

# Early Childhood

## Community Conversations



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June 4, 2024

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**In 2022, New Orleans voters turned out to vote in a springtime election to support one issue: a parish-wide millage to fund additional seats in early childhood education centers.** Investing in early childhood education can change the trajectory for children and for communities. Access to early childhood education prepares children for school, builds social skills, allows parents to work, and can provide jobs for community members. The funding for these additional seats has already started to support families and children in New Orleans. We were excited to reconnect with the community members that we engaged ahead of the 2022 election to hear about their experiences with the program that they supported when they turned out to vote.

Power Coalition is proud to work in deep partnership with Agenda for Children to expand access to early childhood education for New Orleans and Louisiana children and communities.



In Solidarity,

*ASHLEY SHELTON*

Founder, President, and CEO

Power Coalition for Equity & Justice

### BACKGROUND

In 2022, New Orleans passed a parish-wide ballot measure that created a new millage that added \$50 annually on each \$100,000 of property value to support the quality of early childhood education and build the capacity of the early childhood sector.

**This is estimated to raise about \$21 million a year and will serve at least 1,000 of the estimated 8,300 children who are eligible for the City Seats program.** In 2023, City Seats expanded and started enrolling additional children, though some families are not aware that they can participate in the program.

In fall 2023, Power Coalition returned to communities that had been canvassed ahead of the 2022 election to ensure that now that the millage had passed, community members understood how they could benefit from the policy change. Canvassers knocked on doors in the West Bank and New Orleans East, inviting people to join the community conversations, asking questions, and in some cases helping families enroll in the City Seats program.

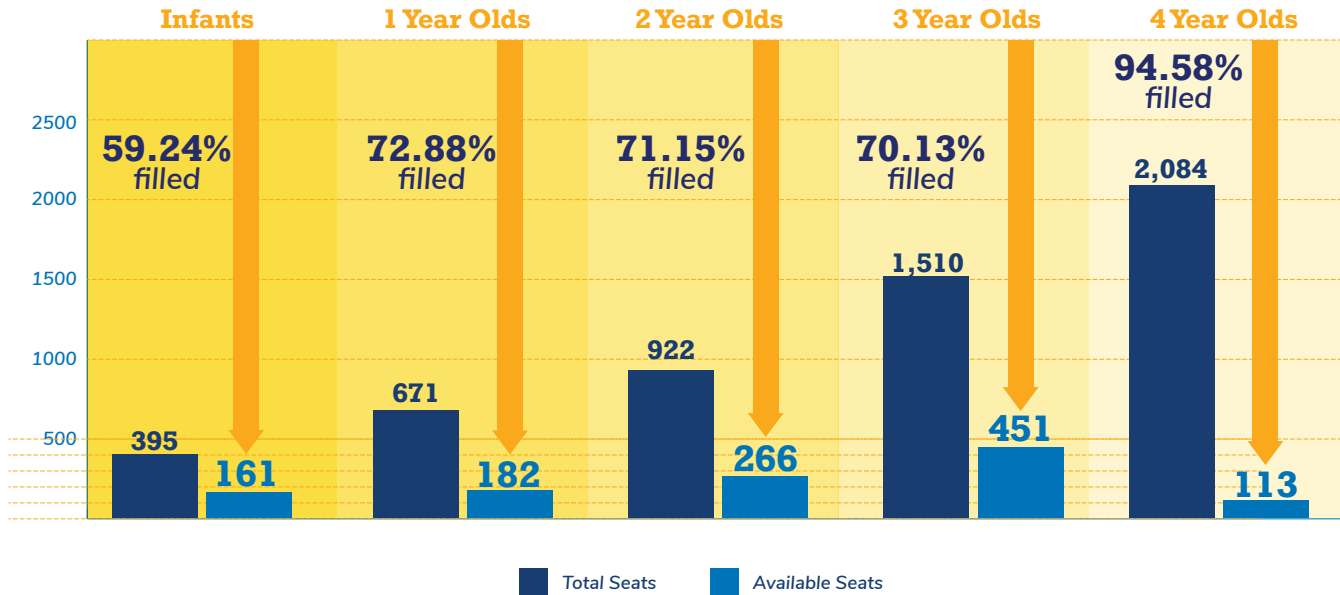
As a direct result of the millage, the number of children enrolled in early childhood programs has grown by 1500 seats in New Orleans. By December 2023, virtually every spot in the City Seats program was filled. **However, there are still free seats available through other funding sources to bring children into early childhood education programs.**

Seats have gone unfilled for several reasons, including more stringent eligibility and documentation requirements for state-funded seats and the release of funding after the start of the school year, months after the initial (Main Round) application process had closed. The New Orleans Early Education Network (NOEEN) Steering Committee, which oversees enrollment policy for publicly funded programs in New Orleans, **has identified ways to move children and families from the waitlist to fill spots**, prioritizing siblings of existing program participants and ensuring that families are able to complete all outstanding paperwork to move them through the system.

***“It was helpful for someone to come to my house to let me know. It gave me the opportunity to ask questions and gain more information”***

**-MEMBER, FRANKLIN AVE BAPTIST CHURCH**

## Enrolled and vacant seats in early childhood programs as of December 6, 2023\*



\*Funding Sources: City Seats, ECEF, CCAP B-3, Early Head Start, Head Start, NSECD, LA4

### COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS



### Field Outreach:

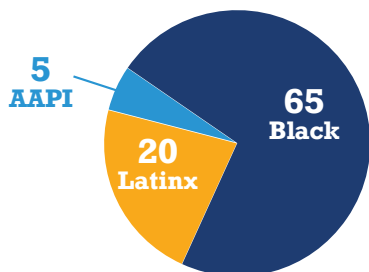
Early Childhood Conversations

#### Target:

Voters Of Color (Black, Latinx, AAPI)



### PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS



AAPI Voters	865
Latinx Voters	1,658
Black Voters	30,154

**Power Coalition hosts “Community Conversations” about a variety of topics to hear directly from community members about their experiences.** These conversations are held across the state, particularly in communities of color that have been historically marginalized.

**There are early indicators of success from the 2022 New Orleans early childhood education millage. With increasing enrollment and more families becoming aware of the program, we expect to see more seats fill throughout the parish.**

Successful childcare prioritizes accessibility, ensuring that families can access childcare services easily within their communities or near their workplace. As we talked with community members, we saw that while many people knew about the program, but there were still barriers that prevented many community members from accessing the programs.

Though we returned to communities that we canvassed ahead of the 2022 elections, we found that some families, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, were unaware of the benefits available to them, resulting in missed opportunities for assistance. Some of the key obstacles and proposed community solutions include:

➔ **In some cases, families thought they made too much money or didn’t know how to navigate the application process.** The families we spoke with suggested that working directly with community outreach workers would have made it easier for them to know whether they’re eligible and how to successfully

apply for an early care and education seat. Other communities have used tools such as eligibility screeners to help families understand whether they’re eligible for free or subsidized child care. New Orleans Public Schools launched a public awareness campaign in the fall, including a new application guide, which should help more families understand the process

*“I make 60k with four kids... I was told I made too much money but after asking someone else I learned I qualify for a millage seat. **The information is confusing**”*

**-MOTHER, 27, NEW ORLEANS EAST**

➔ **Families who do not speak English were encountering extreme difficulties in navigating the system and knowing how to apply for the programs.** The Spanish-speaking families we spoke with reported that program navigators from their communities who speak Spanish would have helped them better understand their options, and successfully apply for a seat. Already we have seen success utilizing a grassroots approach to reaching out to communities, knocking on doors in neighborhoods with large concentrations of lower-income families to inform them about their early childhood options, and helping them apply.

- ➔ **Some community members reported that the process can be confusing and that they were unaware of the status of their applications due to inadequate communication.** Some families reported not being alerted about delays caused by paperwork or missing information and not receiving follow-up after submitting applications letting them know what information is missing. As this program develops more streamlined processes, communication protocols should provide timely updates on application status and clear, plain-language communication about required paperwork.

*“I applied for a millage seat for my grand baby who I have custody of and did not hear anything for months. I thought they lost my application.”*

**-BLACK GRANDMOTHER, 55,  
NEW ORLEANS EAST**

- ➔ **People with children who have disabilities or more complex needs expressed frustrations with navigating the system because there was a perception that there may be fewer seats available for their children, or fewer centers that offer the specific support that their child needed.** This leads to longer wait times for these families and additional steps to ensure that their children have access to appropriate programs and services. Parents we spoke with suggested that the process would have been easier for them if it was clearer

which additional services were available at different centers, or if there were centers that specialized in supporting children with particular needs.

- ➔ **There are not enough programs in New Orleans East and the West Bank.** The community conversations that we hosted in the West Bank and New Orleans East noted the lack of quality care centers in these neighborhoods. Some participants felt like these areas have been under invested in post-Katrina and cited lack of businesses as one of the reasons there are not enough quality child care centers. Participants pointed out that investments in early childhood centers could make the areas more attractive to businesses looking to move to the area in addition to supporting local families.

**In addition to supporting more families, the millage has made working in early learning centers a better career choice for some people.** The expansion of the programs will add to the workforce and there are efforts to increase the pay and benefits to workers in these roles. This will reduce the staff turnover, support career development, and bring new jobs to neighborhoods that have been underinvested in.

The community conversations demonstrated that there is both support for and interest in these programs. Though there has been some confusion about the program, our canvassers and these community conversations, demonstrated that the direct outreach to families is a powerful tool to ensure that the children most in need of child care can get into these new programs and that the broader community understands how to navigate the process.

*“You need to come into the communities...families don’t go this church. **The reason why we are here is because someone knocked on my door and told me and I’ve been trying to get my children into childcare for two years.**”*

**-MOTHER IN NEW ORLEANS EAST**

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **It’s crucial to engage directly with communities to raise awareness about available early child care programs.**

Door-to-door outreach, community events, and partnerships with local organizations can help reach families who may not be connected through traditional channels. Additionally, all of this work needs to be responsive to language barriers and be proactive about having materials and staff that can communicate with families in their language of choice and people from their community engaging them.

Power Coalition and our partners have been canvassing in communities for years. From experience, we know that **many people do not know about programs that they are eligible for and many communities do not have access to information about services.**

A more targeted approach using canvassers as program navigators to build relationships with individuals, and connect families with resources, will create more equitable outcomes. Additionally, program navigators can walk participants through the steps, follow up if there is additional

information needed, and ensure that questions are answered in a timely manner. There was a sense from some participants that people needed to “know someone” to get a seat in the program. Though this is not the case, it demonstrates that the system can be difficult to navigate and that there would be positive outcomes to having more people involved in helping families that have not been supported through traditional programs.

Though some people are aware that these programs exist, many people indicated that they did not know if they would qualify or how to apply for the program. In addition to the initial outreach, workshops or informational sessions that educate parents about the different types of child care programs available, eligibility criteria, and how to navigate the system effectively will move families from knowing the information to enrolling their children. There are community-based organizations that already have connections in communities such as WIC, faith-based groups, and neighborhood schools. Others that should be trained in this information so that they can also serve as trusted community members who can help people navigate this process. Empowering parents with knowledge and resources can help them advocate for their children and navigate the enrollment process more confidently.

*“**There was no one who could help me. I know people who know people at the district and that is how they got a seat but I don’t know anyone**”*

**-LATINO MOTHER, AGE UNKNOWN**



New Orleans is a multi-racial and multi-ethnic city. **In our community conversations, we found that people who spoke Vietnamese or Spanish were less likely to be enrolled in these programs or know how to navigate the system.** There should be additional outreach and program navigators to support BIPOC and non-english speaking communities in enrolling in this program.

Finally, ongoing evaluation and adaptation are essential for the long-term success of childcare initiatives. Monitoring outcomes, collecting feedback, and making adjustments based on data and insights help ensure that the initiative remains responsive to evolving needs and priorities. Continued engagement with the community and stakeholders will be crucial for the success of this program. This will involve listening to the needs and concerns of families, childcare providers, educators, and policymakers to develop effective strategies and solutions.

**When we pass policy that centers people, we have to make sure the people who it positively impacts know that there are new policies and programs to support them.** Continued underinvestment and disenfranchisement has built distrust in systems. It is critical that new program roll outs engage organizations and people that know the target population to support the trust building and create a more transparent process.

***“You do know how excited I am to see this policy in action”***

**-COMMUNITY LEADER, NEW ORLEANS, WEST BANK**