment platforms have experienced pushback and distrust from the provider side, including:

- **Loss of a sense of control.** For providers who are used to managing their own enrollment, transitioning to a centralized system can feel like a loss of autonomy, and this feeling is exacerbated if participation is not optional.
- **Feeling of competition between public schools and private providers.** Private providers sometimes worry that new universal pre-k initiatives (particularly those run by public school systems) will be the “Amazon of preschool” and push out smaller programs.
- **Concerns about unfair consequences.** Many early childhood programs are paid based on enrollment. When the same entity that oversees payment also controls the application process, providers perceive an unfair power dynamic and may feel like they are being punished for something they cannot control.
- **Unfair standards.** Centralized enrollment can emphasize differences between program types—for example, some have fees and others do not, which may be out of their control; providers that take certain types of public funding may charge sliding scale fees. This can unintentionally steer families away from some programs in favor of others.

New York City’s shift to a unified application—carried out under the oversight of a big city bureaucracy—represented a loss in autonomy for private providers. The creation of Pre-K for All increased program choices and spurred changes in family behavior. Many programs saw shake-ups in enrollment, and providers interpreted enrollment drops as intentional impacts of the new program. Many found the algorithm opaque and were deeply bothered by the information asymmetry; the city had all the data, and they had none of it. Public schools were the competition, and providers felt inherently disadvantaged.

Over time, the New York City team tried several strategies to build trust with providers around the enrollment system, including the use of advisory groups made up of advocates, community leaders, program leaders, and parent leaders to provide feedback on critical decisions. The city later determined that the advisory group structure was necessary but insufficient. They created a shared leadership body just for program leaders from community-based organizations who were empowered to hold the city accountable. Starting this collaborative approach even earlier could have helped avoid these valid frustrations.

Many other programs have developed formal structures to engage providers in decision-making and facilitate transparency. From the outset, New Orleans was thoughtful about creating a structure for shared leadership and decision-making with private providers. The New Orleans Early Education Network (NOEEN) Steering Committee and Coordinated Enrollment Subcommittee **includes early education partners from every funding source**, as well as an elected official, a city representative, parents, and other key stakeholders. This group sets enrollment policy, approves seat allocation recommendations, and works on quality and access. There are now stakeholder groups like NOEEN in many parishes across Louisiana modeled off of this structure.

Stakeholders beyond providers may have strong reactions to the launch of a centralized enrollment system. Because centralized enrollment might encroach on the scope of work for **Child Care Resource and Referral** organizations, local leaders should consider how they can leverage these organizations to provide other services related to enrollment or to manage, collect, and share certain data. Centralized enrollment systems do not obviate the need for resource and referral networks; to the contrary, enrollment systems can provide parents with basic information so resource and referral networks can focus on delivering higher-touch services to families.

8. Limit failures—but embrace them as opportunities to improve in the future.

Many resources now exist for governments of all sizes as they develop, build, launch, and continue to improve new technologies and platforms—including tips on everything from **procurement and selecting high-quality vendors**, **de-risking tech launches**, and **ongoing product management**. Even with the best planning and

intentions, it is unlikely to launch a perfect platform on day one. **Many cities faced** media backlash as enrollment websites crashed when applications opened, for example, and new needs will arise with continued system use. For example, New Orleans **added new tools** into its preschool application years after the launch to help parents compare program options and review performance information about each program. Administrators should collect continuous feedback from parents and providers and continue to iterate based on that input. This underscores the importance of working with vendors that will allow for continuous system evolution without charging significant fees for each change.

Conclusion

Too many families in America aren't accessing the care and early childhood programs that are available to them. It's not because they don't want or need them—it's because it's too hard to find a spot and enroll. Early childhood education program administrators in every locality are fighting an uphill battle against fragmentation. Centralized enrollment is one strategy that administrators can deploy to streamline and simplify processes for families, increasing the likelihood they will enroll their child in high-quality care and education programs. We hope these lessons from the field, from different cities, counties, and states that have developed centralized enrollment systems already, can help leaders avoid common pitfalls so that we can all better serve families.

Acknowledgments

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