Automating School Choice Enrollment in the Real World | SchoolMint

How 3 K12 School Systems Took Their Applications & Lotteries Online

Schools and districts using a paper-based school application and lottery process know the challenges: missing forms, cryptic handwriting, and, hours and hours of manual data entry.

"We had 13 different programs and six different paper-based applications," says Mandele Davis, school choice project manager at **Spring Branch Independent School District** (ISD), in Houston, Texas.

It's not just staff struggling to keep up with multiple applications, deadlines, and rules; parents can easily get overwhelmed too. It's not hard to see how enrollment numbers can be negatively impacted.

But can switching to an online system for applications and lotteries make a difference? What are the benefits to automating, what are the challenges, and what does it look like in the real world?

Three school systems originally shared their experiences in three SchoolMint webinars. This post distills it all down so you can read about their motivations, outcomes, and lessons learned from taking their processes online.

Mandele Davis, School Choice Project Manager
Spring Branch ISD | **Public school district** | **Houston, TX**

35,000 students | 46 schools & programs

Trey Thompson, Enrollment Operations Manager
[Noble Network of Charter Schools](#) | Public charter school network |
Chicago, IL
12,000 students | 18 campuses

Charlie Wolfson, Director of Project Management
[Alliance College-Ready Public Schools](#) | Public charter school
network | Los Angeles, CA
12,500 students | 28 schools

Why Automate?

"There was a realization that as our scale was getting bigger, the old way was just not going to be sustainable. We needed a method we could take to scale much more efficiently and be confident in the results."

— Trey Thompson, Noble Network of Charter Schools

Each school system had its reasons for going paperless, but it came down to three primary motivations.

Efficiency and time savings. There was little doubt that going paperless would cut way down on manual data entry and save countless hours of staff time.

For Noble Network, a growing charter organization, a paper-based system was increasingly difficult to scale, especially when thousands of applications per week would come pouring in as the deadline loomed.

For its part, Spring Branch ISD needed to consolidate six different applications into one common application and at the same time preserve the

preferences for each of its nine lotteries.

Charlie Wolfson, director of project management for Alliance College-Ready Schools, says they hoped that modernizing the process would also eliminate the need to manually re-enter data into the student information system (SIS).

Improved data quality and transparency. High-quality, reliable data builds trust, brings better transparency, and helps ensure compliance—key motivators for all three organizations to go online.
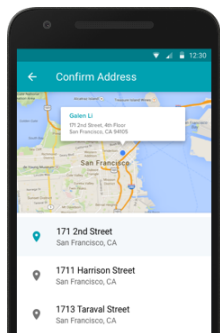
All agreed that a strong audit trail was needed to track every user touch in the system, and it was important to have a system that would automatically validate certain types of data and assign preferences based on that data. For example, Wolfson emphasized that Alliance needed the system to validate addresses and prioritize students who lived within the Los Angeles Unified School District boundaries.

Automatic upload of application data and access to robust analytics were both becoming critical necessities for Noble, according to Thompson, and would also cut down on time. Davis and her team at Spring Branch ISD had to spend on application errors — additional human touch points that introduced opportunities for error.

"Remembering who we're serving is crucial. Parents are our audience as well as our customer base."
— Mandele Davis, Spring Branch ISD

Expanded access for families. Across the board, focusing on parent engagement and helping families feel supported were top priorities: A core value at Alliance is "Parents as Partners;" and for Spring Branch, Davis says, "Parents are our audience as well as our customer base."

Many families have inconsistent to nonexistent Internet access at home, but most have smartphones, so a user-friendly mobile app where parents could complete one common application, upload required documents, and check their child's status was necessary.

The Results

"Our schools are able to better manage the application process from start to finish, plus it makes the process significantly easier and more intuitive for our families." — Charlie Wolfson, Alliance College-Ready Public Schools

To accomplish their goals, the three organizations implemented SchoolMint, a system for school choice applications and lotteries, analytics, parent communications, and electronic document management.

After the first year, each school system reported improvements.

Year 1

Spring Branch ISD
Full rollout to 13 programs

- Increase in applications over previous year: 33%
- High satisfaction with platform and app
- Other departments are using SchoolMint for their own processes

Noble Network of Charter Schools
Pilot: midyear

- Number of applications far ahead of previous year.
- Increase in number of students applying.
- High satisfaction with process reported by families and school counselors.

Alliance College-Ready Public Schools
Pilot: 6 schools in year 1, 21 schools in year 2

- Smooth lotteries in all 75 grades
- Significantly higher enrollment in most schools
- Overwhelmingly positive feedback from parents and administrators

Collectively, the organizations experienced positive results in the first year:

Increased reach to the community. The number of applications and unique student applicants increased, and schools could more effectively communicate with families and also focus on marketing and outreach.

Time savings for staff. Pre-lottery preparation time has been greatly reduced by eliminating manual data entry, says Mandele Davis of Spring Branch. And since staff can communicate with families by sending automated emails and texts through SchoolMint, they don't have to print and mail letters or make nearly as many phone calls.
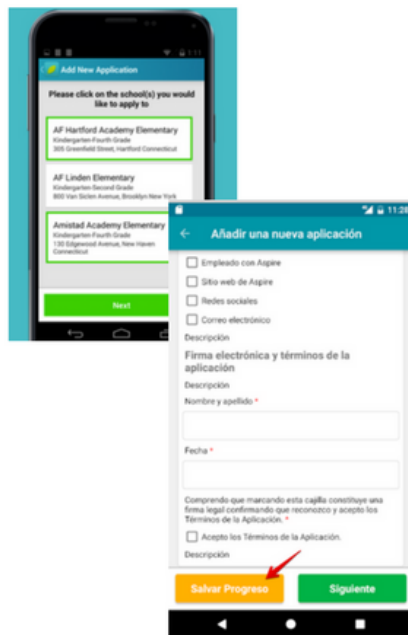
Easier access for families. Parents can apply to multiple schools and upload required documents using one common application through a smartphone app that can be offered in other languages.

No need to call the school to find out their child's application and waitlist status — parents can check right from their devices at any time. They can also accept or decline offers with the click of a button. Parents can even choose their preferred method of communication: text, email, or voice message.

student dashboard showing waitlist and offer

Improved data quality and transparency. Administrators can see application numbers and manage waitlists in real time, as well as view enrollment projections and other factors affecting budgets.

Mandele Davis says the district's enhanced data reporting and dashboard has also helped Spring Branch ensure the process is compliant, fair, and equitable.

For Alliance, Wolfson says, automating integration with the schools' SIS was huge.

"Having one system that houses student data across all schools, from the application process through the registration process, was a key reason Alliance selected SchoolMint."

Adaptable functionality. The flexibility of the platform allowed Spring Branch to preserve all its unique lottery preferences as well as make adjustments based on developing program needs. In fact, other departments in the district are also leveraging SchoolMint to conduct their own processes.

Lessons Learned: Tips for Implementing an Online System

"Be sure to align with all stakeholders interacting with families on the transition process so that parents and student receive cohesive support." — Trey Thompson, Noble Network of Charter Schools

To help ensure a successful implementation, Thompson, Davis, and Wolfson offer these tips based on their real-world experiences.

Prepare for and Manage Change

Switching from paper applications and "visible" lotteries to an entirely electronic process can cause unease. The good news is there are ways you can get ahead of it to gain stakeholder buy-in and ensure a more seamless transition.

Consider a pilot program. Wolfson of Alliance recommends rolling out the new system to a subset of schools in the first year to build comfort and work through any kinks on a smaller scale. Start with schools that may be eager to go online and can serve as champions when you expand system-wide.

Educate staff and communicate regularly. Help acclimate staff by engaging them—particularly those who work directly with families—early and often. Provide an introduction and system demos, offer small-group training sessions, and share updates throughout the rollout.

Offer multiple levels of support for families. Introduce the app and new process to families using emails, texts, and on-site meetings. Ongoing support will be critical—offer various levels to accommodate the tech savvy, the tech averse, and everyone in between:

- **A hotline or dedicated email.** While SchoolMint has online and phone support, offer your own hotline or email support to answer specific questions and walk parents through your process.
- **On-site computers.** Consider providing on-site kiosks with laptops or tablets can use to apply.
- **Multilingual support.** If possible, provide multilingual staff who can answer questions over the phone, by email, or in person.
- **Paper application option.** Provide families who aren't comfortable with technology the option to complete a paper application to ensure there are no barriers to applying.

Plan Ahead for Data Needs

Thompson recommends clarifying ahead of time what data you'll really need to collect through applications. This helps focus your data efforts and keep the application as simple as possible by omitting data that could be captured later.

Also, Davis suggests setting aside time for data cleanup prior to running the lottery—Spring Branch designates a full week. While SchoolMint helps reduce data errors through automatic data validation and duplication reports, you'll still need time to address those errors that the system won't be able to identify, such as duplicate submissions where the parent may have entered the student's name differently.

Run a Test Lottery

"We L-O-V-E the option to pre-run a lottery with live data . . . to rest our minds that the results we're going to get on lottery day mirror the results we're anticipating." — Mandele Davis, Spring Branch ISD

Identify any issues before the real thing by running a test lottery. SchoolMint offers a "sandbox" feature that allows you to go through a trial run ahead of time so you can see how the lottery will work, address any questions staff may have, and do one final check of the data.

Work with Implementation Experts

A good provider will dedicate an experienced implementation team to help get the pieces in place and ensure a smooth process. Mandele Davis highly recommends working closely with the Success Manager that SchoolMint provides. "Our success manager has been absolutely phenomenal in supporting our questions and finding solutions to make certain that we're able to deliver a high-quality product to our community," Davis says.

Additional Resources

Whatever your school system's situation, moving from a paper-based application process to a web-based system could be a great solution, especially now that you know more about how it can work in the real world. Here are some additional resources and next steps.

- **[Learn more](#) about the benefits and features of SchoolMint's Online Application and Lottery Management System.**
- **View other articles and watch webinar recordings using the links below.**
- **[Schedule a demo](#).**

Recorded webinars:

[Developing an Application Process That Yields Results: Featuring the Noble Network of Charter Schools](#)

[Transforming Enrollment in Your Choice Schools: Featuring Spring Branch ISD, Texas](#)

[Streamlining Your Application & Lottery Process: Featuring Alliance College-Ready Public Schools, Los Angeles](#)

Other blog posts:

[Discussing Student Enrollment Efficiency with the Noble Network](#) – Q&A with Trey Thompson including video clips

[Infographic: Build Trust in Your School Application and Lottery](#)

Case study:

[Online Application and Lottery Management System Ensures Efficiency and Compliance](#) – Alliance College-Ready Public Schools

[Discussing Student Enrollment Efficiency with the Noble Network](#) – Q&A with Trey Thompson including video clips

[Infographic: Build Trust in Your School Application and Lottery](#)