



# Opening Doors

## How Low-Income Parents Search for the Right School

Paul Teske, Jody Fitzpatrick, and Gabriel Kaplan

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Since the goal of "Doing School Choice Right" is to improve educational opportunities for low-income urban families, we could not have conducted the study without the help of the survey respondents in Denver, Milwaukee, and Washington, D.C., as well as those parents who participated in focus groups in Denver. We learned a great deal from all of them.

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We hope this report plays a role in helping to open more education doors for the children who need it most.





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A** critical question in school choice programs is whether relatively low-income urban parents have the ability to gather the information they need to make good choices for their children. Choice is expanding, particularly in American cities. Without good information, the benefits generated from expanding public school choice (via No Child Left Behind, charter schools, vouchers, and other programs) may not reach their potential.

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The limited evidence developed prior to this study on parent information is mixed. On the one hand, most parents (including higher-income parents) do not have extensive and fully accurate information on “hard data” about schools, and lower-income parents have less. On the other, more positive side, many parents are sometimes able to utilize shortcuts to get “enough” information, which is often “softer” and more contextual.

This research asked 800 low- to moderate-income parents in three cities (parents in Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and Denver with incomes below \$50,000) about how they gathered information and how well informed and satisfied they are about their school choice. Parents report engaging in considerable information-gathering activities and feel quite well informed. Most parents visit the schools, talk to teachers, school officials, other parents, and others in their social networks as they make their choice. An important statistical relationship between information gathering and satisfaction exists: the more information-gathering tasks in which parents engage, the more likely they are to report high levels of satisfaction with their choice.

Generally, the new evidence presented here supports the more optimistic perspective on parent information.

More specifically, the highlights of these findings include:

- Parents choose from a small set of realistic school options.
- Parents who engage in more information-gathering activities report higher levels of satisfaction with their choice.

- Children are more often involved in the choice process than past research has shown, and the involvement of a child correlates with higher satisfaction.
- Many parents have definite ideas about the attributes of a school that will work best for a particular child and seek to make the best match they can.
- The lowest-income parents (those below \$20,000 in income) engage in somewhat less information gathering, report somewhat lower levels of satisfaction, and believe they would benefit most from access to a paid school counselor or parent information center.
- Parents feel well informed about their choices.

While Milwaukee and Washington, D.C., have probably the most advanced and “mature” school-choice systems in the nation, parents were also surveyed in Denver, where a less extensive and less well-developed system of school choice exists. Although there are differences in parental reports in each of the three cities, frequently related to income, education levels, or race and ethnicity, they are differences at the margin.

From the survey, as well as from two parent focus groups held in Denver, it is clear that parents want to visit schools and talk to other parents, to gather firsthand the “soft” information about school safety, environment, inclusiveness, culture, and leadership. These indicators seem to be closely related to notions of school quality for these parents. They value written “hard data” about test scores and other measurable outcomes, but it is not the key component of their choices.

Even when all parents are free to choose, which will provide “bottom-up” accountability, local officials will still need to monitor school performance and apply “top-down” accountability based on outcomes like test scores, student proficiency levels, and graduation rates. When parents are compared by income, education levels, and race and ethnicity, many aspects of information gathering and satisfaction are quite similar. However responses from very low-income parents (those with incomes of less than \$20,000 annually) indicate some substantial differences. (The results for parents with a high school education or less are similar.) These parents have smaller and less useful social networks (from which to gather information), feel less well informed, and more often prefer assistance from a “school choice counselor” or parent information center. Nonetheless, a high proportion of the lowest-income parents report being well informed and satisfied.

The lowest-income parents can make well-informed school choices, but they need some help choosing schools confidently. Access to well-informed advisors, whether provided by local school districts or nonprofit organizations, is crucial.



# FOREWORD

**A**ny form of school choice, whether new options offered by school districts or new charters, can either support or harm public education. Everything depends on how choice is funded and organized, who can choose, what information parents obtain, and who receives public funds to launch and operate schools. That was the message of the National Working Commission On Choice in K-12 Education, which issued its final report in late 2003.

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The Commission looked closely at how choice could work—how it could lead to good outcomes (improved learning for children of parents who choose), or to bad ones (greater segregation or harm to children who stay in traditional public schools). The Commission’s report offered some important lessons:

**On funding:** Choice can help children only if they can transfer to good schools, and good schools require reasonable amounts of money to operate.

**On parent information:** Choice can benefit poor children only if their parents have good information about schools, so that parents can choose schools that best match their children’s needs and interests.

**On possible harm to children:** Avoiding harm to children left behind requires changes in district policies that now permit the ablest teachers to avoid the most challenging schools, leaving those schools with the least qualified and least experienced teachers.

**On performance accountability:** Even with choice there is still a need for public oversight to protect children from schools that do not adequately prepare them for higher education, good jobs, and engaged citizenship.

Although the Commission's report left a lot of questions unanswered, it is clear that choice is neither a sure disaster nor a sure thing. Choice is a human creation that can be regulated, tinkered with, and made to work.

Reactions to the Choice Commission's 2003 report were positive. Community leaders across the country agreed that the report had focused attention on the practical issues associated with choice and away from ideological posturing. However, these leaders insisted that the practical issues identified by the report—how to fund schools of choice properly, fully inform poor parents, and protect children remaining in district-run public schools—were too hard to solve. Local leaders said, for example:

- “Parents don’t know enough about schools, and they will just choose the school with the most whites or the highest test scores.”
- “Our public schools will be left with too little funding, only the neediest students, and the worst teachers.”
- “I really can’t send money to schools on a per pupil basis. The state requires me to keep money in separate pots, and I have to keep funding activities funded by state and federal programs.”
- “School boards can’t do anything about charter and voucher schools unless someone abuses children or steals money.”

These were not the only concerns raised by local educators, but they are the most prominent. And they raise legitimate questions, which deserve careful attention.

In response, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) launched a new initiative entitled “Doing School Choice Right.” Funded by the Lynde and Harry Bradley, Annie E. Casey, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundations, the initiative’s goal is to help state and local leaders handle practical issues whose resolution can determine whether school choice helps or harms children, especially low-income children in big cities. On being launched in early 2004, the initiative mounted four major lines of inquiry:

- Explore what it takes to inform parents (especially low-income parents who normally get very little information about schools) about the choices they have so they can match their child’s needs with a school’s offerings. This document is the final report on this study.

- Initiate case studies on how school districts can try to help traditional public schools cope with the challenges of choice and competition. The final report on that project was published by CRPE in September, 2006.<sup>1</sup>
- Examine implementation issues involved in moving toward pupil-based funding, particularly legal, technical, regulatory, and political barriers. A report on that work is forthcoming.
- Create models for how school districts can oversee public schools in multiple ways—including direct operation, chartering, contracting, and licensing private schools to admit voucher students. A report on that analysis is also forthcoming.

This report, based on an analysis of telephone interviews with 800 parents across three cities—Washington, D.C., Milwaukee, and Denver—does not tell us all we need to know about how low-income parents choose schools. But it provides an encouraging response to the claim that parents do not know enough to choose well. Parents are satisfied with their choices. They consider themselves well informed. They talk to a lot of people about their potential choices and they gather a lot of different kinds of information. On the whole, they prefer information from people, instead of from written material. They have ideas about what individual children need in order to succeed in school, and they seek to make a good match. Interestingly, students themselves, particularly at the high school level, play a bigger role in choice decisions than most policy discussions acknowledge.

In years past, when fewer choices were available to low-income parents, our respondents might not have thought so much about schools or sought so much information about them. However, only a few years after schooling options became available to them, the parents we studied have come to behave a lot like middle-class parents who have long exercised school choice.

This report does not answer every question, of course. No study can. But it does indicate that educators who argue that low-income parents cannot make informed choices for their children might want to rethink that position.

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1. Christine Campbell, Michael DeArmond, Kacey Guin, and Deborah Warnock, *No Longer the Only Game in Town: Helping Traditional Public Schools Compete* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, September 2006).





# CHAPTER ONE: ISSUES AND METHODS

**A** choice environment cannot work well if parents are not reasonably well informed about their range of options. The theory of markets, after all, depends on all participants having access to relevant information and being willing to act on it as it becomes available. Opinions have varied on the ability (or willingness) of low-income parents to make good choices or find the information required to choose well.

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## HIGH-SES PARENTS AND CHOICE

Higher-income parents have enjoyed choice for decades. Their choices come in the form of the means to select schools through mobility, either by purchasing a private education for their children or by moving into areas (and school districts) with schools they find more attractive. A review of the literature indicates that parents from backgrounds with high socioeconomic status (SES) are generally quite effective in obtaining information, are more likely to seek out more information than comparable parents without choice, use multiple sources of information (school visits, the Internet, and written materials) and rely on large, high-quality networks of friends and peers for advice. These parents also seem to be able to find their way to “market mavens”—a small group of extremely well-informed parents who are willing (often eager) to share information.

Do high-SES parents choose “ideal” schools for their children? The choices they make may be “ideal” from their point of view, but the literature indicates that high-SES parents make choices that they find satisfactory, not choices that are maximal in terms of the perceived academic quality of the options available to them. It seems that, despite access to high-quality networks and much information, high-SES parents rarely have accurate information about a lot of schools and they wind up basing their choice on school proximity, on particular needs of their children, and among the relatively limited subset of

schools on which they have information. A “bounded rationality” is at work. Like parents working to choose a college for their child, K-12 parents can easily be overwhelmed with too much choice and information, working toward limiting the options they consider and moving toward choices which seem to meet personal goals.

## **LOW-INCOME PARENTS AND CHOICE**

What about low-income parents and school choice? To explore choice issues in lower-income communities, the authors led research that included telephone interviews with 800 parents across three cities—Washington, D.C.; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Denver, Colorado.<sup>2</sup> Each of the parents interviewed had recently chosen a school for their child; all reported incomes of \$50,000 annually or less, with about as many reporting \$0–\$10,000 as reporting \$40–\$50,000; and 90% were women (mostly single mothers). These were parents who were asked about their “most recent choice”; so, although the respondents’ children were spread among grades, most were found at kindergarten, 1st grade, or 9th grade—grade spans at which, with or without choice, children are often expected to enroll in new schools.

## **WHAT ARE THE INFORMATION STAKES IN CHOICE FOR LOW-INCOME FAMILIES?**

Most school choice programs focus on low-income urban parents, since school achievement problems are most acute in their communities. As noted above, middle- and upper-income parents have often made “mobility choices” for many years; that is, they have chosen where to live, in part based upon the availability of quality public schools for their children. And, higher-income parents are assumed to be more savvy about school choices and to have the resources to choose private schools if they desire. Lower-income families have not had these same choices in America, due to poverty, residential segregation, and related issues. At the same time, public opinion suggests that most Americans favor choice programs targeted to low-income urban families (Moe 2001).

The key issues here are whether low- to moderate-income parents know they have school choices to make, and if so, how they make those choices, what information they might lack, and how public policies could improve their decision-making processes.

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2. Respondents were distributed as follows: 300 parents each in D.C. and Milwaukee and 200 parents in Denver.

This report's general finding is that low-income urban parents report feeling more well informed than was anticipated. They are extremely satisfied with their choices, and most do not believe that they lacked *any* important information when they made their choice. Those who engage in the most information-gathering activities and who feel most “well informed” are also the most satisfied with their choices.

While there are some caveats and nuances to these results, at least in relatively mature urban choice environments, low- to moderate-income parents believe they have the tools to make good choices. At the lowest end of the survey group—parents with incomes less than \$20,000, often unemployed, and often single parents with relatively low education levels themselves—matters are not so sanguine. Here there is room for public policy to assist these parents in getting better information about school choices. As is often the case with public policy, it will be challenging to target information to the people who need it most.

These findings are reasonably consistent across cities. When the report notes that there are differences or “no differences” across cities or subgroups, that conclusion rests on tests of statistical significance.<sup>3</sup>

## THE LITERATURE AND ITS GAPS

Research controversies have raged around whether various forms of school choice influence test score performance. A huge body of literature on the details of parent choice, by contrast, does not exist. Past work has often focused on the accuracy of parent information. Researchers have acted as though accuracy of parental insights or choices can be gauged by comparing parent responses on surveys to objective information about schools, and seeing how close parents come to the “correct” information (Schneider et al. 2000; Van Dunk and Dickman 2004). This work is valuable, but limited.

Particularly with regard to low-income parents, it turns out that they have rarely had accurate information about test scores, demographics, class size, and similar quantifiable issues, the very issues that frame school accountability reports. But, it is also true that upper-income parents do not have highly accurate knowledge of such features of schools either, though upper-income parents are somewhat more accurate, on average, than lower-income parents.

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3. The report tested for statistically significant differences at the 95% level (e.g.,  $p=0.05$ ) and for two-tailed tests, unless otherwise explicitly noted. The tests of significance are at these levels of confidence.

From the literature, two extreme perspectives can be drawn. The optimistic view rests on the incentives parents have to make good choices about such an important issue for their children. The pessimistic view is based on parents' demonstrated lack of accurate information about schools—information that should be important based upon their own assessments—and by some of the difficulties of actually gathering useful information from schools and districts.

In the optimistic scenario, families are presumed to respond to the incentives of having a choice by gathering information and using it to make an appropriate choice (Chubb and Moe 1990). This follows the assumptions of market behavior and consumer responsiveness to choice. It also fits well with basic tenets of neoclassical economics. Most would agree that more highly educated, higher-income parents fit better into this perspective, since lower-income parents face more barriers. An extreme version of this view suggests that many parents will become “encyclopedic” gatherers of information, using the kinds of support and checklists developed in books like Hassel and Hassel's *Picky Parent Guide* (2004), which defines the sort of information requirements needed by carefully discerning parents.

Research suggests that most parents are not “picky parents,” but there are also a few important groups of parents who may make it possible to put the optimistic perspective into practice. Not all parents need to be highly informed to create a competitive market. A group of “market mavens” or “marginal consumers” (consumers who create markets, compared to “average consumers”) who are well enough informed can make a market (Teske et al. 1993; Schneider et al. 2000).

For example, Schneider et al. (2000) found that while most parents have relatively little knowledge of objective information about test scores or demographics of their child's school (either in absolute terms or relative to other schools in the district), some parents are very knowledgeable (see also Van Dunk and Dickman's 2004 evidence from Milwaukee). These parents, who tend to be relatively better educated and higher income, are more likely than others to place their children in schools that actually are high on the attributes they report to be important to them.

The careful “shopping around” of these market mavens can force supplier schools to become better, providing enhanced choices even for less-informed parents. Market-making parents can also help inform other parents who may talk to them in their social networks as a “two-step flow” of information. Research by Buckley and Schneider (2003), based upon parent use of a school information website in Washington, D.C., demonstrates

that “marginal consumers” do in fact search for school information more efficiently and thoroughly than others.

Another subset of the optimistic perspective deals with what social scientists call “low-information rationality.” This suggests that even though some studies find many parents poorly informed or holding inaccurate information, they may still be able to make a choice that is appropriate for them. Just as voters can use party affiliation as a general “brand name” or guide to candidates’ policy positions, parents can use heuristics or general rules of thumb to guide their choices. A Montessori school might fit the bill, or a Jewish day school or parochial school.

In addition, beyond seeking encyclopedic information, parents can take advantage of their social networks to get information “on the cheap” by talking to acquaintances they know at work, at churches, synagogues and mosques, and in their neighborhoods. Studies of parent choice have found that talking with friends and family is a critical way to get informed about a wide variety of consumer decisions about schools (Beales and Wahl 1995; Heise et al. 1995; Rubenstein and Adelman 1994). For example, if adults are asked about how they decided on a particular car or home theater, a number of answers are offered. Some will do exhaustive research using *Consumer Reports*, the web, and similar information sources, but more will talk to a friend who is an expert on the purchase or has recently completed a purchase. So, although many parents may appear not to have gathered large amounts of formal information in a focused manner, they may actually have employed decision techniques that marketing and political studies reveal to be common in consumer choices and voting behavior (Schneider et al. 2000).

Collectively, these elements build a case for the optimistic perspective. Incentives matter, presumably to all parents. It is plausible that at least a subset of consumers will respond to incentives to help shape a market, and others will use information shortcuts to do “well enough” in making choices. Many districts and states have also made it easier to find such information, through report cards, websites, school fairs, and other options, and this should lead to reasonably well-informed choosers.

At the other extreme, we have the pessimistic perspective. While the case above may be convincing for middle- and higher-income parents, it still leaves open the possibility that incentives and more information are insufficient to overcome other barriers facing low- and moderate-income parents.

Not only might lower-income parents have fewer resources (e.g., time, technology, knowledge of indicators) to gather and utilize information, they may also have a lower

comfort level with complex institutions and less confidence dealing with schools, teachers, and administrators. Many observers worry that this possibility is especially acute for parents who struggled themselves as students. As a result, some low-income parents may not believe as strongly in the importance of finding a good school, and they may not be as motivated to gather information. In addition, many earlier studies found that schools and districts did not provide much useful information. In today's environment, with an emphasis on accountability and greater use of report cards, better information is available, but there are still important debates about what information is most useful and how to report it.

The truth is that in many arenas (from stock markets to ballot questions on such complex and value-laden issues such as land use and stem-cell research) individual ability to process complicated information into good decisions correlates with income and education levels. In contrast to the tidy and simple assumptions of neoclassical economics, psychologists have long argued that not all consumers are "good" decisionmakers. While "brands" and heuristics can be useful shortcuts, they can also lead to biases that do not help consumers make appropriate decisions (Tversky et al. 1988; Schwartz 2003). In fact, Schneider et al. (2000) found that parents use shortcuts such as graffiti, broken windows, and students' work on the walls to learn about some aspects of schools. These are not bad predictors, but they do not fully cover the dimensions of school quality. Furthermore, the integration of different types of information and values into a decision is known to be a difficult cognitive process (Tversky et al. 1988), and one that can be highly sensitive to how information is presented (Slovic 1995).

Above all, there is considerable evidence that too many choices can overwhelm some consumers. They have too many automobiles from which to select, or too many colleges to examine. In these cases, consumers often limit the choices they will consider and make a selection that satisfies them, even if it is not ideal. In the worst-case scenario, some consumers, faced with too many options, become frozen and overwhelmed, either refusing to make a choice or throwing up their hands and making a random choice out of frustration (Schwartz 2003).

A related issue involves the public's ability to process the information available to it. In the area of health care choice, some emphasize research pointing out that 21% of American adults are functionally illiterate, and another 27% (mainly low-income adults) have marginal literacy skills (Davis et al. 1998). Focus groups in California show that consumers with lower income and education have more difficulty than others understanding the basics of how consumer-directed health plans work (California Health Decisions 2002).

About 60% of Medicare consumers have difficulty interpreting simple comparative performance information about health plans (Hibbard et al 2001). Consumers with lower information-processing skills are more likely to avoid making complex health choices or to have others make decisions for them (Hibbard et al. 2001).

Research has demonstrated some related evidence about school choice. Bell (2005) interviewed low-income parents and found that their social networks severely limit their knowledge and their actual school choice sets. Bell suggests that this factor, more than any problem with actual choice processes, leads low-income parents to keep their children in low-performing schools. Most low-SES parents also do not use the Internet to gather information (Buckley and Schneider 2002), which limits their access to potentially useful comparative information.

It is conceivable that many parents do not understand the full range of choice options available to them. Howell (2006) surveyed parents in the 10 largest districts in Massachusetts and found that only 29% of parents with children attending a low-performing school actually knew the school was low performing by the standards of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Perhaps even more surprising, Howell also reported that 44% of these parents (now eligible to make a choice) would opt for another school that also does not meet NCLB standards. In Milwaukee, Van Dunk and Dickman (2004) found that while most parents report that they sought out information on the school elements they tell surveyors are important, fully one-third make no effort to seek out this information.

In terms of using information shortcuts, lower-income parents have smaller social networks that are less likely to be linked to other people who have better information about schools than they have (Schneider et al. 2000). Further, knowing that slots are often not available in better schools, they may feel powerless about whether they can succeed in getting their child placed in their school of choice. This may limit their incentives to gather information. Finally, they may not know how to follow the several steps required in a bureaucratic system to negotiate a choice process successfully (Teske and Schneider 2001).

Problems may exist on the information supply side as well. Even though many schools and districts are doing more to inform parents, even in a choice system as advanced as Milwaukee's, many choice schools (especially private ones) do not readily provide parents with information about test scores, teaching qualifications, and curriculum, the information that parents say they want most (Van Dunk and Dickman 2004). Milwaukee researchers sent trained parent observers to visit voucher schools, and about one-third

of these schools were not very responsive or helpful in providing information to these potential parent choosers. While the “supply side” of school information is vastly improved from a decade ago, it is not yet perfect.

For all of these reasons, on both the demand and supply sides, the pessimistic view cannot be dismissed out of hand. It is possible that, even when choice options are opened up, low-income parents might not gather good information about the quality of schools available to their children and the appropriateness of these schools for their children’s needs.

As Teske and Schneider (2001: 615) summarized about parent information: “This issue is far from resolved.” While researchers have made some progress, there are still large gaps in what is known about parent information and school choice. Although earlier work explored information sources to some degree, it did not go into depth on the issue. It also did not dig deeply into what parents actually do to make a choice, and what information they trust the most, and why. This research set out to explore these questions.

## METHODS

A mix of methods is necessary to get better answers to these questions. A survey was designed to ask parents how they made school choices. The intent was to obtain a large sample so that there would be some confidence that the analysis represents a large parent population. In addition, the study pulled together focus groups to explore these issues in more depth.

**A Targeted Survey.** Most people believe random surveys are the best way to obtain information on public attitudes. But in this case, the point was to understand how people who had made a choice in their child’s schooling had come to a decision. So a random survey of all parents was unnecessary. This study targeted low- to moderate-income, urban parents in cities where there is considerable choice, to better understand how they make such choices.

Specifically, the study wanted to reach low- to moderate-income parents who had made a school choice. As a screening question, eligible parents (that is, those with children in K-12 schools and incomes less than \$50,000) were asked if they had “considered schools other than the closest zoned public school.” About two-thirds of these parents said that, in fact, they had. Denver, with 56% reporting that they had considered other schools, provided the lowest response rate on this filter.



Since the sample was screened based on this question, it is worth discussing parents who were not interviewed. It is hard to know what the parents who answered “no” to this question had in mind. They might have been satisfied with the local school. They might have enrolled their child there out of force of habit or neighborhood dynamics. Or they might not have known they had a choice to make (although in each of these cities they are legally entitled to exercise various forms of public, and sometimes private, school choice). To the extent that they did not know they had a choice, then parent information may be a larger issue than it seemed to be in the survey group.

On the other hand, these parents might have been happy with the closest zoned local public school, so they did not even take the time to consider other schools. To the extent that this is true, it may be a positive perspective on parent satisfaction with schools. Although we do not know the relative proportions of parents in these categories, evidence from the lack of use of tutoring and choice within the NCLB context might suggest that, among the one-third of eligible parents screened out on this question, there is considerable parent ignorance of the full range of their options. The most efficient use of time and effort was to survey only parents who had “considered other schools.”

That consideration also led the survey team to focus on “relatively mature” choice environments, since it made little sense to examine cities that have little actual choice. Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee both demonstrate a relatively long history of school choice. Several different types of choice programs—from public school choice within and across districts, to many charter schools, to voucher or scholarship programs—exist in each city. In Washington, D.C., about 25% of children now attend charter schools and another 6–7% attend private schools through a privately funded scholarship program and a new federally funded voucher program. In Milwaukee, over 30% of students attend charter, voucher, or suburban public schools of choice. With the exception of Cleveland, Milwaukee and Washington, D.C., are the two largest cities in America with long-running school choice programs on a large scale. It is to be expected that the information environment in these cities should be relatively advanced.

Although Denver does not have vouchers for private schools, it does provide public school choice, both within and across districts. About 10% of Denver’s children are in charter schools. In many ways, Denver is closer to many other large and medium-sized American cities in terms of its choice offerings. (As it turns out, Denver has a relatively large percentage of children attending public schools outside of their district, a form of choice less often utilized in Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee.)

Table 1 compares key statistics in the three cities.

**TABLE 1. City Comparisons of Population, Race, Income, and School Types**

	Milwaukee	D.C.	Denver
<b>City population</b>	569,000	529,000	545,000
<b>Median household income</b>	\$33K	\$43K	\$44K
<b>Proportion African American</b>	41%	60%	12%
<b>Proportion Hispanic</b>	14%	10%	35%
<b>Students in charter schools</b>	16%	25%	10%
<b>Students using vouchers</b>	16%	6%	0%
<b>Percent who "considered other schools"</b>	70%	73%	56%
<b>Sample % African American</b>	54%	90%	18%
<b>Sample % Hispanic</b>	6%	8%	43%
<b>Sample % in charter schools</b>	11%	21%	7%
<b>Sample % in private schools</b>	26%	20%	14%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003 data

As table 1 reveals, these cities are very comparable in size (although not selected on that basis) and some other basic dimensions. Total population in 2003 was quite similar across these cities. Milwaukee has the most K-12 children, with 110,000, compared to 76,000 in Denver and 70,000 in D.C. Poverty rates among households are 22% in Milwaukee, 20% in D.C., and 13% in Denver.

Using prior parent surveys as a foundation (Schneider et al. 2000 and Van Dunk and Dickman 2004), the research team assembled a new set of survey questions. The survey focused more on the mechanics of gathering and using information, and less on the accuracy of that information. The survey was administered in late fall of 2005. In Milwaukee and Washington, D.C., 300 parents were surveyed. Only 200 were surveyed in Denver. Although the initial Denver goal was also 300, it turned out to be much harder

and more expensive to reach respondents in that city.<sup>4</sup>

The sample frame was aimed at parents of relatively low incomes (at best moderate incomes) who had recently made a choice about their child's schooling. Eligibility was restricted to parents in households with incomes of no more than \$50,000. While the goal was to examine low-income choosers in the main, it seemed appropriate to include some moderate-income parents, to get some variation on incomes. The respondents were pretty well mixed across this income spectrum. Of the 800 respondents, 766 provided specific income data: 16% reported less than \$10,000; 19% reported between \$10,000 and \$20,000; 24% reported between \$20,000 and \$30,000; 20% reported between \$30,000 and \$40,000; and 21% reported between \$40,000 and \$50,000.

Overwhelmingly, the sample is made up of women—about 90% of respondents were female. (Schneider et al. 2000 and Van Dunk and Dickman 2004 reported similar proportions in their parent surveys.) This occurred both because the screeners sought the main school decisionmaker in the family and because nearly two-thirds of the sample was made up of single-parent households, almost invariably headed by women.

The sample of children produced by this screening procedure was divided just about evenly between boys and girls. The procedure also produced a good spread across grade levels, but with more students in kindergarten and first grade, and fewer in high school. Indeed, only three grades exceed 10% of the sample (kindergarten, 21%; 1st grade, 12%; and 8th grade, 11%). The very high kindergarten and 1st grade figures might be expected, since these are times when parents are thinking about where to send their children to school. These figures suggest relatively high levels of parental interest in selecting an elementary school for their children, with interest leveling off after that until selecting a high school. Additional information on the sample can be found in appendix A.

Past evidence demonstrates that race can be an important factor associated with school choice (Buckley and Schneider forthcoming 2007; Weiher and Tedin 2002). Despite large racial variation across the cities in this survey (see appendix A), the broad findings are relatively similar across racial and ethnic groups, for most issues.

## RESULTS OF PARENTAL DECISIONS

Across the full sample, most of the students whose parents made a school choice are still in public schools (81%), including charter schools. In Milwaukee, 26% of the students are

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4. It was difficult to reach target parents in each city, but particularly Denver, where 100 calls were required to find one eligible participant willing to talk.

in private schools, a figure that stands at 20% in Washington, D.C., and 14% in Denver. These percentages are above the 11% national average of students attending private schools, although obviously the focus here on parents who had made a choice leads to a larger private school group.

More specifically, of the 800 respondents, 52% are in a district public school (including 37% who report that they are in the “closest” public school and 15% who are in other non-charter public schools). In D.C. and Denver, the percentages of students who end up in the closest public school are higher than in Milwaukee, at 44% and 45%, respectively.

As noted above, across the sample, 19% of our respondents are in private schools. Another 14% are in charter schools, and 11% are in another district’s public schools (most of this number comes from Denver, where more than 30% of respondents are in another (suburban) district’s public schools). By city, the largest charter percentages are in Washington, D.C., where 21% of our respondents are in charters, compared to 11% in Milwaukee, and 7% in Denver (compared to estimates of 25%, 16%, and 10% of the actual student populations in these cities, respectively).

## **CAVEATS ABOUT THE SURVEY DATA**

This survey clearly taps important attitudes and activities of low- and moderate-income parents who make school choices for their children. Still, there are a few caveats to keep in mind about the results reported here (and about other survey reports).

These results are based on self-reports of what parents feel and what they say they did in choosing a school for their child. The parental responses may demonstrate elements of “socially desirable responses,” in that parents want to let the surveyor know that they care about their child’s education and learning. As a result, in the hope of making themselves “look good” to the surveyors, it is possible that some parents may tend to overstate how active they were in choosing a school or how much information they actually gathered.

For example, school choice scholars have fairly good evidence that parents will not talk about the racial makeup of schools as a major factor in why they choose a school. Discrimination is no longer considered to be socially acceptable. Other evidence of parent behavior, however, indicates that race matters a great deal (Buckley and Schneider 2002; Weiher and Tedin 2002), both in the search activities and the racial mix of schools chosen. This suggests that some degree of skepticism about a few elements of these responses may be in order; it does not require dismissing the responses.

Another caveat revolves around the idea of a “halo” or “rose-colored glasses” effect. Parents who have made a choice about a school might want to justify the time and energy going into that choice, both to themselves and to the surveyor, by noting their satisfaction with that choice. Indeed, most studies of choice have demonstrated very high levels of satisfaction by parents with their choice (e.g., Driscoll 1993; Ogawa and Dutton 1994; Martinez et al. 1995; Schneider et al. 2000). The skepticism about whether this reflects real satisfaction with the schools or “rose-colored glasses” is related to the broader concept of “cognitive dissonance,” first advanced by Festinger (1957). To get a broader conception of satisfaction, Vanourek et al. (1998) surveyed parents on a range of issues about the school they chose—such as teachers, class size, discipline, and other elements—and found high levels of satisfaction with all, but also with some variation. This research also surveyed teachers and students in schools of choice, not only parents, and found high levels of satisfaction among those groups as well. Buckley and Schneider (2006) argue that a rose-colored glasses effect is unlikely, in part because parents who choose are often those who are dissatisfied with prior schools for their children, and thus are not people who are prone to being “rosy” about choices. This issue is probed in more depth in the discussion of findings about parent satisfaction.

It needs to be noted that this research made no effort to match the information activities described with measures of the quality of the information provided or obtained. So, for example, a parent might report having enough information from their own perspective, but the survey did not probe into what that actually meant, or whether or not parents could accurately place their child’s school in a comparative ranking of test scores. Past work has examined these issues, and there was no need to replicate those efforts.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the questions themselves might mean different things to different respondents. And the questions might mean different things to respondents than they do to researchers. But this is true of just about every survey completed on just about any topic. Except where noted, the surveyors did not elaborate on the meaning of the questions. Thus, the survey creed of WIMTY (What It Means To You) applies here. For example, parents were asked if they spoke to school officials in making a school choice. For some parents, that may have involved a lengthy, detailed conversation with a school principal about curriculum offerings; for others it might have been little more than “hello” to an administrative assistant in a school.

Even with these caveats, there is no reason to believe that there are major flaws in this survey data. It was difficult to reach eligible parents with all of these characteristics. In addition, many low-income parents (like many middle-income ones) are not highly



responsive to telephone surveys. Thus, every one hundred calls generated only a couple of useable responses, on average (with the lowest response rate in Denver). Appendix B provides the details of the response rates in each city. While this is a concern in terms of representativeness, it is no more so than for many such telephone surveys done today. Across sample cities and respondents, a great deal of consistency, reliability, and validity in the responses is evident.

## CHAPTER TWO: GENERAL FINDINGS: HOW DO PARENTS CHOOSE?

***D**espite efforts to keep the questionnaire relatively straightforward, as with all surveys it grew quite complex (see appendix C). To present this detailed information in digestible form, the results are broken down into two major categories. The first is contained in this chapter. Essentially it explores the broad question (across cities) of how parents make their choices. The second is presented in chapter 3, where any differences in the results are examined by city, racial and ethnic group, levels of parental education, and the like.*

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It needs to be pointed out that the survey explored the opinions only of those low- and moderate-income parents who had, in fact, considered other schools for their children. The screening question of the survey was designed to eliminate those who answered “no” when asked if they had “considered schools other than the closest zoned local public school.” That screen eliminated about one-third of the parents with incomes below \$50,000 dollars who were initially contacted.<sup>5</sup>

The decision not to survey parents screened out by this question means that the study had to abandon the idea of a comparison group (of parents who did not consider other schools). In part this was an issue of resources; in part a sense that since the interest was in understanding how parents made choices, it would be inefficient to survey people who had little to offer on that subject.

Still, this is an interesting group of parents. Legally entitled to make a choice of schools

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5. By city: 44% in Denver, 30% in Milwaukee, and 27% in D.C.

for their children in each of these cities, they chose not to exercise their option. The survey can shed no light on what lay behind that decision. Some of these parents may not have known they possessed a choice. Some may have known but been intimidated, either by the process or the system. Some may have been satisfied with their children's school and felt no need to make a change. Some may have been dissatisfied but not so severely as to make a change—particularly if it involved taking one child out of a school and leaving another there. The WIMTY element needs to be considered here also. Parents defined what they meant by “considered other schools.” Some might have very carefully weighed options or briefly considered other choices before settling back into their closest local public school.

The reality is that the survey is unable to shed any light on what information these parents actually had. It is tempting to assume that they are less well informed, on average, than parents who did consider other schools, but that would be simply an assumption.

Thus, the information in this report needs to be understood as data gathered from those who not only knew they had a choice but actually considered other schools (whether they changed their child's school or not).

Against that backdrop, this chapter explores seven issues:

- How do parents learn they have choices?
- What do parents value in schools?
- How do parents choose schools?
- How well informed are parents?
- What role do children play in the process?
- How do parents match child and school?
- How satisfied are parents with the results?

The next chapter breaks down these results to examine significant differences, if any, between cities and among families by a variety of factors such as income and education.

## **HOW DO PARENTS LEARN THEY HAVE CHOICES?**

The survey indicates that parents rely on multiple sources of information to learn about their options, but some sources are more important and trustworthy than others. The



main source of information comes from “word of mouth,” either from friends or school personnel. Almost half of all parents first became aware they had a choice through their networks. Across the entire sample, 22% learned they could choose from talking with friends or other parents.<sup>6</sup> Another 21% learned from talking with teachers or school officials, which might best be described as “official word of mouth.”<sup>7</sup> And another 14% learned from school letters or written materials sent to the home (including letters issued by school districts due to NCLB requirements).<sup>8</sup> In one sense, word of mouth from either social networks or school officials (and not official written notification) is the central manner in which parents find out that they actually have a school choice to make. And school notifications, either in writing or conversations with parents, are a more significant factor than communication through family and friends.

As will be noted below, however, when it comes to actually choosing a specific school, “word of mouth” from family, friends, and social networks is what parents rely on.

**Networks and Multiple Choices of Information.** It is tempting to look for one, single best source of information, but probably foolhardy. Most people use multiple sources of information to make important decisions, and low-income families are no different. The survey data indicate that parents work hard at getting the information they need. They do a lot of things to get information about schools, and then they process this information into a choice decision. While the most trusted and utilized sources can be identified, it is important to emphasize that parents employ many different sources of information.

The most important source lies in social networks and word-of-mouth information. Excluding their own spouse and children, but including school officials, 46% of the sample report talking to five or more people. Only 20% report talking to no one outside the family. These “school network” numbers are higher than those reported in past work (Schneider et al. 2000). It may be the case that these “mature choice” environments encourage and allow parents to talk to more people about school decisions.

When the survey forced parents to choose whether they got their “best information from talking to people or from written material,” the responses were about two to one in favor of talking to people. (Here, people include school officials and teachers, in addition to

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6. By city: 27% in D.C., 21% in Milwaukee, and 16% in Denver.

7. By city: 24% in Denver, 20% in Milwaukee, and 18% in D.C.

8. By city: 15% in D.C., 14% in Milwaukee, and 13% in Denver.

friends and other parents.) There is little variation in this ratio by city. Low-income parents prefer to get information from other people, not from paper (nor presumably websites). So, even though parents report using written materials and finding them understandable and helpful, they find word of mouth more valuable. In part, this may be because many parents do not believe that they can get information about the “soft factors” related to schools, such as atmosphere, environment, and culture, from written materials, but they believe they can obtain that information by talking with other people.

When forced to make a further choice about how they resolve conflicting information offered by parents or teachers, respondents clearly favor other parents. Here the ratio in favor of other parents is also two to one. Again, little variation is evident by city. Not surprisingly, other parents seem to be the most trusted word-of-mouth source. Perhaps this is because they are considered to be less biased or more honest than school officials (because other parents think about children in the same way), or because parents are most comfortable talking to other parents.

## WHAT DO PARENTS VALUE IN SCHOOLS?

When results of this survey are compared with results from other research, low-income parents seem to value very much the same things in schools as do higher-income parents. Academic quality, by various measures, is the number one factor.<sup>9</sup>

Across the sample, 45% of respondents cited some aspect of academic quality as the top factor in choosing a school.<sup>10</sup> Curriculum or thematic focus of the school is the second factor, cited by 19% of the sample.<sup>11</sup> This is encouraging in that it suggests some degree of trying to match a child’s needs to school type, or a search for a good program, such as Montessori, bilingual, or individualized instruction.

Location and convenience ranks as the third factor, cited by 11% of respondents.<sup>12</sup> This is not a surprising number; conceivably it is even low. In busy, often single-parent households, families need their children to be in a school (or schools) relatively close to either home or work, or both.

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9. This focus of parent choice upon issues of academic quality is supported by several prior studies in different choice contexts (Heise et al. 1995; Martinez et al. 1995; Beales and Wahl 1995; Greene, et al. 1998).

10. By city: 48% in D.C., 47% in Denver, and 40% in Milwaukee.

11. By city: 21% in Milwaukee, 19% in D.C., and 16% in Denver.

12. By city: 12% in Milwaukee, 12% in Denver, and 10% in D.C.

Although location is an important decision element, since academic quality and curriculum issues are the primary consideration, parents are willing to have their children travel to the “right” school. It is significant that the majority of these parents (62%) are not sending their child to the closest zoned public school.<sup>13</sup> These are very large proportions, including nearly three-quarters of the parents (who had considered other schools) in Milwaukee. And, this is true even though 63% of the children are going to some public (non-charter) school. As a check, it is also worth noting that 70% of the respondents report that they themselves attended the closest public school in their own childhood (when school choice options were much more limited).

Parents were also asked directly about the importance of location to their choice. Across the sample, on a 5-point scale, 14% say location is “the most important factor,” 22% say it is “very important,” 27% indicate it is “somewhat important,” 10% say it is “slightly important,” and 26% say it is “not important at all.” The percentage citing “most” or “very” important declines as the grade level of the child in the family gets into middle and high school.<sup>14</sup>

A significant minority of parents, having considered their alternatives, decided to remain close to home. Some 37% of the sample ended up in the closest public school, even though reporting they considered other schools. Perhaps they found that other schools were not better for their children. They may also have concluded that even though other schools appeared more suitable, they were not so demonstrably better to justify the additional transportation time (and conceivably expense) associated with changing their child’s school.

## HOW DO PARENTS CHOOSE SCHOOLS?

The survey indicates that low- and moderate-income parents look at only a small number of schools. About half of them “consider” only two schools and actually apply to just one. The other half consider three or more and apply to two or more. Very few families consider four or more schools, or apply to three or more.

13. By city: 73% in Milwaukee, 56% in D.C., and 55% in Denver.

14. Location is least important in Milwaukee, where only 8% cite it as “most important” and 29% say it is “not important at all.” In D.C., 17% say location is “most important,” while 23% say it is “not important at all.” In Denver, 19% say location is “most important”, with 25% saying it is “not important at all”. So, D.C. and Denver are quite similar in regard to location importance, while Milwaukee parents are significantly less concerned about location. This also corresponds with the fact that fewer parents in Milwaukee end up choosing their neighborhood public school than do parents in Denver and D.C. (described in more detail in chapter 3).

These data indicate that most parents are not seriously considering the entire spectrum of schools across an entire city. Some of this focus is geographic (as parents clearly prefer schools that are closer rather than farther away), and some may also be thematic—a search for a particular kind of school, say one emphasizing the basics, or science and technology.

This behavior around school choice seems to be consistent with decisionmaking generally in consumer affairs, and also with how upper-income parents approach school choice. Research on consumer choice suggests that most consumers prefer to consider a handful of real choice options, rather than dozens (Schwartz 2003). Enlarging the array of choices beyond manageable limits may freeze or confuse consumers. Research also provides some evidence that higher-income parents only seriously consider a small number of schools (Schneider et al. 2000). So, low- and moderate-income urban parents seem to approach school choice in a manner consistent with consumer behavior generally and, more specifically, with how upper-income families choose schools for their children.

In terms of actual choice activities, parents report doing many more specific information-gathering activities than might have been expected (see table 2).

**TABLE 2. *Information-Gathering Activities***

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Parents Responding</b>
<b>Visit school</b>	85%
<b>Talk to administrators</b>	77%
<b>Talk to teachers</b>	76%
<b>Child visits school</b>	74%
<b>See printed information</b>	73%
Written material very easy to use	74%
Written material very helpful	61%
Written material somewhat helpful	30%
<b>Talk to family/friends</b>	68%
<b>Talk to parents/students</b>	58%
<b>Attend parent fair/meeting</b>	39%
<b>Use websites</b>	31%
<b>Use parent information center</b>	17%

Table 2 indicates that most parents do a great deal to gather information about the schools they consider seriously. They visit the schools (85%). Nearly three-quarters or more also examine printed information (which most find helpful), have their child visit the school, and talk with teachers and administrators. Large majorities also talk to family and friends (68%) and to other parents or students (58%).

Attending parent fairs and meetings, examining websites, and taking advantage of parent information centers are less appealing alternatives for these parents, although even here nearly 40% of parents will attend a parent fair or information session.

Overall, this seems to be a fairly positive perspective on information-gathering activities. Parents do many things to gather information, and at least two-thirds and often three-quarters or more of parents report doing most of these things.

From this list of ten information-gathering activities, the authors developed an index—just a simple count from 0 to 10 for each parent. The results are informative. The largest percentage of parents (about two-thirds) report between five and eight of these activities. Fully 10% report engaging in nine or even ten of them. Fewer than 5% of parents place themselves in the lowest category, those reporting on none or just one of these activities, while about 18% report engaging in between two and four of these activities.

On balance, the results are positive: About 77% of parents engage in at least five of these information-gathering possibilities.

What about the most significant source of information? Presented with an open-ended question about the “single most important source,” 38% of respondents cited teachers or school administrators, while 34% cited family or friends. Mailings were reported as a distant third. Clearly, verbal information seems to be the most important mechanism for parents to gather information, in addition to (or combined with) visiting schools and seeing them firsthand.

## HOW WELL INFORMED ARE PARENTS?

Critics frequently claim that low-income parents do not have enough information to make informed choices. There is little support for that claim in this research. These parents consider themselves to be quite well informed. They were explicitly asked if there was “any important information they were lacking” when they made their school

choice. Across the sample, only 17% felt they lacked some important information.<sup>15</sup> It is interesting that more than one-fifth of the parents in Denver reported lacking some essential bit of information (the highest level reported among the three cities). This suggests that access to information may be a problem early on in the implementation of choice, since Denver is the least mature choice environment of the three cities.

Parents who reported they needed more information were asked an open-ended question about what information was lacking. Many different responses were received. It is not entirely clear how much weight should be placed on these numbers, particularly by city, because the responses here are very limited in size. Only about one in six parents (overall) believed they needed more information; when that is disaggregated by city, what seems to be a large response rate can be accounted for by a handful of people. For example, the 23% of respondents in Milwaukee who cited lack of test scores as a problem represent only eight respondents.

The best way to describe these responses overall is to say that parents felt they lacked “comparative information” about schools, especially information on “test scores,” “curriculum,” and “teacher quality.”<sup>16</sup> This fits well with the idea that parents mainly value academic issues about schools and curricula, although it is hard to square with what seems to be an abundance of information on test scores, by school, available everywhere.

This suggests that even though the vast majority of parents said they did not lack information, nearly 17% (one in six) worried that they did not have all the facts in hand. They seem to want to know more about how to compare schools, particularly around issues like test scores, teacher quality, and curriculum. A parent information center, or a well-focused and accessible website, could obviously provide this kind of information, much of which is already mandated for district and/or school report cards in many states today. The catch-22, as noted above, is that most low- to moderate-income parents do not currently utilize websites or parent information centers.

Using the combined index of information-gathering activities described earlier, those parents who engage in more information gathering (among the ten activities) seem less likely to report that they lacked information.<sup>17</sup>

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15. By city: 21% in Denver, 17% in D.C., and 12% in Milwaukee.

16. Although similar, the results varied mildly from city to city. In Milwaukee, the top categories for which parents lacked information were test scores (23%), teacher qualifications (17%), curriculum (17%), and social services (11%). In D.C., by contrast, the top categories were general comparative information (29%), test scores (14%), curriculum (10%), and safety (10%). In Denver, “don’t know” led the list (24%), followed by curriculum (20%), general comparative information (12%), and teacher information (10%).

17. This relationship does not quite meet the conventional threshold for statistical significance ( $p=0.12$ ).

A small caveat is in order here. Parents may not know what to ask about schools; that is, they “may not know what they do not know.” Depending on the parents, this might make them more likely to feel they have all the information needed on hand; conversely, they may worry that they did not know enough to ask the right questions. In fact, parents in the survey with more education were a bit more likely to indicate that they “lacked some information.” This might indicate that it was the better-informed parents (or at least the better-educated parents) who had the greatest insight into what they needed to make a good decision. That caveat aside, however, it is significant that most of the low-income parents who had made a choice in these three cities reported feeling well informed and engaging in a great deal of information gathering.

## WHAT ROLE DO CHILDREN PLAY?

Something quite fascinating turned up in these survey findings. While analysts generally assume that parents make choices about their children’s schools, educational experts think of education as a “co-produced” good. That is to say that for a child to become well educated, the child, the parents, friends, the school, and the community must all be actively involved. It makes sense that at least some children, especially those at higher grade levels, might play an important role in helping select the school they attend. Little previous research has examined the role of children. This research suggests that the role of children in the school choice process is very important, much more important than most public policy debate reveals. Indeed, these findings might suggest changing ideas and labels about choice from “parental school choice” to “family school choice.”

Across the sample, about half of the parents surveyed have only one child in K-12 schools for whom the parents recently made a choice. That is the child the study focused on. The rest of the parents have at least one additional child in K-12, a child the survey largely ignored. Having another child, however, does not affect the number of information-gathering activities in which parents engage.

When asked if the child of interest was “involved” in the school choice, a surprisingly high number of respondents said “yes.”<sup>18</sup> A solid majority across the three cities (54%) reported that the child was part of the decision in some way.

What these parents meant by “involved” is unclear. The questions were asked in relation to what they mean to the respondent with elaboration. However, it is clear (as noted

18. By city: 62% in Denver, 53% in Milwaukee, and 50% in D.C. (The difference between Denver and the two other cities is statistically significant.)

in table 2) that fully three-quarters of respondents reported their child had visited the school as part of the choice process.

Reports of children visiting the schools are spread fairly evenly across grade levels, whereas reporting that the child was “involved” is significantly associated with higher grade levels. This suggests that parents viewed “involvement” as something more than simply visiting the school, and something that may require a higher maturity level for the child.

By grade level, nearly all parents with children in 8th grade or higher said their child was involved, while the numbers were almost two to one against the child being involved in grades K-4. Between 4th grade and 8th grade, the numbers gradually shifted from less child involvement to more involvement. Overall, there is a fairly linear trend on involvement of child, but the big changes occur from 5th grade (53%) to 6th grade (72%). This change would parallel the change from elementary to middle school (either at 5th or 6th grade). There is another major increase in student involvement in the decision at 9th grade (79%) and 10th grade (where the figure is an astonishing 96%). Although initially surprising, in many ways these numbers make intuitive sense. Younger children might be expected to go along with parental choices. As the students grow older, wise families bring them into the decisionmaking process. By the time high school is an issue, the parent who forced a student into a high school against his or her wishes would be courting a major confrontation.<sup>19</sup>

It also seems to be the case that parents who involved their children were likely to be more active choosers. Specifically, parents whose children were involved in the decisionmaking were significantly more likely to have considered a larger number of schools than did parents whose children were not involved. A slim majority of those considering two schools did not involve their child (51%), but as more schools were considered, the students were more likely to be part of the process. Considering three schools? Fully 55% of respondents involved the child. Four schools? Here, 68% of the parents dealt the child into the choice. By the time five schools entered the picture, more than three-quarters of respondents (77%) involved the student in the decision. So, involving the child is associated with very active choice, although which comes first is hard to say.<sup>20</sup>

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19. In terms of demographic factors, neither income, education, English as a first language, race/ethnicity, nor gender of the child is significantly related to the child's involvement in the choice.

20. In some households, it is conceivable that when parents first broach the subject of changing to a specific school, the student balks, while suggesting an alternative. The expanded list of schools may be the result of a bargaining process in which the parent (determined to find a better school) negotiates with the student about which particular school.



Similarly, those who involve the child in the decision are significantly more likely to talk to more information sources and to engage in more information-gathering activities.<sup>21</sup>

## HOW DO PARENTS MATCH CHILD AND SCHOOL

The survey explicitly explored whether the child for whom a school was being chosen had special characteristics that required a good match (for example, gifted, artistic, shy, non-English speaking, coping with a disability). A majority of parents (61%) responded “yes.”<sup>22</sup> At first blush, these are remarkably high numbers; more than two-thirds of the parents in Denver reported that their children possessed special characteristics. However, it would be the rare parent who believed his or her children were common, ordinary, run-of-the-mill offspring without anything special about them. In many ways, the search for school choice is the search for an institution that will match an individual child’s strengths, and in some cases work to overcome his or her weaknesses.

What are these characteristics in the eyes of these parents? By far the largest category may represent the “Lake Wobegon effect” (where all of the children are above average), but the need for gifted/talented programs led the responses. (It needs to be understood that parents’ definitions of gifted may not match official state and district measures based upon testing results.)

Almost 40% of respondents reported that “gifted” characteristics were what they tried to match. About 18% cited positive social issues for matching (friends, good peers, and the like), while 14% cited negative social issues (such as bullying and bad peers). Another 10% of respondents cited their child’s disabilities, a number which approximates broader statistics on learning and physical disabilities. Smaller proportions cited discipline (7%) and athletics (5%) as important.

The emphasis on gifted characteristics is interesting. Representatives of low-income parents and communities frequently complain that poor and minority children are underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented. Responding parents may have been prompted to make a choice to ensure that their low- to moderate-income gifted children received the education appropriate to their needs.

21. This result holds up even in a multivariate context, with controls for parent income and education. It is impossible to determine the direction of causation here; having the child involved does not necessarily stimulate parental information gathering, but it does appear that involving the child is related to more information gathering.

22. By city: 67% in Denver, 62% in D.C., and 57% in Milwaukee.

Parents who reported that their child had special characteristics that they wanted to match to a school were significantly more likely to report that their child was “involved” in the decision. This was a particularly strong finding. Fully 61% of the “child involved in decision” group reported their child had a special characteristic, while only 39% of the “child not involved in the decision” group reported a special characteristic.

## HOW SATISFIED ARE PARENTS?

These parents are very well satisfied with the school choices they have made. On a 5-point scale of satisfaction, 68% are “very” satisfied across the sample, while another 20% are “somewhat” satisfied.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, fully 88% of the respondents place themselves in the top two categories in terms of satisfaction, a figure that reaches 94% in Milwaukee. In comparison, the *Phi Delta Kappan* poll for 2005 surveyed a representative sample of all parents (across the full range of income, and in urban and suburban schools) and found 70% placing their schools in the top two categories.<sup>24</sup> So, these low-income urban parents are reporting extremely high levels of satisfaction.

Prior studies have also shown high satisfaction levels with choice. One national study in 1995 found 82% of private school parents “very satisfied,” compared to 61% of parents of children in public schools of choice and 52% of parents with children in assigned public schools (McArthur et al. 1995). That is likely to be a comparison of moderate- to upper-income parents (private schools) and low- to moderate- and upper-income families (public schools, whether assigned or choice). Thus, the survey sample here of 68% reporting themselves to be “very satisfied” is in the general range for schools of choice, but it is a higher rate of satisfaction than the 1995 results.

Chapter 1 discussed the skepticism some observers bring to the question of whether choosers’ satisfaction is “real” or an artifact of a “halo” or “rose-colored glasses.” While other research supports a real satisfaction impact, the data here cannot conclusively demonstrate that.

The issue of satisfaction with choice deserves study, over time. A recent examination in Washington, D.C., did, in fact, follow a panel group of the same parents over time.

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23. Respondents in Milwaukee are significantly more likely to be satisfied than those in D.C. or Denver.

24. The *Phi Delta Kappan* categories are the familiar letter grades of A, B, C, D, and E. Nearly a quarter of respondents (24%) give their child’s school an A; 46% give it a B, with the rest distributed across the lower grades. *Phi Delta Kappan* respondents also famously grade all American schools outside their own very severely.

It found declining satisfaction levels with Washington, D.C., charter schools over a few years (Buckley and Schneider forthcoming 2007). Most studies have not, unfortunately, followed the issue. They have focused on the initial period following the choice, perhaps a more satisfied period, before second thoughts have had a chance to form.

This survey asked parents what grade their child was in both at the time of the survey and when they had made the school choice. Subtracting the latter from the former provides the number of years since the school choice was made. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents made their choice for the current school year or the prior year. (This is an attractive feature of the findings generally, since respondents are more likely to accurately recall recent events and decisions.) The other 26% of respondents had had their children in the school for three years or more, with rapidly declining numbers of respondents for longer periods of time.

Theoretically, it seems plausible that satisfaction levels could decline with number of years, if expectations are disappointed (like the Washington, D.C., charter school finding cited above). On the other hand, satisfaction might remain high if parents were more likely to keep the child in the same new school because they were genuinely happy with the new choice. In fact, satisfaction levels rise slightly in our sample the longer parents kept children in the same school, although the differences are not large enough to be statistically significant. Without a panel or longitudinal data, the best that can be said about satisfaction based on this data is that satisfaction is steady, at close to 90% “very” or “somewhat” satisfied, and it does not decline the more years parents are removed from the actual school choice decision discussed with them.

The data also permitted examinations of satisfaction as a function of other factors. Levels of satisfaction are highly associated with being well informed. Nearly one-third of the parents who said they lacked some important information (only 17% of the total sample) also reported being somewhat or very unsatisfied with their school. By contrast, only about 5% of the parents who said they did not lack any important information (83% of the respondents) reported being somewhat or very unsatisfied. Parents reporting no lack of information are 29% more likely to report being satisfied than parents who did lack information. So, reporting “satisfaction” and reporting being “informed” are highly linked.

As elsewhere in the study, it is impossible to determine the direction of causality, or even the relationship between the two. The findings may mean that parents who received all the information they needed felt satisfied with their choice. But there may be no relation,

if both are really different measures of the same basic phenomenon of feeling positive about the choice experience. For example, parents who are unhappy with their choice may now wish they had had more information. They may legitimately believe that if they had known certain things about the school, they would not have chosen it. But the data cannot determine whether their views on the need for more information *at the time of the choice* were different from those who were ultimately satisfied with their choice.

To take this issue further, the data were examined to explore the relationship of the combined index of information-gathering activities (the 10-part index mentioned above) to satisfaction with the choice. There is a highly statistically significant relationship.<sup>25</sup> This relationship seems more likely to be causal because it follows a simple theory: People who report having engaged in a larger number of information-gathering activities (visiting schools, talking to teachers, examining written information) end up being more satisfied with their school choice. At the high end, 81 parents (about 10% of the total sample) reported engaging in nine or all ten information-gathering activities. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that every one of these parents also reports being “very” or “somewhat” satisfied with their choice.<sup>26</sup> Appendix D provides standardized regression coefficients for several variables in the satisfaction index, including distinctions by city.

Child involvement is also related positively to parental satisfaction. Parents who involved their child in the school choice decision are significantly more likely to report higher satisfaction levels than parents who did not (see table 3).

**TABLE 3. Satisfaction Levels and Child Involvement**

Child Involved?	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Somewhat Unsatisfied	Very Unsatisfied
Yes	55%	62%	37%	42%
No	45%	38%	63%	58%

While this could mean that parents who involve their child end up with a more satisfying, or better, choice, there may be alternative explanations. Perhaps some parents do not involve their child because they do not really trust the child’s judgment, or because the

25. Statistical difference was greater than 99%.

26. A simple bivariate regression of the information index upon satisfaction (measured on a 1–5 scale) produces a highly significant relationship: every additional information-gathering activity in which a parent engages yields about a 14% increase in satisfaction level.

child is a difficult student. These characteristics might also make it more difficult to find a satisfactory school for that particular child.

## A SUMMARY

To oversimplify, a broad analysis of the data from these 800 parents produces several fairly compelling findings:

- Parents rely on multiple sources of information, trust word-of-mouth networks more than documentation, and, when push comes to shove, rely on other parents more than on teachers or administrators.
- Parents seek academic quality, a specific curriculum or school theme, and location and convenience when making a school decision.
- Parents limit the number of schools they examine. About half of them “consider” only two schools and apply to just one. Very few families consider four or more schools, or apply to three or more.
- Most parents take the school choice process seriously and gather a great deal of information to help them make the choice. They visit schools, examine printed information, have the child visit the school, and talk with teachers and administrators.
- These parents consider themselves to be very well informed about their school options and their choice. Across the sample of 800 parents, only 17% felt they lacked some important information in the process.
- The role of children in the school choice process is much more important than most public policy debate acknowledges. A solid majority of parents across the three cities (54%) report that the child was part of the decision in some way.
- Low-income parents have specific ideas about what individual children need in a school, and they try to find a match.
- Fully 88% of the respondents are either “very” satisfied with their choice or “somewhat” satisfied.

Chapter 3 drills down into these general results in greater detail. It examines significant differences among the three cities and families by a variety of factors, such as income, ethnicity and race, and education.

## CHAPTER THREE: DRILLING DOWN: SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES?

**O**n balance, the findings presented in this chapter are encouraging for those who believe that, offered more school choice, low-income parents will take advantage of the opportunity and exercise their new flexibility carefully. In many ways, the findings across the three cities indicate that low-income parents choose schools in very much the same way that middle- and upper-income parents choose theirs: they limit the schools they consider to a manageable number; they talk with friends and teachers; they visit the schools; and they involve their children, particularly older ones, in the decision.

The study team also wanted to know if significant differences existed within that broad picture. This chapter explores that possibility, and examines the degree to which significant differences exist by:

- city,
- race and ethnicity,
- income,
- parents' education level, and
- type of school chosen.

The chapter concludes with a brief summary of how conversations in the Denver focus groups reflected or altered the findings presented in chapters 2 and 3.<sup>27</sup>

27. Appendix E provides a multivariate analysis of combinations of factors as they related to school choice.

## CHOICE BY CITY

Chapter 2 presented the broad findings from the survey across the cities and, where appropriate, the range of responses in each of the three cities. In the main, findings in the individual cities were quite similar; there are not large differences among the three cities. For most survey responses, the percentages from each city are fairly close and usually not different enough to be statistically significant. In one sense, this is not entirely anticipated, since one might expect Denver to look markedly different from Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee, which have larger and better-established school choice programs.

In one area there was a major difference between Denver and the other cities: the percentage of parents who “considered other schools” in the first place (the screening question discussed in chapter 2). Fully 44% of eligible Denver parents did not consider other schools (compared to 27% in Milwaukee and 30% in Washington, D.C.). These parents were omitted from the survey, which has nothing to say about them.

What this does suggest, however, is that as school choice programs mature, a larger proportion of eligible parents are likely to take their new options into account. Considering other schools is a relatively new option in Denver. Even those who know they have the option may feel uncomfortable pursuing it, until others they know (market mavens) begin looking at other schools.

Another difference of note is the high level of parental satisfaction in Milwaukee. This city, with 94% of parents describing themselves as either “very” or “somewhat” satisfied, is considerably ahead of Denver and Washington, D.C., both at 87% satisfaction levels. (Given how high the level of self-reported satisfaction is in Milwaukee, it is hardly surprising that the difference among the three cities holds up when the data are controlled for income, level of parental education, time since making the choice, and other factors.) In addition, Milwaukee parents are significantly more likely to say they “did not lack any important information,” while Denver is on the less informed end and Washington, D.C., is in the middle.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of information-gathering activities, a few significant differences do exist (see table 4). Washington, D.C., parents tend to be on the higher end of engaging in these activities. (This may partly be a function of recent efforts around the voucher program and charter schools to more actively target parents through various information outreach campaigns.) Denver parents are sometimes on the low end of information-gathering

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28. By city: 12% reported lacking information in Milwaukee, compared to 17% in D.C., and 21% in Denver.



activities. Milwaukee parents, for their part, tend to be in the middle range, except for website usage, which tends to be lower.

Combining all of this information into the 0–10 index of information-gathering activities, Washington, D.C., parents are significantly more likely to engage in more information-gathering activities than parents in either Milwaukee or Denver.

**TABLE 4. Information-Gathering Activities by City**

Activity	Parents Responding		
	<i>Milwaukee</i>	<i>D.C.</i>	<i>Denver</i>
Visit school	83%	89% *	81%
Talk to administrators	69%	86% **	69%
Talk to teachers	79%	77%	66% **
Child visits school	75%	73%	74%
See printed information	77%	71%	64%
Written material very easy to use	78%	77%	62% **
Written material very helpful	63%	63%	52%
Written material somewhat helpful	31%	27%	33%
Talk to family/friends	67%	70%	70%
Talk to parents/students	58%	58%	60%
Attend parent fair/meeting	39%	47% **	31% **
Use websites	22% **	37%	33%
Use parent information center	15%	21% **	13%

\* difference (from other two cities) significant at .10 levels  
 \*\* difference significant at .05 levels

## CHOICE BY RACE AND ETHNICITY

Examining choice by race and ethnicity was relatively straightforward, since the racial and ethnic groups in the sample varied by city. It is possible that some of the city differences actually reflected differences across groups. In fact, such differences have been apparent in other studies of choice and choice outcomes (for example, Weiher and Tedin 2002; Peterson and Howell 2002).

This analysis explored differences across white, Hispanic, and African-American families (using respondent's self-reports about their background). There was a small percentage of Asian American, Native American, and other mixed respondents, but the analysis reveals more when we put these relatively small numbers aside.

Generally, the analysis finds some differences, but also many similarities in terms of choice. Of the responses examined, about half show significant differences between the three racial groups. There were, for example, no significant differences by race and ethnicity in terms of parental satisfaction and feeling well informed.

**School Closest to Home.** In terms of school characteristics, parents in all groups were about equally likely to choose a school closest to home, but white parents were significantly less likely to say that location mattered to them (34% of whites said it was “not an important factor,” compared to 25% of African Americans, and 19% of Hispanics). This may have to do with segregated housing patterns in American cities, or with lack of an automobile in cases where school transportation is not provided as part of the choice program.

**Religious Private Schools.** White parents were significantly more likely to choose a religious private school than either Hispanic or African-American parents, despite the expectations of many that Hispanic Americans (likely to be Catholic) would do so. White parents were also most likely to choose a public school outside the district, especially in Denver, where more than half indicated that their child went outside of the city.

**Gathering Information.** Information-gathering activities also revealed some differences. White parents are more likely to talk to teachers, to have their child visit the school, to talk to other parents, and to talk to family and friends. African-American and Hispanic parents, by contrast, are more inclined to use parent information centers and attend school fairs or meetings. White parents are also significantly more likely to talk to more people about their school choice; indeed, 30% of white parents report talking to ten or more people, compared to only 14% of African-American parents and 11% of Hispanic parents.

**Information Sources.** The mechanism by which respondents learned about choice differs somewhat. White parents are more likely to report learning about choice from experience or common knowledge, while African-American parents rely much more upon written sources and mass media (this is partly a function of aggressive recent information outreach campaigns in Washington, D.C.).

Again reflecting network differences, white parents are significantly more likely to trust

information coming directly from other parents, while African-American and Hispanic parents are relatively more likely to trust information from authoritative school officials or written materials. For example, only 20% of whites said they would favor information from teachers over information from parents, if it conflicted, compared to 31% of African Americans and 39% of Hispanics.

Related to relative trust of official sources, Hispanic (46% yes) and African-American (43% yes) respondents were most likely to express a desire for a school choice counselor to assist them (compared to only 29% of white parents). There are also some interesting and significant differences on who they would prefer to provide that advice: Hispanics' largest category is "paid school official" (48%), while African Americans most often favor a "parent group member" (41%), and whites most often favor a "community group member" (28%).

**Academic Quality.** As Schneider et al. (2000) found, African-American and Hispanic families are more likely to cite academic quality as the most important factor in choosing a school. White parents, by contrast, are relatively more likely to report values, environment, or other features of the school as the most significant factor in their choice. This survey in general supports Schneider's earlier findings.

## CHOICE BY INCOME

The sample was restricted to families with incomes below \$50,000, approximately the median family income in the United States for a family of four. Respondents were reasonably well spread out across the spectrum, from families with incomes below \$10,000 to those with incomes between \$40,000 and \$50,000.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, median family incomes in 2003 were about \$33,000 in Milwaukee, \$43,000 in Washington, D.C., and \$44,000 in Denver. Thus, part of the sample exceeds the median incomes in these cities, especially in Milwaukee.

By definition, income is part of socioeconomic status. Income is highly and significantly related to both parent education and employment; only 20% of the income group under \$10,000 is working full-time. Income is also highly related to race/ethnicity; white parents are more highly represented in the moderate-income groups in the study sample, with African-American and Hispanic parents more highly represented in the lower-income groups.

29. As noted in chapter 1, 16% of respondents reported incomes of less than \$10,000; 19% reported incomes between \$10,000 and \$20,000; 24% reported incomes between \$20,000 and \$30,000; and 20% reported incomes between \$30,000 and \$40,000; the remaining 21% reported incomes between \$40,000 and \$50,000.

**Similarities.** There are several areas where income does not seem to be related in any significant way with the variables in this study. It is hard to find information-gathering strategies that vary by income group. Parent satisfaction levels do not differ significantly by income groups. There are no significant differences across income groups in the important school features that influence their choice or the number of sources parents report using in selecting a school.

Are children involved in the choice? Families up and down this relatively limited income spectrum report children's involvement in very similar ways. And parent reports of the utility and ease of use of printed materials (and whether they lacked important information) look similar across the income groups.

**Differences.** There are some differences that could be sorted out by income. The lowest-income group, certainly \$10,000 and under, and sometimes \$20,000 and under, is a bit different from the rest of the group on some features.<sup>30</sup>

The data suggest that very poor families, overwhelmingly homes with a single mother who is not employed (or employed full-time and making less than \$10,000), are getting the least satisfaction and the least useful information from their experience with school choice. Policy intervention would be most usefully targeted at this population.

Lower-income parents focus more on school familiarity than on data. A substantial number of the lowest-income parents (42%) cited a school close to home as the "most important" or a "very important" factor in their decision. Just 20% of the highest-income group in the sample thought school proximity was that significant. The lowest-income group was also more likely to report that a practical factor is important in their decision. So they were about twice as likely to say that the school was the one their child's friends attended (19%) compared to the highest-income group parents (9%).

The most useful income analysis point compares respondents in two categories: those with incomes between zero and \$20,000, and those with incomes between \$20,000 and \$50,000. (This often turned out to be a distinction between non-working single mothers or full-time workers earning the minimum wage or less and working several jobs, and full-time workers with better-paid jobs or two wage earners in the family.) About one-third of the sample fell into the \$20,000-or-below category, with the rest obviously reporting incomes of between \$20,000 and \$50,000.

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30. The differences, while sometimes reaching standard norms of statistical significance, are not always substantively large.

Comparisons of these two groups of respondents produce quite revealing and policy-relevant differences in terms of information-gathering activity, trust in teachers, and who the most trusted sources for information are.

**Information Seeking.** In terms of information-seeking activity, the higher-income group consistently does more (see table 5).

**TABLE 5. *Information-Gathering Activities by Income Group***<sup>31</sup>

Activity	Income	
	\$0–\$19,999	\$20,000–\$50,000
Visit school	80%	85%
Talk to administrators	74%	78%
Talk to teachers	72%	78%
Child visits school	69%	77%
See printed information	71%	74%
Talk to family/friends	65%	70%
Talk to parents/students	58%	61%
Attend parent fair/meeting	36%	42%
Use websites	23%	36%
Use parent information center	18%	18%

In addition, as previous research has established across the full income spectrum (Schneider et al. 2000), the higher-income parents in this sample report talking to more people than do parents in the lower-income groups. This may reflect the fact that higher-income people generally report having larger social and professional networks from which to draw information.

In general, the pattern is clear: higher-income parents do more in terms of gathering information. So there is a highly significant relationship between income and the information index score (which ranges from 0 to 10).

31. Although the differences are apparent between the two groups, the only statistically significant differences (based on a two-tailed test at the 95% level) are those around visiting schools and the child visiting the school.s

**Trust in Teachers.** While a majority of all parents say they are likely to trust information from other parents more than information from teachers and other school officials, that is not true of the lowest-income parents. By a two to one margin, the lowest-income groups are significantly more likely to have more relative trust in teachers. These parents are also significantly more likely to say that a counselor would help them.

Although all parents indicate that other parents are the most trusted source, this is not entirely true, again, for the lowest-income parents. These parents are significantly less likely to report that other parents were their most trusted source. Nearly half (47%) of the parents with incomes below \$10,000 reported that other parents are their most trusted source, compared to more than two-thirds (69%) of parents with incomes above \$10,000.

Taken together and combined with the earlier finding about smaller networks for low-income families, it is interesting to speculate about what these two findings on trust in teachers and less reliance on other parents as the most trusted source mean. It may be that the lowest-income parents believe that teachers with college degrees are likely to be better sources of advice on educational options than their neighbors, and that their own friends and families may be relatively less reliable as information resources.

Thus, within this sample, many elements of school choice information gathering and decisionmaking appear to be similar. However, when the lowest-income group is examined, important differences emerge. They are less likely to visit schools than their higher-income counterparts and they trust teachers more. They are more likely to choose a school close to home (or with friends attending), and they are more concerned about school safety and somewhat less concerned about academic quality.

While these differences are important, they should not be overstated. Even the lowest-income parents report being very satisfied overall and quite well informed about their choice.

What this evidence suggests is that there may be something of an income-based “information gap” in choice programs, but it is at the very bottom of the income spectrum. Low- to moderate-income urban parents report behaviors very much like higher-income parents on many information dimensions. This suggests that public policy aimed at overcoming information gaps should be targeted most prominently at the lowest-income groups, typically single mothers who are not employed or who are employed at wages that cannot support them. More outreach, multiple information sources, and parent information centers with counselors knowledgeable enough to advise such parents seem to be potential policy solutions to overcome this gap.

## CHOICE BY PARENTS' EDUCATION LEVEL

Parent actions around school decisions differ considerably depending on levels of parental education, normally here meaning the level of educational attainment of the mother. Study findings here are highly consistent with other recent work on school choice, such as looking at how families apply for and use school scholarships (Campbell et al. 2005), as well as broader education research on the important role of mothers' education and educational aspirations for their children.

First, parents with a high school education or less consider fewer schools in their choice and tend to keep their children closer to home. Almost 60% of the parents with a high school education or less choose only on the basis of location. In contrast, less than 30% of the college-educated parents report doing this.

With regard to information gathering, for the most part levels of education do not distinguish parents. However, parents with more education are more likely to utilize a website, talk to an administrator, or visit the school.

Higher levels of education (like higher incomes) are related to bigger social networks. College-educated parents are twice as likely to talk to five people outside the home and about four times as likely to talk to seven or more people outside the home, compared to parents with less education. Parents with a high school education or less, by contrast, were twice as likely as their better-educated peers to talk to no one else outside the home about their school choice.

Better-educated parents are also more likely to learn about choice options from "common knowledge" or from other parents, suggesting that general knowledge of choice is somewhat better embedded in the better-educated population. Less well-educated parents, by contrast, rely more on teachers and counselors, in this sense paralleling the behavior of lower-income parents. In fact, to the extent that low income correlates with lower levels of education, the distinctions around parental educational levels may be identifying the same low-income parents under a different label.

Parents with greater education are somewhat more likely than others to say that they lacked information, and they are more likely to report that they would like to have known more about test scores, comparative information, or financial information. Less-educated parents are more likely to say that they wanted more information about school curricula.

Children enter the equation of parental education levels and choice in a very subtle way. The child's involvement in the decision does not vary by education level of the parent, but other issues do. The lower the education of the parent, the more likely the parent is to report that academic quality was the most important feature in the school choice. The more education a parent had, on the other hand, the more likely it was that they reported the child had "special" characteristics that influenced the decision. In addition, parents with more education are more likely to report that they made a choice on the basis of the school's student body. Interestingly, level of parental education was also related to whether a child visited the school. The more education a parent had, the more likely it was that the parent brought the child to visit the school before the choice was made.

## TYPE OF SCHOOL CHOSEN

What distinctions appear when parents are parsed by those who chose charter, public, or private schools?

In this survey, 63% of respondents included in the sample made a choice to be in a traditional district (non-charter) public school. Choice did not necessarily mean the parents went elsewhere; what it meant was that the parents exercised the options available to them once they began to think of a school other than the closest zoned public school.

Breaking this 63% of respondents down:

- 37% chose the closest zoned public school; having considered another school, the parents, for whatever reason, remained close to home
- 15% put their child in another public (non-charter) school in the district
- 11% selected a public school outside their district (mostly parents in the Denver area)

Where did the rest of the 800 respondents place their children? About one in five (19%) selected a private school, while 14% selected charter schools.<sup>32</sup>

How do charter parents compare with all others? First, there are no differences in a number of important factors: parent income, higher-education attainment, whether the

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32. By city, the largest charter percentages are in D.C., with 21% of respondents choosing charters, compared to 11% in Milwaukee, and 7% in Denver. For private schools, Milwaukee leads the sample with 26% in private schools, compared to 20% in D.C., and only 14% in Denver.



parents attended public or private schools as children, whether the parents went to a school in the region, how long they had lived in the region, parental age, church attendance or religious group affiliation, marital or employment status, their first language, and whether or not the spouse works. Parents who choose charter schools look very much like parents who choose other public schools or private schools on a wide variety of factors. The implications of this finding are discussed in chapter 4.

Some important differences are worth exploration. Charter choosers are more likely than others to have their child in a school that is *not* the closest school to their residence: Only 15% of families with children in charter schools are using the closest public school, compared to 40% of other choosers. This makes sense, since traditional public school choosers (more than half the sample) often do select the closest school, even after considering others. These differences in terms of school location appear strongly in Washington, D.C., and Denver, and to a much lesser extent in Milwaukee.

**Information.** Charter parents seem to be voracious users of information. Fully 72% of charter choosers report using two or more sources, compared to 59% of non-charter choosers. Examination of this finding against parents' reports of the relative importance of academic, operational, and school cultural issues indicates that academic issues predominate in the charter choosers' thinking (compared to operational or cultural issues). In terms of school matching, the charter choosers somewhat more often believe that their children have important personal characteristics that had to be factored into their choice (68% versus 60% of non-charter choosers).

In gathering information, charter parents are more likely than other choosers to speak to principals or administrators (85% compared to 76%). They are not, however, more likely to speak with teachers. Charter choosers find written materials more helpful and are more likely to emphasize written information over word of mouth (44% compared to 28%). It may be that charter schools provide better written materials than other schools in these cities. Regarding information, charter choosers are also more likely to use websites than other choosers, and by a very large amount, 50% compared to 28%. Thus, the actual availability of websites may influence how choosers utilize them.

Charter choosers are much more likely to attend school fairs (56% versus 37%), with the largest difference again in Washington, D.C. Charter choosers whose most important factor was school culture are also much more likely to go to fairs than non-charter choosers similarly interested in school culture.

**Charters and Parental Satisfaction.** Perhaps the most important difference between types of choosers is satisfaction. Charter parents are more satisfied with their schools: Using a 1–4 scale, where 1 = very satisfied and 4 = very unsatisfied, charter parents are at 1.3 and other choosers are at 1.5. Charter parents are more satisfied in all cities, with the largest difference in Milwaukee and smallest difference in Washington, D.C.

Put another way, while traditional public school parents are quite happy (86% are “very” or “somewhat” satisfied across our sample), 97% of charter parents are very or somewhat satisfied, comparable to the 96% satisfaction reported by private school choosers. Within the charter parent group, those who most favored academics are the most satisfied.

**Charter Parents and Private School Parents.** Since the satisfaction level of charter choosers is quite similar to that of private school choosers, the analysis examined some elements in terms of charter versus private parents only.

First, there are no income differences between charter and private school parents. However, private school parents are more likely than charter school parents to be married, to have attended private schools themselves as children, and to identify themselves as religiously active.

In gathering information, private school parents are more likely to rely upon social networks, while charter school parents rely more upon school sources. Charter school parents are much more likely to learn about choice options in the first place through school actions like letters and mass media (32% versus 13%), while private school parents are more likely to learn about choice through their social network (49% versus 38%). In actually choosing, private school parents more often named school culture (environment, safety, values) as their most important factor (36% versus 19%), while charter school parents are more likely to choose for academic reasons (71% versus 58%). Consistent with learning about choice, private school choosers are also more likely to use their social networks to learn about the most important school factor (39% versus 27%), while charter school choosers are more likely to utilize school actions to learn about their most important factor (18% versus 6%). Charter school choosers use a greater variety of information sources than other choosers generally, as noted above. This remains true when the comparison is restricted to private school choosers: 74% of charter school choosers used two or more sources of information, compared to 57% of private school choosers. When asked about the most important source of information, private school choosers are more likely to say family or self (68% versus 40%), while charter school choosers are more likely to mention teachers or administrators (47% versus 25%).

Thus, while charter school choosers are as equally and highly satisfied as private school parents, they differ on a few background characteristics, and they learn about choice and gather information in different ways, emphasizing academics and school-based information relatively more than social network information.

## FOCUS GROUP INSIGHTS

The focus groups allowed the authors to probe some of the issues described in chapters 2 and 3 in greater detail.

Probably the main point coming out of the two focus groups is that parents really want to see things with their own eyes. They want to visit and observe schools. Additionally, parents' notions of "academic quality," which they try to infer from their own observations, mean many more and different things than simply test score results.

Two focus groups were convened in Denver in summer 2005. One was made up of low-income "parent leaders," who were invited to participate based on their current and prior involvement with school and parent groups. The other group was made up of low-income "average parents," people invited to participate to get the views of this important constituency. Each session lasted about ninety minutes, led by a professional focus group facilitator with substantial experience in education and community work. The sessions were held at a school in central Denver and a pre-school center in central Denver, respectively.

The facilitator started with a set of prepared questions about information sources, school experiences, and other issues similar to the survey questions. Each group was made up of parents, nearly all women, who were paid a stipend for their time and provided with lunch. Although the anticipation had been that the "parent leader" group would be better informed and focus on information in a different way, it turned out that there were few differences between the leaders and the "average parents."

Even more than in the survey responses, it seemed clear from the focus group responses that these parents' school choices are not driven very much by hard data such as test scores. These parents are well aware of written sources, school accountability reports, and comparative test score data, but these documents are not the main basis of their choices. Many were dismissive of the importance of state test scores. Instead, written material is a far less popular option than parents actually visiting schools and talking to a variety of parents, friends, and school officials.

More so than in the survey, it also seemed clear that safety is the most basic issue (which parents presented as not just “in-school” safety, but the quality of the facility and the neighborhood around it). Next, matching the school’s strengths to the child’s needs within a reasonable geographic area was considered important. Transportation was cited often as an issue by these Denver parents (more so than in the survey responses).

These factors were followed by some notion of academic quality. The comfort level of a school for the parents was very important—including a welcoming first impression from staff, the facility, the school environment, and a sense of inclusiveness for all children. These parents seemed most pleased about a school where the principal would come out to greet them, where they could walk around and talk to staff and observe classes in session, and where they would sense both order and inclusion.

These parents often mentioned teacher quality as important. Since even experts have difficulty measuring teacher quality, probing on this issue produced a sense that parents want to see a sense of control by the teacher, class orderliness instead of chaos, and inclusion of all children in the classroom learning environment. Parents are clearly not demanding that teachers be dazzling in their pedagogical techniques or approaches.

In all, findings from the focus groups mostly corroborated the responses from the survey.

## CHAPTER FOUR: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

**T**he research reported here presents a picture of the complex processes through which parents go in seeking school choices for their children. They seek out a lot of information. They examine the advantages and disadvantages of different schools. They speak with friends, family, teachers, and administrators, and they examine school materials. They weigh all of this against which school choice will best meet the child's needs and fit in with the family's choices about where it lives and other preferences.

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On balance, the research indicates that while there are some differences related to income, race and ethnicity, parental education, and the kind of school the family selects, overall these low- to moderate-income parents seem fully capable of making the decision. They feel well informed; they appear satisfied with their choices; and they go about the process in very much the same way as middle- and upper-income families choosing schools—or other consumer goods.

This chapter reflects on these findings. The chapter places this research in the context of other existing and ongoing research, and comments, in particular, on what these findings reveal about charter school parents. It explores some policy implications of the research and examines some practical hands-on issues that seem to emerge from the findings. The chapter ends on a philosophical note about how school choice fits into broader conceptions of what families and people generally seek in terms of a full life and how the parents in this study relate to those conceptions.

### ONGOING RESEARCH

This survey and report address several important elements of family and parent school choice much more directly than has previous work. Nevertheless, this is a field in which

a lot of significant work unrelated to this study has either been completed or is still underway.

With the start of the Washington, D.C., scholarship program two years ago (vouchers for eligible low-income families to use at any school), there has been a strong push in that city to inform parents about the program. Early implementation analyses of that program confirm a lot of what is reported here.

The Washington, D.C., information outreach program finds that a variety of resources, often amounting to a redundancy of sources, is important to parents. There is no single dominant source of information for all parents. The Washington, D.C., experience supports what is reported here: It is clear that word of mouth is the most important source of information. Consequently, choice leaders in Washington, D.C., work to try to develop networks of “trusted advocates,” who seem to be similar to the “market mavens” discussed earlier.

In terms of media sources, a campaign was mounted in Washington, D.C., to inform parents and the community. The targeted radio advertising sponsored by the campaign turned out to be surprisingly important as an information source. It let parents know that choice exists. The campaign also utilized advertisements at bus and subway stations, and handed out flyers to potentially eligible parents at appropriate venues, such as churches and schools.

As the program evolved, Washington, D.C., staff found that scholarship applicants often needed help filling out the forms, which are fairly complex applications to verify income, address, and other elements of eligibility. In a sense, they found that they ended up playing the role of caseworker for the parents. In terms of the highest priorities from parents, safety, location, and “vague notions” of academic quality predominated.

Dayton, Ohio, is another city in which intensive efforts have been made to learn about parent decisionmaking. The Fordham Foundation and GreatSchools.net recently supported a series of parent focus groups, which reported findings similar to the focus groups this study completed in Denver. Many parents did not know (or did not believe) that they had school choices to make. The key information sources they identified included their personal networks (“word of mouth”), community organizations, and the schools themselves. The parents were also presented with various forms of written information materials. Dayton parents found valuable a written brochure to help them make choices—and they preferred actual scores to information like “stars” in ranking a school’s performance.

Even though the parents in this three-city survey did not engage in web-based information searches as often as they performed more direct information gathering, the web is ideally suited for providing wide and deep information about schools. It can only be useful to low-income parents if some strategy is developed to help them cross the “digital divide.”

GreatSchools.net is a San Francisco-based firm that is using a business model of subscriptions and advertising to provide publicly available information to parents, in a very user-friendly format. (There are other competitors in this market niche, including Standard and Poor’s “Schoolmatters.org.”) In terms of what is known about information presentation formats (from health care research and other areas) these new efforts seem to be on the cutting edge, and ahead of many school districts and states in how they present school information. For example, subscribing parents can compare a school’s test scores in terms of time trends, but also in terms of how a subgroup’s performance in that school (e.g., Latinos in 3rd grade) compares to the same group in other schools in the district and state (on a 1-10 scale). In addition to performance and demographic data, the GreatSchools website has statements from principals about the schools’ approach and philosophy. The site is also incorporating parents’ reviews (with some careful screening mechanisms), so that the kinds of “word of mouth” that parents now get in face-to-face conversations can be available to all who access the website. The site is now getting about 100,000 reviews per year, with about 80% of them positive, and 20% negative.

Providing such information on websites clearly has great potential, but as the survey here demonstrates, the website approach is not yet serving low-income parents well. (See also Schneider & Buckley, forthcoming 2007, on Washington, D.C., Internet data access.) Until the digital divide is mostly bridged, another way to increase information access for these parents may be by providing assisted access to websites at parent information centers, libraries, or school-based kiosks.

In the summer of 2005, a survey similar to the one reported here was completed in Edmonton, Canada (see Maguire 2006). The Edmonton schools have a long history of school choice and school-based budgeting. While the Canadian school context is certainly different than that in the United States, some comparisons are useful.

The Edmonton survey examined all parents, not just low-income parents. About half of their respondents had incomes exceeding the \$50,000 level in our survey (adjusted for Canadian/U.S. dollar differences). But, the responses from these upper-income Canadian parents are quite similar to the results reported here for low- and moderate-income American parents. The results are alike in terms of the numbers of schools the

parents considered, information-gathering activities, and the frequency of talking with teachers, family and friends, and the like.<sup>33</sup>

The results of the three-city survey reported here comport very well with other activities and research designed to improve understanding of how urban parents make choices.

**A Comment on Charter Parents.** Charter schools or operators in some areas have been accused of looking more like private, religious schools than public schools. What is striking about the research across Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and Denver is how similar the responses of the parents who chose charter schools (14%) are to the parents who remained in regular public schools (63%).

Charter parents and other choosers do not differ in how they learn about their choice opportunity. The percentages that get informed by personal action, personal networks, personal experience, or school actions are about the same. In terms of information sources utilized to make a decision, the charter parents look similar. They do not differ on the single most important source of information they cited, on why that source was important, on the child's involvement in the decision process, on the most important factor in choosing a school, or on the importance of a school being near their home.

The list of similarities goes on. There is no difference between charter parents and others on how they actually gathered information, whether they visited the school or the child visited the school, whether they spoke with other parents, family or friends, or received printed information, or on the number of schools they considered or actually applied to.

This seems worth pointing out if for no other reason than to underline that charter school parents seem to resemble traditional public school parents across the board in terms of how they search for a school for their child.

## **PUBLIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

This study examined how and under what circumstances a parent information center might help low- and moderate-income parents as they explore their school choice

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<sup>33</sup>. For example, 30% of Edmonton parents considered two schools, while another 26% considered three, and only 12% considered more than three schools. In terms of information-gathering activities, 78% of Edmonton parents talked to teachers; 71% talked to family and friends; and 65% talked to parents of students, figures that are fairly similar to the low- to moderate-income sample in our survey. Some 39% of Edmonton parents said they could have made a better choice with help from a parent information center (and this percentage was higher at lower income levels). They also found that more highly educated parents are more likely to utilize newspapers or website material.



options. About 41% of parents across the sample said they could have made a better choice by talking to a school counselor of some kind.<sup>34</sup>

Parents were asked what type of counselor they preferred. They were most likely to select someone not associated with the schools directly. The largest percentage (35%) said a “parent group member” would be most helpful, 26% said a “paid school district official,” 21% said a “community group member,” and 12% answered a counselor paid for by a private foundation. These findings varied by city, with Washington, D.C., parents favoring a “parent group member,” and Denver parents preferring “a paid school official.”<sup>35</sup> These results suggest the importance of careful study of the political environment and parent perceptions in a particular city before deciding on an approach.

Parents were also asked why such a counselor might be helpful. Here the responses fell into three related categories. A third of the parents (33%) cited the factor of a counselor holding “first-hand information”; 29% said a counselor would have “more information”; and 28% cited the “reliable or trustworthy” information they could get from a counselor.

Thus, despite the high levels of “feeling informed” and very high levels of satisfaction reported by our parents, about two in five parents still think their choice could have been improved with some assistance. In the multivariate analyses reported in the appendices, minority parents, the lowest-income parents, and the least well-educated parents are most likely to want help from a counselor.

**Practical Implications.** When parents were asked if there were any “other practical issues” (apart from academic issues) that influenced their choice, 55% said “no.”<sup>36</sup> What about the other 45%?

These other parents cited a variety of issues. The top issue (cited by 20% of the 45%, thus 9% of the total sample) was the combined response of transportation and availability of after-school programs. The second and third categories tied at 12% each—extracurricular programs and a desire for siblings or friends in the school. Financial or bureaucratic issues (probably associated with applying for choice programs) came in fourth at 4%. As with the findings from the focus groups, transportation may be an important barrier to

34. By city: 43% in D.C., 40% in Denver, and 34% in Milwaukee. Interestingly, a third or more of parents in each city responded favorably, but the newer the choice option, the more parents seemed to express a need for such assistance.

35. In D.C., 42% favored a parent group member, nearly double the percentage supporting a paid district official, and parents were also the top group in Milwaukee, at 36%. In Denver, on the other hand, the plurality favored a paid school official, at 29%, with parent group members garnering only 24%.

36. By city: 61% in Milwaukee, 54% in Denver, and 50% in D.C.

parents making choices, especially as many parents are willing to have their child travel to get to the right school (and the reality of having more than one child conceivably in different schools complicates the lives of parents and guardians enormously).

Though the numbers are small, there are significant differences across the cities around these practical issues. For example, parents in Washington, D.C., are twice as likely as those in Milwaukee to cite safety and discipline as an important practical issue in selecting a school. Conversely, parents in Milwaukee are much more likely than parents in other cities to cite facilities and resources of the school as a significant practical issue in their selection. Though one out of nine parents in Milwaukee cite resources and facilities as practical issues, fewer than one in a hundred of the Washington, D.C., and Denver parents do so.

These nuances suggest the different cultures that may be established in cities are important concerning practical or “non-academic” factors associated with school choice. Parents’ priorities might also reflect the perceived deficiencies of the schools their children attended before options became available. Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943) has argued that humans have a hierarchy of needs—first food and water, then safety, then social interchange, then esteem and love, and finally individual accomplishment—and that individuals must satisfy the most basic needs before they can focus on more advanced ones.

Applying this concept to school choice, it seems possible that parents want safe schools first, a reasonable physical facility second, a good location third, friendly staff fourth, and a good learning environment fifth, with high test scores, graduation rates, and college attendance coming even higher in the hierarchy as likely indicators of learning. Parents might be able to attend to higher-level needs only after they have ensured that their children’s schools meet more basic needs like safety.

As the school choice movement goes forward, one challenge will be to address how all parents, no matter where they enter the hierarchy, have access to the basic information needed to answer the questions important to them.

## **OTHER IMPLICATIONS**

There are a number of lessons and implications from this research. First, in these relatively “mature choice cities,” a very large percentage of low- to moderate-income parents engage in a great deal of information-gathering activities and they feel pretty well informed and

pretty satisfied in the end.

These respondents report being remarkably satisfied, well informed, and active information seekers. It is hard to imagine parents who report greater satisfaction, who are more likely to say they did not lack information, and who actually engaged in more information-gathering activities.

These urban parents clearly care about academic quality and performance of schools, but they mostly do not use test scores as a strong metric for that. They prefer their own observations of the school in action and the sense of reputation they gather from word of mouth (“soft data”). Indeed, most of the factors that parents use in selecting schools are not readily conveyed on paper or on a website. Instead, the factors important to them are less tangible and, hence, better conveyed through discussion with other parents with similar concerns, values, or experiences.

The children in these families are involved in the school choice in a major way, a fact missed by most prior research. In short, most low- to moderate-income urban parents seem to make school choice decisions in ways similar to higher-income parents—they talk, they visit, they read, and they discuss. They may know a bit less factual information than higher-income parents (as shown in past research), but this is less important to them than the “word of mouth” they hear about a school, the feeling they get from visiting the school, and talking to school officials. And, in fact, these less tangible issues may be the issues of concern to parents across income levels.

While parent choice is growing and is likely to be a critical component of urban school reform in the future, it is embedded in other changes to school systems and to school accountability structures. The parents surveyed reported feeling highly satisfied with their school and engaging in considerable information-gathering activities to make that successful match. But three-quarters of taxpayers in most locations do not have children in public elementary or secondary schools. Yet, with education as a public good funded by taxpayer dollars, they have a stake in the system and have a right to feel that schools are being held accountable to them, as well as to parents. Data show that parents are actually more satisfied with schools than is the general population.

The use of “top-down” accountability, focused upon test scores, graduation rates, and other measurable outcomes, is a legitimate function of federal, state, and school district systems, if taxpayers truly believe that these are the appropriate measures of educational outcomes. However, policymakers should keep in mind that test scores do not seem to be the main factor driving parental decisionmaking—at least among a low- to moderate-

income population. “Bottom-up” parental choice is another form of accountability. Dual accountability may not be easily resolved, in terms of the precise alignment of broader societal and parental interests, but it may be an appropriate part of educational system governance.

## APPENDIX A: THE SURVEY SAMPLE

The city samples in this survey varied considerably by race. In Milwaukee, 54% were African American, 33% were white, and 6% were Hispanic. In Washington, D.C., by contrast, 90% of respondents were African American. Denver demonstrated greater diversity; the largest group of respondents was Hispanic (43%), while 35% were white, and 18% were African American.

How does this sample compare to the racial breakdowns in these cities? As is true in most American cities, in these three communities, the adult population has higher percentages of white adults, while the school-aged population has more minorities. The samples in this study reflect that fact, but also reflect the existence of more private-school choosers than in the actual population (since the survey focused on choosers).

In Milwaukee, the adult population percentages are 41% white, 41% African American, and about 14% Hispanic, but the Milwaukee Public Schools enrollment has quite a different racial composition—59% African American, 18% Hispanic, and 15% white. Since the study sample includes parents who select private schools, the study ended up with a white sample in Milwaukee that is higher (31%) than that. In Washington, D.C., the adult population is 60% African American, 27% white, and 10% Hispanic. Enrollment in the D.C. public schools is markedly different: 84% African American, 9% Hispanic, and 5% white. The study sample (at 90% African American) has a slightly higher percentage of African-American respondents. In Denver, the adult population is 49% white, 35% Hispanic, and 12% African American; Denver Public Schools enrollment, on the other hand, is 57% Hispanic, 20% white, and 19% African American. The Denver sample, then, somewhat over-represents Hispanics, who are more likely to be of low to moderate income.

These parents report being very satisfied with their choice, which many surveys show for parents who choose schools, but these parents' satisfaction levels are higher than most previously reported (Teske and Schneider 2001). About two-thirds of these low-income parents report being “very” satisfied (at the extreme end of a 5-point scale), and nearly 90% are either “somewhat” or “very” satisfied. The annual, national Phi Delta Kappa polls, which include parents in all income groups, show only 70% selecting the top two points on their 5-point scale, where their scale asks parents to rate their schools with

a grade from A to F. So, even though our sample is a low- to moderate-income urban sample, in cities where the school performance is substantially below national averages, satisfaction levels among parents who choose are much higher than national averages of all parents. One possibility is that low-income parents are “less picky” than others, and more easily satisfied, though there is little evidence of this (and satisfaction does not vary consistently by income within our sample). Another possibility, backed by more evidence, is that choosers really are more satisfied, for a combination of reasons.

## APPENDIX B:

# METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND DETAILS OF RESPONSE RATES

This information was provided by the Connecticut Survey Research Associates (CSRA) at the University of Connecticut, which conducted the parent survey.

The survey sample frame consisted of a directory-listed sample from various lists supplemented with a random-digit-dial (RDD) sample in cases where targeted list samples were exhausted. Although the contacts in this sample are likely to be representative of all low-income parents, the overall incidence figures on having children in households and income may not be accurate representations of all households in these areas.

### **SAMPLE VIABILITY**

A total of 58,937 sample records were dialed during this project. This included 31,613 in Denver, 22,988 in Washington, D.C., and 8,031 in Milwaukee. Overall, 200 interviews were completed in Denver, while 300 were completed in both Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee. The overall sample hit rate was 0.63% in Denver, compared to 1.31% in Washington, D.C., and 3.74% in Milwaukee. The Denver sample performed poorly both because the sample records frequently did not reach households and because contacted households were less likely to be eligible for the survey. In contrast, sample records in Milwaukee were not only more likely to reach a household, but households were also more likely to be eligible for the survey.

### **SAMPLE EFFICIENCY AND SCREENING RATES**

Though the sample was designed to target households, some numbers were disconnected or reached establishments. These numbers are determined to not be households. Additionally, in some cases no human contact could be made at a telephone number; for example, after numerous attempts an answering machine constantly picked up the telephone. In these cases, it could not be determined whether the telephone number actually reaches a viable household. Overall, 76.6% of Milwaukee sample reached a household for screening, compared to 49.3% of records in Washington, D.C., and only 29.6% in Denver. Screening rates were similar among all three samples. Among households, CSRA interviewers were able to screen 74.4% of Denver records, 80.6% of Washington, D.C., records, and 77.2% of Milwaukee records.

## ELIGIBILITY OF HOUSEHOLDS

In Denver, 45.6% of screened households had children. This compares to 44.7% of those in Washington, D.C., and 59.8% of those in Milwaukee. Households with age-eligible children in Denver were substantially less likely to make decisions about school choice than others. In Denver, only 55.8% of parents reported making decisions about school choice. This contrasts to 73% in Washington, D.C., and 69.6% in Milwaukee.

Among households that were screened for income eligibility, 62.1% of Denver households reported household incomes less than \$50,000. This was in contrast to 79.2% of households in Washington, D.C., and 90.2% of households in Milwaukee.

**TABLE A. Data Summary**

		Denver	D.C.	Milwaukee
sample viability	Total sample records	31,613	22,988	8,031
	Completes	200	300	300
	Hit rate	0.63%	1.31%	3.74%
sample efficiency & screening rates	Percent of sample not a household	48.1%	33.2%	19.6%
	Percent of sample unknown if household	22.4%	17.4%	3.9%
	Percent of total sample viable for contact	29.6%	49.3%	76.6%
	Percent of viable contacts screened for children	74.4%	80.6%	77.2%
eligibility of household	Percent of screened contacts with children	45.6%	44.7%	59.8%
	Percent of screened parents who make a school choice	55.8%	73.0%	69.6%
	Percent of screened parents income eligible	62.1%	79.2%	90.2%
	Estimated cumulative incidence	15.8%	25.9%	37.6%



# APPENDIX C: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Hello, my name is — and I'm calling from the University of Connecticut. We are talking with residents in your area about issues related to education and making school choices for children in grades K-12. May I please speak with a parent or guardian in this household, 18 years of age or older, who is at home now? (IF NO PARENT/GUARDIAN AT HOME NOW, SCHEDULE CALL BACK)

Q1. (NOTE: CONFIRM THAT PERSON ON PHONE IS PARENT/GUARDIAN OF CHILD IN GRADE K-12) Just to be sure I am speaking with the correct person, are you the parent or guardian of a child in K-12 schools?

N = .....		
Yes.....	01	
No.....	02	=> /INT02
Don't know (vol.).....	98	=> /INT02
Refused (vol.).....	99	=> /INT02

Q2. (NOTE: CONFIRM THAT THE RESPONDENT ON THE PHONE IS THE PARENT/GUARDIAN MOST INVOLVED SO WE ARE SURE WE ARE SPEAKING WITH THE CORRECT PERSON.)

And are YOU the parent or guardian who is most involved in making decisions about schooling for your child?

N = .....		
Yes.....	01	=> Q3
No.....	02	
Don't know (vol.).....	98	=> Q3
Refused (vol.).....	99	=> Q3

Q2A. May I speak to the parent or guardian who is most involved in making decisions about schooling for your child? (NOTE: No, Don't Know and Refused go back to INT2. We need to speak with the person who is most involved in making decisions about school.)

N = .....		
Yes.....	01	
No.....	02	=> INT2
Don't know (vol.).....	98	=> INT2
Refused (vol.).....	99	=> INT2

Q3. Did you consider any schools other than your neighborhood public school for any of your children in grades K-12?

N = .....		
Yes.....	01	
No.....	02	=> INT02
Don't know (vol.).....	98	=> INT02
Refused (vol.).....	99	=> INT02

Q4. For classification purposes only, is the total yearly income of all the members of your family now living at home less than \$50,000 or is it \$50,000 or more?

N = .....		
Less than \$50,000 .....	01	=> Q6I
\$50,000 or more.....	02	
Don't know (vol.).....	98	
Refused (vol.).....	99	

---

---

Thank you very much for your time. For this study we are speaking with people with a household income level below \$50,000 who have made school choices for a child in grades K-12. I appreciate your cooperation. Those are all the questions that I have for you today.

N = .....  
Terminate Interview ..... TI D => /END

---

---

Q6I. For the remainder of the questions, we would like you to think specifically about the one child in grade K-12 for whom you most recently made a school choice. We would like to talk about your school choice for this child for whom you most recently made a decision.

N = .....  
Continue..... 01

---

---

Q6. What is that child's first name please? (IF RESPONDENT REFUSES TO GIVE NAME SAY: "We simply want to have a source of reference when we are asking questions about the child you most recently made a school choice decision about. The child's initials or nickname would be just fine.) (NOTE: THE RESPONSE TYPED HERE BECOMES PART OF QUESTION TEXT)

N = .....  
RECORD CHILD'S FIRST NAME/NICKNAME/INITIALS ..... 01

---

---

Q7. Is this child a boy or a girl?

N = .....  
Boy ..... 01  
Girl ..... 02  
Refused ..... 99

---

---

Q8. What grade was <q6>/<q7> in when you last considered what school this child would attend? (ASK OPEN ENDED AND CODE TO CATEGORIES)

N = .....  
First ..... 01  
Second ..... 02  
Third ..... 03  
Fourth ..... 04  
Fifth ..... 05  
Sixth ..... 06  
Seventh ..... 07  
Eighth ..... 08  
Ninth ..... 09  
Tenth ..... 10  
Eleventh ..... 11  
Twelfth ..... 12  
Kindergarten ..... 13  
Pre-Kindergarten ..... 14

Q9. What grade is <q6>/<q7> in this fall? (ASK OPEN ENDED AND CODE TO CATEGORIES)

N =	.....	
First	.....	01
Second	.....	02
Third	.....	03
Fourth	.....	04
Fifth	.....	05
Sixth	.....	06
Seventh	.....	07
Eighth	.....	08
Ninth	.....	09
Tenth	.....	10
Eleventh	.....	11
Twelfth	.....	12
Kindergarten	.....	13
Pre-Kindergarten	.....	14
Refused	.....	99

Q10. What school is <q6>/<q7> attending this fall?

N =	.....	
RECORD SCHOOL NAME (VERIFY SPELLING)	.....	01
Refused	.....	99

Q11. Is that a public school or a private school?

N =	.....	
Public	.....	01
Private	.....	02
Home school	.....	03

Q11A. Does this school have a religious affiliation or not?

N =	.....	
Yes	.....	01
No	.....	02

Q11B. Is it the closest school to your residence that <q6>/<q7> is eligible to attend?

N =	.....	
Yes	.....	01
No	.....	02

Q11C. Is this public school within (CITY HERE—Denver, D.C., or Milwaukee) or is it located outside of (CITY HERE—Denver, D.C., or Milwaukee) city limits?

N =	.....	
Within city	.....	01
Outside city	.....	02
Don't know (vol.)	.....	98
Refused (vol.)	.....	99

---

---

Q12. About how many schools did you consider when you were making a choice about where to send <q6>/<q7> to school? (ASK OPEN ENDED AND CODE TO CATEGORIES)

N =	.....	
2	.....	02
3	.....	03
4	.....	04
5	.....	05
6	.....	06
7 or more	.....	07
Don't know	.....	98

---

---

Q13. About how many schools did you officially apply to? (ASK OPEN ENDED AND CODE TO CATEGORIES) (INTERVIEWER NOTE: Officially apply means filled out paperwork or met whatever requirements were necessary to be considered for acceptance to the school.)

N =	.....	
1	.....	01
2	.....	02
3	.....	03
4	.....	04
5	.....	05
6	.....	06
7 or more	.....	07
Don't know (vol.)	.....	98

---

---

Q14. How many children living in your household other than <q6>/<q7> attend grades Kindergarten through 12th?

N =	.....	
0/none	.....	00 => Q16
1	.....	01 => Q15
2	.....	02 => Q15
3	.....	03 => Q15
4	.....	04 => Q15
5	.....	05 => Q15
6	.....	06 => Q15
7 or more	.....	07 => Q15
Refused (vol.)	.....	99 => Q16

---

---

Q15. What grade or grades are they in? (NOTE: RESPONDENT HAS <Q14> OTHER CHILD/CHILDREN. DO NOT ENTER MORE THAN <Q14> RESPONSES.)

N =	.....	
First	.....	01
Second	.....	02
Third	.....	03
Fourth	.....	04
Fifth	.....	05
Sixth	.....	06
Seventh	.....	07
Eighth	.....	08
Ninth	.....	09
Tenth	.....	10
Eleventh	.....	11
Twelfth	.....	12
Kindergarten	.....	13

Q16. How did you first become aware you could choose a school for <q6>/<q7> other than your local public school? (ASK OPEN ENDED) (INTERVIEWER NOTE: If respondent does not understand, mention examples such as a letter from the school, an open house, a media advertisement, or by talking to other people)

N = .....	
Letters, brochures, or guides from/about the schools .....	01
Mass media .....	02
School visit .....	03
Talked with teachers/school officials .....	04
Talked with family/friends/other parents .....	05
Common knowledge .....	06
Worked in the school system .....	07
Through experiences with older children .....	08
Through personal experience .....	09
By doing research .....	10
Don't know/Can't remember .....	98

Q17. What was the most important factor in choosing the school <q6>/<q7> attends? (ASK OPEN ENDED)

N = .....		
Academic quality .....	01	
School curriculum .....	02	
Location/Convenience .....	03	
Hours of operation .....	04	
Extracurricular activities .....	05	
Feeling/Environment .....	06	
Safety/Discipline .....	07	
Values .....	08	
Student body .....	09	
Cost/Affordability .....	10	
Other .....	80	
None given .....	97	=> Q20

Q18. What was the second most important factor in choosing the school <q6>/<q7> attends? (ASK OPEN ENDED)

N = .....		
Academic quality .....	01	
School curriculum .....	02	
Location/Convenience .....	03	
Hours of operation .....	04	
Extracurricular activities .....	05	
Feeling/Environment .....	06	
Safety/Discipline .....	07	
Values .....	08	
Student body .....	09	
Cost/Affordability .....	10	
Other .....	80	
None given .....	97	=> Q20

---

---

Q19. What was the third most important factor in choosing the school <q6>/<q7> attends? (ASK OPEN ENDED)

N = .....	
Academic quality .....	01
School curriculum .....	02
Location/Convenience .....	03
Hours of operation .....	04
Extracurricular activities.....	05
Feeling/Environment.....	06
Safety/Discipline .....	07
Values.....	08
Student body.....	09
Cost/Affordability .....	10
Other.....	80
None given.....	97

---

---

Q20. Where did you learn about the important school features that you just mentioned?

N = .....	
Letters, brochures, or guides from/about the schools .....	01
Mass media .....	02
School visit .....	03
Talked with teachers/school officials .....	04
Talked with family/friends/other parents .....	05
Common knowledge .....	06
Worked in the school system.....	07
Through experiences with older children .....	08
Through personal experience .....	09
By doing research.....	10
Don't know/Can't remember .....	98

---

---

Q20A. Just to confirm, you learned about school features from <q20>. How many different sources did this information come from? (NOTE: NUMBER OF SOURCES EXECUTES SKIP PATTERN.)

N = .....		
1 .....	01	=> Q22
2 or more.....	02	
Don't know .....	98	=> Q23
Refused.....	99	=> Q23

---

---

Q21. What or who was your single MOST important source of information in making the choice?

N = .....	
Friends/Family/Other parents .....	01
Self .....	02
Teachers/Administrators/School .....	03
Mass media .....	04
Mailings/Brochures/Guides .....	05
Don't know .....	98

---

Q22. Why was this source the most important? (ASK OPEN ENDED)

N = .....	
The source was reliable or trustworthy .....	01
The source possessed more information .....	02
The source had firsthand information .....	03
The source was the only one considered .....	04
The source was the most readily available/convenient .....	05
The source was the most affected/concerned .....	06
The source was the most authoritative/offered the best information .....	07
Don't know (vol.) .....	98

---

Q23. Was <q6>/<q7> involved in making the decision about where <Q7> would attend school?

N = .....		
Yes .....	01	=> Q24
No .....	02	=> Q25
Don't know (vol.) .....	98	=> Q25
Refused (vol.) .....	99	=> Q25

---

Q24. What did <q6>/<q7> want most in a school?

N = .....	
Academic quality .....	01
School curriculum .....	02
Location/Convenience .....	03
Hours of operation .....	04
Extracurricular activities .....	05
Feeling/Environment .....	06
Safety/Discipline .....	07
Student body .....	09
Other .....	80
Don't know .....	98

---

Q25. Does <q6>/<q7> possess certain personal characteristics or traits that influenced your decision on where to send <q6>/<q7> for school? (INTERVIEWER NOTE: If respondent does not understand, mention examples such as a need for discipline, strong interest in athletics or the arts, learning disabilities, or strong academic skills.)

N = .....		
Yes .....	01	=> Q26
No .....	02	=> Q27
Don't know (vol.) .....	98	=> Q27
Refused (vol.) .....	99	=> Q27

---

Q26. What was the most important characteristic of <Q6>'s / <Q7>'s personality?

N = .....	
Discipline issue .....	01
Artsy .....	02
Gifted .....	03
Learning/Physical disability .....	04
Athletic ability .....	05
Negative social issue .....	06
Positive social issue .....	07
Race/Religion .....	08
Don't know (vol.) .....	98

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Q27. How important was it for the school you chose to be close to your home—was it the most important factor, a very important factor, a somewhat important factor, a slightly important factor, or not an important factor at all?

N = .....	
The most important factor .....	01
A very important factor .....	02
A somewhat important factor .....	03
A slightly important factor .....	04
Not an important factor at all .....	05
Don't know (vol.) .....	98
Refused (vol.) .....	99

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Q28. Besides the location of the school, were there any other practical issues that influenced your choice? (ASK OPEN ENDED) (INTERVIEWER NOTE: If respondent does not understand, mention examples such as siblings in same school, transportation issues, work schedules, or the need to go through bureaucratic hurdles.)

N = .....	
Own/Friends' children attended .....	01
Availability of transportation/After-school care .....	02
Financial/Bureaucratic considerations .....	03
Courses/Extracurricular activities available .....	04
Quality of school/Teachers/Academics .....	05
Demographic composition .....	06
Safety/Discipline .....	07
Facilities/Resources available .....	08
Size/Teacher-student ratio .....	09
Atmosphere .....	10
Met child-specific needs .....	11
Did not get into first choice .....	12
No .....	97

---

---

Q29I. Now, I would like to ask you about some of the things you did when making your choice:

N = .....	
Continue .....	01

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Q29. Did you visit any of the schools you applied to?

N = .....	
Yes .....	01
No .....	02
Don't know (vol.) .....	98
Refused (vol.) .....	99

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Q30. Did your child visit any of the schools?

N = .....	
Yes .....	01
No .....	02
Don't know (vol.) .....	98
Refused (vol.) .....	99



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Q31. Did you talk to teachers at any of these schools?	
N = .....	
Yes.....	01
No.....	02
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

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Q32. Did you talk to principals or administrators at any of these schools?	
N = .....	
Yes.....	01
No.....	02
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

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Q34. Did you talk with any parents or students at any of these schools?	
N = .....	
Yes.....	01
No.....	02
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

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---

Q35. Did you talk with family and/or friends about any of these schools?	
N = .....	
Yes.....	01
No.....	02
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

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Q36. Did you get brochures or printed information from any of these schools?		
N = .....		
Yes.....	01	=> Q36A
No.....	02	=> Q37
Don't know (vol.).....	98	=> Q37
Refused (vol.).....	99	=> Q37

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---

Q36A. Were the written materials easy or difficult to understand? (PROBE: Very/Somewhat easy/difficult)	
N = .....	
Very easy.....	01
Somewhat easy.....	02
Somewhat difficult.....	03
Very difficult.....	04
Neither easy nor difficult (vol.).....	97
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

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---

Q36B. Were the written materials helpful or unhelpful for making a school choice decision? (PROBE: Very or Somewhat helpful/unhelpful)

N = .....  
Very helpful.....01  
Somewhat helpful.....02  
Somewhat unhelpful.....03  
Very unhelpful.....04  
Neither helpful nor unhelpful (vol.).....97  
Don't know.....98  
Refused (vol.).....99

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Q37. Did you look at any websites to get information on these schools?

N = .....  
Yes.....01  
No.....02  
Don't know (vol.).....98  
Refused (vol.).....99

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Q38. Did you utilize a Parent Information Center designed to help choose?

N = .....  
Yes.....01  
No.....02  
Don't know (vol.).....98  
Refused (vol.).....99

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Q39. Did you attend any meetings or fairs for parents on choosing a school?

N = .....  
Yes.....01  
No.....02  
Don't know (vol.).....98  
Refused (vol.).....99

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IQ40. Now I want to ask you a few more general questions about your school choice decision:

N = .....  
Continue.....01

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Q40. Are you satisfied or unsatisfied with the school you chose for <q6>/<q7> to attend? (PROBE: Very or Somewhat (Satisfied/Unsatisfied)?)

N = .....  
Very satisfied.....01  
Somewhat satisfied.....02  
Somewhat unsatisfied.....03  
Very unsatisfied.....04  
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied (vol.).....05  
Don't know (vol.).....98  
Refused (vol.).....99

Q41. When you consider all of the information you were able to get, was there any other piece or element of information or data that you did not receive that would have helped you in making your choice?

N =		
Yes	01	=> Q42
No	02	=> Q43
Don't know (vol.)	98	=> Q43
Refused (vol.)	99	=> Q43

Q42. What type of additional information would have been helpful? (ASK OPEN ENDED)

N =	
Test scores	01
Faculty information	02
Curriculum	03
Financial information	04
Social services information	05
Demographics	06
Open houses	07
Comparative information	08
Information about violence/safety	09
Don't know (vol.)	98
Refused (vol.)	99

Q43. Outside of your spouse and your children, about how many people, including friends, relatives, acquaintances and professional people, did you talk to about your decision about where to send <q6>/<q7> to school?

N =	
zero/none	00
1	01
2	02
3	03
4	04
5	05
6 to 10	06
10 or more	07
Don't know (vol.)	98
Refused (vol.)	99

Q44. Some parents report that they get most of their school information from talking with friends, relatives and school officials, while others emphasize using written information from school report cards and other official sources? Would you say your best and important information mostly came from talking to people or from written materials? (INTERVIEWER NOTE: Try to get them to make a choice, even if they are initially hesitant to do so.)

N =	
Talking to people	01
Written materials	02
Don't know (vol.)	98
Refused (vol.)	99

Q45. If teachers and school officials provided one perspective about the quality of a school, but parents of children who had attended that same school generally told you something different, who would you be more likely to believe—teachers and school officials or parents of children? (INTERVIEWER NOTE: Try to get them to make a choice, even if they are initially hesitant to do so.)

N = .....	
Teachers and school officials.....	01
Parents of children .....	02
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

Q46. Do you think you could have made a better choice if you had a school choice counselor to talk with about the decision?

N = .....		
Yes.....	01	=> Q47
No.....	02	=> Q49I
Don't know (vol.).....	98	=> Q49I
Refused (vol.).....	99	=> Q49I

Q47. In the best case scenario, would the counselor be a paid school district official, a community group member, a counselor paid by a private foundation group, a member of a parent group, or have some other background?

N = .....	
A paid school district official.....	01
A community group member .....	02
A counselor paid by a private foundation group .....	03
A member of a parent group .....	04
Education researcher independent from the schools .....	05
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

Q48. Why might such an advisor be more helpful than other sources? (ASK OPEN ENDED)

N = .....	
Possess reliable or trustworthy information .....	01
Possess more information .....	02
Possess firsthand information .....	03
Possess better qualifications to help .....	05
Possess the ability to be more responsive to needs.....	06
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

Q49I. Finally, we have some questions for classification purposes only. First . . .

N = .....	
Continue.....	01

---

Q49. What is the highest grade of school or year of college you have completed and gotten credit for?

N = .....

Grade school or less (0-8).....	01
Some high school (9-11) .....	02
High school (12).....	03
Some college (1-3 years).....	04
College graduate (4 years).....	05
Post graduate (Masters or Doctorate).....	06
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

---

Q50. For kindergarten through 12th grade, did you personally attend a public school or a private school?

N = .....

Public .....	01	=> Q50B
Private .....	02	=> Q50A
Both.....	03	=> Q50A
Don't know .....	98	=> Q50B
Refused.....	99	=> Q50B

---

Q50A. Did this <q50> school have a religious affiliation or not?

N = .....

Yes.....	01
No.....	02
Both (vol.) .....	03
Don't know .....	98
Refused .....	99

---

Q50B. Was this (were these) <q50> school(s) located within the city of (CITY HERE—Denver, D.C., or Milwaukee), outside the city of (CITY HERE—Denver, D.C., or Milwaukee) but within the United States, or outside the United States?

N = .....

Within the city of (Denver, D.C., or Milwaukee) .....	01
Outside the city of (Denver, D.C., or Milwaukee) but within the U.S.	02
Outside the U.S. ....	03
Both inside and outside (Denver, D.C., or Milwaukee) but within the U.S.	80
Both inside (Denver, D.C., or Milwaukee), and outside the U.S. ....	80
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

---

Q50C. Was this the closest school to your residence that you were eligible to attend?

N = .....

Yes.....	01
No.....	02
Don't know (vol.).....	98
Refused (vol.).....	99

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Q51. How many years have you lived in (CITY HERE—Denver, D.C., or Milwaukee)? (RECORD 2 DIGITS—ROUND TO NEAREST YEAR)

N = .....	
Less than 10 years .....	00
10 to 19 years .....	00
20 to 29 years .....	00
30 years or more .....	00
Don't know (vol.) .....	98
Refused (vol.) .....	99

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---

Q52. In what year were you born? (ENTER 4 DIGIT NUMBER)

N = .....	
Less than 30 years old .....	00
30 to 39 years old .....	00
40 to 49 years old .....	00
50 years old or more .....	00
Refused (vol.) .....	99

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---

Q53. What racial or ethnic group would you most identify yourself with—African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, White, or some other group?

N = .....	
African American .....	01
Hispanic .....	03
White .....	05
Multiracial .....	80
Don't know (vol.) .....	98
Refused (vol.) .....	99

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Q54. Is <q6>/<q7> of the same ethnic or racial groups?

N = .....		
Yes .....	01	=> Q56
No .....	02	=> Q55
Don't know (vol.) .....	98	=> Q56
Refused (vol.) .....	99	=> Q56

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---

Q55. What racial or ethnic group is <q6>/<q7> identified with—African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, White, or some other group??

N = .....	
African American .....	01
Hispanic .....	03
White .....	05
Multiracial .....	80
Don't know (vol.) .....	98
Refused (vol.) .....	99

Q56. Lots of things come up that keep people from attending religious services even if they want to. Apart from occasional weddings, baptisms, or funerals, how often do you go to religious services—every week, almost every week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, or never?

N =	.....	
Every week	.....	01
Almost every week	.....	02
Once or twice a month	.....	03
A few times a year	.....	04
Never	.....	05
Don't know (vol.)	.....	98
Refused (vol.)	.....	99

Q57. Do you consider yourself Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, or what?

N =	.....	
Protestant	.....	01
Roman Catholic	.....	02
Jewish	.....	03
Muslim	.....	04
Christian	.....	05
Nondenominational/Agnostic	.....	06
Atheist/None	.....	07
Hindu	.....	80
Buddhist	.....	80
Jehovah's Witness	.....	80
Mormon	.....	80
Unitarian	.....	80
Don't know (vol.)	.....	98
Refused (vol.)	.....	99

Q58. Is English your own first language?

N =	.....	
Yes	.....	01     => Q60
No	.....	02     => Q59
Don't know (vol.)	.....	98     => Q60
Refused (vol.)	.....	99     => Q60

Q59. What is your first language? (ASK AS OPEN ENDED)

N =	.....	
Spanish	.....	01
Amharic	.....	02
Cherokee	.....	03
Indian	.....	01
Somali	.....	02
Twi	.....	01
Don't know (vol.)	.....	98
Refused (vol.)	.....	99

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Q60. Are you currently employed full-time, employed part-time, retired, a student, a homemaker, temporarily laid-off, or are you not employed?

N = .....  
Employed full-time.....01  
Employed part-time.....02  
Retired.....03  
A student.....04  
A homemaker.....05  
Temporarily laid-off.....06  
Not employed.....07  
Don't know (vol.).....98  
Refused (vol.).....99

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Q61. Are you married, single, partnered, divorced, or widowed?

N = .....  
Married.....01       => Q62  
Single.....02       => Q63  
Partnered.....03       => Q63  
Divorced.....04       => Q63  
Widowed.....05       => Q63  
Don't know (vol.).....98       => Q63  
Refused (vol.).....99       => Q63

---

---

Q62. How would you describe your spouse's current work situation—is your spouse currently employed full-time, employed part-time, retired, a student, a homemaker, temporarily laid-off, or not employed?

N = .....  
Employed full-time.....01  
Employed part-time.....02  
Retired.....03  
A student.....04  
A homemaker.....05  
Temporarily laid-off.....06  
Not employed.....07  
Don't know (vol.).....98  
Refused (vol.).....99

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Q63. For classification purposes only, is the total yearly income of all the members of your family now living at home (READ CHOICES 1-4)?

N = .....  
Less than \$10,000.....01  
\$10,000 to less than \$20,000.....02  
\$20,000 to less than \$30,000.....03  
\$30,000 to less than \$40,000.....04  
\$40,000 to \$50,000.....05  
Don't know (vol.).....98  
Refused (vol.).....99

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Q64. (RECORD GENDER. DO NOT ASK)

N = .....  
Male.....01  
Female.....02

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your cooperation is appreciated.

N = .....  
Complete..... CO D   => /END



# APPENDIX D: SELECTED VARIABLES AROUND INFORMATION GATHERING AND PARENTAL SATISFACTION

Since other factors are likely to influence satisfaction, the analysis included several independent variables in a multiple regression. The study team examined parent income and parent education (neither is a significant predictor of satisfaction levels), as well as dummy variables for each city. (As in the raw data, Milwaukee parents are more likely to be satisfied.) Still, the information index score remains very highly significant. The analysis also added the “information lack” variable. Both information gathering and a sense of not lacking information are independently and highly related to satisfaction levels.

**TABLE B. Satisfaction as a Function of Information Gathering and Other Factors**

Factor	Standardized Regression Coefficient
Information activity scale	+0.127 **
Milwaukee resident	+0.075
D.C. resident	-0.093*
Lacked information	-0.312**
Parent income	-0.038
Parent education	-0.014

N = 725  
 F = 24.4, Prob > F = 0.0000  
 Adj R-squared = 0.14  
 \* significant at 95% or higher confidence  
 \*\* significant at 99% or higher confidence

To test the robustness of this relationship, the research team also ran multiple regressions for satisfaction measured in other ways, besides the 1–5 scale. Looking at the combination of “very” and “somewhat” satisfied, or using only “very” satisfied, as binary dependent variables (with less, neutral, or negative satisfaction as a 0 value), the results hold up equally strongly.

As one might expect, it also turns out that the combined index of information-gathering activities predicts the “information lack” answer pretty well, but the result falls below the conventional confidence level to be considered statistically significant. When both are placed as independent variables in a regression explaining satisfaction (measured in the three different ways), and including city dummies, parental income and parental education, they are both highly significant independent predictors of parental satisfaction.

## APPENDIX E:

# CHOICE BY COMBINATION OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS

It is well known that parent education, income, and race are correlated in American cities. White parents in this sample, and in the population at large, tend to have higher education levels and higher incomes. In addition, the study sample varies somewhat by city; nearly 90% of Washington, D.C., respondents are African American. The findings in chapter 3 demonstrate some differences for each of these background characteristics.

This appendix examines combined multiple regression models (with the precise type of model depending upon the nature of the dependent variables), to determine whether income, education, city location, or race are more likely to drive any differences that we find.

After working with the data (and also examining findings from other studies), intuition suggested that parent education would be the variable most likely to have significant influences on information-gathering actions and experiences, but the picture is much more mixed in the multivariate context. Education does dominate statistical associations in some instances, but elsewhere, other factors matter more. The relatively low “R-squareds” in all of these models suggest that variations in outcomes from respondents are driven more by unmeasured factors and personal idiosyncrasies than by the systematic factors measured here (for example, our regression in table C below for the information activity scale has an adjusted R-squared of 0.05, meaning that 95% of the variance across parent activities is NOT explained by variables in our model).

Only the most interesting and important findings are presented below. In terms of location of schools parents select, city and parent education matter most. Denver and D.C. residents were more likely to choose the school closest to home. This was also true of parents with a high school education or less.

For the size of the school choice set considered, while parent education is a significant factor when examined alone, its influence washes out in the multivariate models. But for the number of schools actually applied to, residents of Denver, African Americans and whites (but not Hispanics), and college-educated parents each were more likely to apply to more schools.

For network size, white and higher-income families talk to more people about their choice. Compared to African-American respondents, white parents have a relative preference for talking to others over using written materials, again emphasizing the network quality and trust dimension. In terms of relative trust of school officials, compared to parents, Hispanics are the most trusting of school officials and whites the least. The lowest-income families were also the most likely to trust school officials if their accounts differed from those of a parent or acquaintance, and the education factor washes out here.

As table C shows, for the 0–10 combined index of information-gathering activities, education still matters: Those with only a high school education or less are less active; higher-income parents in the sample (moderate income in these cities) are more active; and D.C. residents are more active (mainly because they are more likely to use websites and fairs). There can be much less confidence that other parent characteristics are statistically significantly related to information gathering.

**TABLE C. Information-Gathering Activities by Multiple Parent Characteristics**

Parent Characteristic	Regression Coefficient
Denver resident	- 0.268
D.C. resident	0.408 *
High school education or less	- 0.496 **
High-income group	0.636 **
College degree	0.211
African American	0.023
White	0.045
Low-income	0.158
Constant factor	5.763

N = 720

F = 5.82, Prob > F = 0.0000

Adj R-squared = 0.05

\* significant at 95% or higher confidence

\*\* significant at 99% or higher confidence

In terms of getting assistance from a school counselor, the groups most favorable are Hispanic, African-American, low-income, and less well-educated parents. In identifying a preference for a counselor, African Americans are most likely to prefer another parent as that counselor, while college educated respondents prefer someone employed by the school district.

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The Center on Reinventing Public Education at the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington engages in research and analysis aimed at developing focused, effective, and accountable schools and the systems that support them. The Center, established in 1993, seeks to inform community leaders, policymakers, school and school system leaders, and the research community.