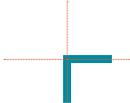


# Hopes, Fears, & Reality



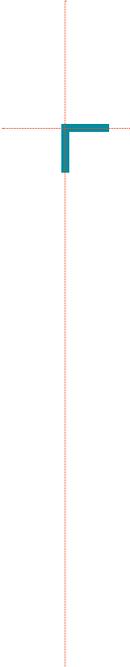
A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN  
CHARTER SCHOOLS IN 2006

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# About NCSRP

The National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) brings rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate.

NCSRP seeks to facilitate the fair assessment of the value-added effects of U.S. charter schools and to provide the charter school and broader public education communities with research and information for ongoing improvement.

NCSRP:

- Identifies high-priority research questions.
- Conducts and commissions original research to fill gaps in current knowledge or to illuminate existing debates.
- Helps policymakers and the general public interpret charter school research.

The Project is an initiative of the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

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## CHAPTER I

# Doing Their Homework: How Charter School Parents Make Their Choices

*Paul Teske and Robert Reichardt*

Some groups of parents have always been able to choose their children's schools. These parents, the economically privileged and lower-income families who feel so intensely about schools, changed neighborhoods, sought vouchers, or found parochial schools. Nobody expresses much concern about whether they were able to make well-informed choices. Charter schools, especially those in big cities, extend choice to new groups of low- and moderate-income parents, which has led to concern about whether parents choosing charter schools are sophisticated enough and have access to good enough information to make good decisions.<sup>1</sup> Critics fear that such parents may be misled by superficial aspects of schools, rather than concentrating on academic priorities.

A number of researchers have compared parents who chose charter schools to parents who did not exercise any form of educational choice.<sup>2</sup> These studies were done in places where few schooling options exist and parents must take extraordinary measures to get them. However, there are now communities where low- and moderate-income families can choose among a wide variety of publicly funded schooling options, including their neighborhood schools, other district-run schools, magnets, charters, and, in some cases, voucher-funded private schools. No one knows whether, under such circumstances, parents who choose charter schools differ from parents who choose other alternatives.

We sought to answer that question by surveying 800 low- and moderate-income parents in three cities with many choice options: Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and Denver.<sup>3</sup> The choice of these cities allowed us to compare charter school parents to those who picked other choice options. Thus, our comparison group is not a passive group of “non-

choosing” parents, but rather a second group of active parents who picked options other than charter schools.

We found that parents who choose charter schools:

- are not richer or better educated than other parents who exercise school choice;
- say that academic factors and teacher quality are their most important considerations, regardless of their income level;
- use the same kinds of information in making a choice as other parents: visiting schools, talking with parents who have children in the school, reviewing printed materials, and consulting school counselors and parent information centers;
- are more likely to select a school other than their “neighborhood school” (85 percent versus 60 percent for other choosers);
- factor their children’s views about schools into their decision criteria;
- are more likely than other parents to use school websites in making their choice (possibly because charter schools are more likely to have websites);
- are more likely to be very or somewhat satisfied with the schools chosen than parents who chose other public schools (97 percent versus 84 percent), and are as satisfied as parents who chose private schools; and
- are, compared to parents of similar incomes who choose private schools, more likely to choose on the basis of academic factors than on school culture, environment, safety, and values.

These findings do not tell us whether low- and moderate-income families who choose charter schools are more sophisticated than families that do not bother to choose, or are less sophisticated than parents who are richer and more educated. But they do tell us that the kinds of families for whom charter schools are now creating choices care about school quality and have an appetite for information. They also suggest that the high satisfaction rates in charter schools cannot all be attributed to the act of choosing itself.

*The kinds of families for whom charter schools are now creating choices care about school quality and have an appetite for information.*

## THE PEOPLE WE SURVEYED AND THE CHOICES THEY MADE

Parents in our survey sample appear to be representative of low- and moderate-income parents in urban areas. Table 1 shows that survey respondents are spread fairly evenly across the five quintiles within the \$0-50K income range.<sup>4</sup>

TABLE 1. CITY COMPARISONS

	MILWAUKEE	DC	DENVER
CITY POPULATION 2003	569,000	529,000	545,000
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME 2003	\$ 33K	\$ 43K	\$ 44K
POP % BLACK 2003	41%	60%	12%
POP % HISPANIC 2003	14%	10%	35%
% WHO SAID THEY “CONSIDERED OTHER SCHOOLS”	73%	70%	56%
SAMPLE % BLACK	54%	90%	18%
SAMPLE % HISPANIC	6%	8%	43%
SAMPLE % IN CHARTER SCHOOLS	11%	21%	7%
SAMPLE % IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS	26%	20%	14%

Source: U.S. Consensus Bureau, 2003 data

Our parent sample is overwhelmingly female—about 90 percent.<sup>5</sup> The heavy preponderance of women occurs both because we interviewed the main school decisionmaker in the family and because nearly two-thirds of our sample is single-mother households. The city samples vary considerably by race, as do the cities. In Milwaukee, 54 percent of parents surveyed are black, 33 percent are white, and 6 percent are Hispanic; in Washington, D.C., 90 percent are black; and in Denver, 43 percent are Hispanic, while 35 percent are white and 18 percent are black.

In our sample, charter parents and parents who elected other school choice options are surprisingly similar, showing no statistically significant differences across a slew of comparisons.<sup>6</sup> They show no appreciable differences in parental income, educational attainment, attendance at public or private schools as children, attendance at a school within the region, length of residency in the metropolitan area,<sup>7</sup> parent age, church attendance or religious affiliation, marital status, employment status, first language, and whether or not their spouse is employed. Looking just at the characteristics of children in charter schools, we find that they are also quite similar in age, gender, and numbers of siblings to the children of parents who opt for non-charter options.

Nearly two-thirds of the parents in our survey said they had “considered a school other than their neighborhood public school” (73 percent in Milwaukee, 70 percent in D.C., and 56 percent in Denver). Thus, even though some parents either did not know they could make a choice, or did not want to consider other schools, the majority of these low- and moderate-income parents did make an active choice.

Across our sample, 37 percent placed their child in the closest public school (even though they told us they “considered other schools,” and we did not want to rule out this form of choice), 15 percent placed their child in another district (non-charter) public school, and another 11 percent chose an out-of-district public school (mostly in the Denver metro area). By contrast, 19 percent of parents had enrolled children in private schools, and 14 percent of families in the three cities chose charter schools.<sup>8</sup>

In every city, the parents in our sample reported being very satisfied with their school choice, perhaps even more so than in other surveys, which consistently show high satisfaction levels. More than two-thirds of these low- and moderate-income parents report being “very” satisfied (at the extreme end of a 5-point scale), and nearly 90 percent are either “very” or “somewhat” satisfied. This is a higher degree of satisfaction than found in earlier studies of public school parents by Phi Delta Kappa<sup>9</sup> and the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>10</sup> The latter study, for example, found that of a cross section of all public school parents, 61 percent of parents were “very satisfied” with public schools of choice, compared to 52 percent “very satisfied” for their assigned public schools. Our survey result of 68 percent “very satisfied” is above this range, and from a low- and moderate-income group in cities where the actual school performance is substantially below national averages.

*Quite apart from the demographic similarities of the two groups, charter parents and non-charter parents look alike as school choosers.*

*The same proportions of charter and non-charter parents learned about their school choice opportunities via word of mouth, use of media, and school-initiated outreach.*

## HOW CHARTER PARENTS CHOOSE

Quite apart from the demographic similarities of the two groups, charter parents and non-charter parents look alike as school choosers. The same proportions of charter and non-charter parents learned about their school choice opportunities via word of mouth, use of media, and school-initiated outreach.

Once parents know that school choices are possible, they use the same methods to learn about schools. Their most important source of information is parents with children in the schools under consideration, or friends. Parents say they rely on these sources because they trust them to give unbiased information. Parents who choose charters and public schools are equally likely (60 percent) to consider their child’s opinions about schools, and to consider how far a school is from home.

Parents in both groups are equally likely to visit a school (about 85 percent do so), take their child to a school, consult with other parents and/or other family members and

friends, review printed materials, and utilize a parent information center. They talk to the same number of people in their social network about their decision, are equally interested in consulting a school counselor, and place the same level of faith and trust in school officials.

Finally, charter parents and other parents consider and apply to the same number of schools. When asked to single out the most important factor in their final choice, both charter parents and non-charter parents cite academic factors, including quality teachers and high performance. As one non-charter school mother responded to our open-ended question, “I wanted a school with better teachers, better books, and a better all-around atmosphere.”

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHARTER PARENTS AND OTHER CHOOSERS

Though charter school parents in our three cities do not have more education and income than other parents and do not place a higher priority on academic concerns, there are a few differences between parents who choose charters and those who choose other schools.<sup>11</sup> A subgroup of charter school parents—particularly those who rank academic issues as their top priority—do display somewhat more sophistication and ambition about their school search than most non-charter parents.

Though all parents care about how far a school is from home, parents who choose charter schools are apparently more willing than other parents to trade off convenience for other factors. In fact, 85 percent of charter students are not in the closest school to home, compared to 60 percent for children of other choosers. Parents who choose charters also cast a wider net, using a larger number of information sources—72 percent used two or more sources, compared to 59 percent of parents who selected non-charter options. And larger proportions of charter than non-charter parents (44 percent versus 28 percent) said they emphasized written materials about schools over word of mouth, though they used both kinds of resources.

One big difference is in the use of school websites: Half of the charter parents viewed school websites during their search process, while only about a quarter of the non-charter group (28 percent) did so. The largest gap in website use was in Washington, D.C., where charter schools are more likely to have websites than other schools, and the

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smallest gap was in Denver, where virtually all schools have available websites. Thus, differences in use might reflect the availability of web-based information rather than parents' preferences among sources of information.

Because we did not assess the academic performance of charter schools in these three cities, we cannot say whether charter parents' greater reliance on multiple sources of written information and websites leads them to make better choices. But we can say that charter parents are more satisfied than other choosers. (On a 1-4 scale where 1=very satisfied and 4=very unsatisfied, charter parents scored 1.3 and other choosers 1.5.) Charter parents are more satisfied in all three cities, with the largest difference in Milwaukee and the smallest difference in D.C. On another measure, parents who chose non-charter public schools are quite happy (84 percent were "very" or "somewhat" satisfied across our sample), but 97 percent of charter parents are "very or somewhat" satisfied. This satisfaction rate is nearly identical to the 96 percent satisfaction rate reported by parents who chose private schools for their children. Within the charter parent group, those who valued academics most are also the most highly satisfied.

The comparable satisfaction rates led us to ask whether parents who chose charter schools sought the same kinds of information as parents who chose private schools. We found important differences. Parents who chose private schools are different from parents who chose charters and other public schools—more likely to be married, to have attended private schools themselves as children, and to describe themselves as religiously active. However, we did not find that private school parents sought more information or chose more carefully. Charter parents are far more likely to learn about choice options through school actions, such as letters to prospective parents and other written information (32 percent versus 13 percent), while private school families are more likely to learn about choice through their social networks (49 percent versus 38 percent).

When it comes to actually selecting a school, academic concerns again weighed more heavily on charter parents in our sample than on the families that opted for private schools. Private school parents more often name school culture (environment, safety, values) as their most important factor in picking a school (36 percent versus 19 percent), while charter parents are more likely to choose schools based on academic factors (71 percent versus 58 percent). When asked about the most important source of information they relied on, private school parents are more likely to say family or personal knowledge (68 percent versus 40 percent), while charter choosers are more likely to mention teachers or administrators (47 percent versus 25 percent).

*Private school parents more often name school culture as their most important factor in picking a school, while charter parents are more likely to choose schools based on academic factors.*

In short, while charter parents are just as satisfied with their schools as private school parents, the two groups learn about choice and gather information in somewhat different ways, with charter parents emphasizing academics and school-based information relatively more than social network information.

Since all parents in our sample made some sort of choice, it is not likely that charter choosers' higher degree of satisfaction is due simply to cognitive dissonance—the tendency to justify a decision by focusing on the positive aspects of the object chosen. We speculate that better information might lead to greater satisfaction: private school parents have the advantage of choosing known quantities, while charter school parents learn enough about the schools they choose to be confident that they have obtained what they sought.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR FINDINGS

In most respects, charter parents are no different from other parents who make other school choices in an urban setting. That overarching finding is new but not entirely unexpected—once parents are in a “choice mode,” they are likely to review an array of school types that they may never have considered before.

Clearly charter parents are not ill-informed consumers of school choice, as some critics have suggested. But neither are they parents with overwhelming socioeconomic advantages—at least not when compared with other low- and moderate-income families that exercise school choice in urban areas.

Nor are parents who choose charters an elite group that has greater information resources than parents who choose other public schools. Like other low- and moderate-income parents in our sample, charter parents are not accustomed to choosing schools, but they know what they want in a school and make serious efforts to inform themselves.

Policymakers should especially take note that charter parents do their own homework in making school choices and are happier with the results than parents who pick non-charter public options. These facts suggest that districts and schools would be well advised to provide more and better information about all their schools—academic quality, curricu-

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*Charter parents do their own homework in making school choices and are happier with the results than parents who pick non-charter public options.*

lum, and other school features—since there is a surprisingly robust audience of low- and moderate-income parents eager to educate themselves about schooling options.

This research was not designed to learn about the small number of families who do not exercise choice even when they have the opportunity to do so. It may be that those families are less savvy than those who choose, or those families may prefer, for whatever reason, to trust the district to provide for their children. Whatever the case, there may always be some families who choose not to choose, making it incumbent on school systems that offer choice as a mainstream option to think carefully about how to ensure that all students are placed into high-quality schools.

Future research might examine why charter schools are more successful than other public schools at matching parents' expectations; how districts can better provide information to address parent concerns; and what kinds of safeguards need to be put in place to provide for students whose parents choose not to participate in a choice-based public school system.

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#### NOTES

1. While these criticisms and concerns are often expressed informally and anecdotally in media outlets, some of the most thoughtful skepticism in this vein comes from Jeffrey Henig, *Rethinking School Choice: Limits of the Market Metaphor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Scott Abernathy, *School Choice and the Future of American Democracy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); and Courtney Bell, "All Choices Created Equal? How Good Parents Select "Failing" Schools" (working paper, National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Columbia University, October 2005).
2. See, for example, Paul Teske and Mark Schneider, "What Research Can Tell Policymakers About School Choice," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 20, no. 4 (2001): 609-31.
3. Our telephone survey of low- and moderate-income parents, with annual incomes of less than \$50K, was fielded in the fall of 2005 in Washington, D.C. (300 parents), Milwaukee (300 parents), and Denver (200 parents). All three of these cities can be characterized as "mature" choice sites that offer parents a variety of educational options. The cities are also similar in population size. In Washington, D.C., almost 25 percent of public school students are now enrolled in charter schools, and another 6 to 7 percent attend private schools with aid from a privately funded scholarship program and a new federally funded voucher program. Milwaukee and Washington are the two large cities in the nation with the longest-running and most far-reaching school choice programs, so local knowledge and information availability should be relatively advanced. We selected Denver to complement our fieldwork in Milwaukee and Washington, D.C., because Denver's choice offerings are closer to those of many medium-sized American cities. Denver has public school choice, and about 10 percent of its public school students attend charter schools. Unlike Milwaukee and Washington, D.C., however, Denver does not offer vouchers.

4. Across our sample, for the five quintiles, 16 percent report less than \$10K income, 19 percent between \$10-20K, 24 percent between \$20-30K, 20 percent from \$30-40K, and 21 percent from \$40-50K.
5. This was also true in surveys of parents by Mark Schneider, Paul Teske, and Melissa Marschall, *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and in the survey by Emily Van Dunk and Anneliese Dickman, "School Choice and the Question of Accountability: The Milwaukee Experience" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
6. We define "different" as statistically significant differences above a 95 percent likelihood that we can reject the null hypothesis of "no difference."
7. On the importance of length of residence for knowledge about local schools, see Paul Teske, Mark Schneider, Michael Mintrom, and Sam Best, "Establishing the Micro Foundations of a Macro Theory: Information, Movers, and the Competitive Market for Local Public Goods," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993): 702-13.
8. Washington, D.C., has the highest proportion of families choosing charters (21 percent, compared to 11 percent in Milwaukee and 7 percent in Denver). For private schools, Milwaukee leads the sample with 26 percent of students in private schools, compared to 20 percent in D.C. and only 14 percent in Denver.
9. This poll can be accessed at <http://www.pdkintl.org/kaplan/kpollpdf.htm>.
10. See Edith McArthur, Kelly W. Colopy, and Beth Schlainé, "Use of School Choice," NCES 95-742R (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995).
11. Whenever we highlight a difference between charter and other parents in this section, it is based upon a statistically meaningful difference between the groups, analyzed at the 95 percent level of confidence.