



Hopes, Fears, & Reality

A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN CHARTER SCHOOLS IN 2011

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Chapter 7

Creating Savvy Choosers: Informing Families About School Choices

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School choice is meant to improve students' educational experiences, first by giving parents the opportunity to find the school that best suits their children's needs and interests and second by creating market-like pressure on schools and districts to provide the kind of high-quality schools that parents want. In addition, choice is expected to improve equity by allowing all students, regardless of income, to access schools in any of a city's neighborhoods.

However, none of these advantages can play out if parents do not exercise choice or if they make their decisions based on limited or poor information. Unfortunately, low-income and language-minority families tend to fall behind affluent families in their knowledge of and access to school choices. Low-income families especially face more of a burden when choice systems do not provide free transportation to schools.

Districts and charter schools simply need to try harder to make choice work for lower-income families. Affluent parents, because of greater flexibility in choosing where they live and a history of accessing private schools, may be well practiced in school choice. But choice is new to most low-income urban parents, and many of them do not have access to the Internet, where school districts place much of their information about school choice.

Because low-income families have limited access to social networks and to official information from schools and districts, they are less likely to know or fully understand their choices and how to access them. This is particularly true when parents must navigate systems with many types of choices—for example, charter schools and magnet schools in addition to traditional public schools—and when parents must begin the application process as early as nine months prior to actual enrollment.



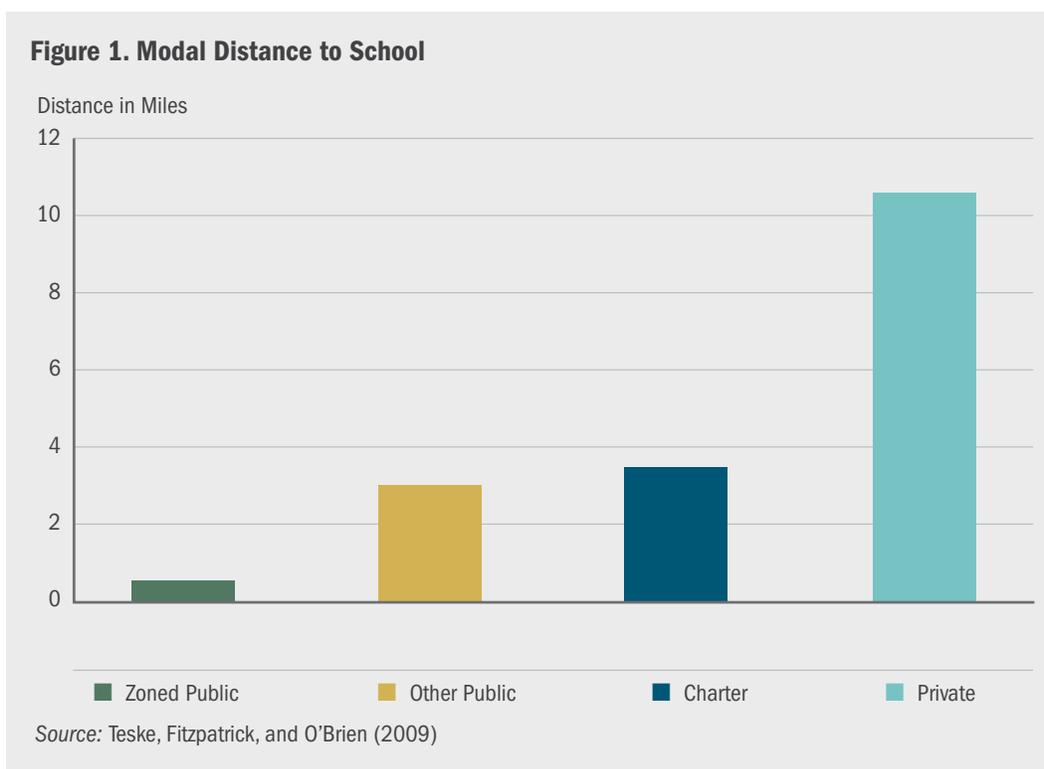
Even when low-income parents are aware of choice, some of the parents may lack the political efficacy to exercise their options. These parents may be concerned that they will not be able to effectively navigate the bureaucratic system, or they may be concerned that the system is rigged against them. These concerns are magnified for families with questionable immigration status.

All of this information suggests that districts that partner with charter schools have a major challenge on their hands. These districts need to do more than make choice available—they need to develop and implement a strategic plan to effectively reach and engage their low-income families (Buckley & Schneider, 2002; O'Brien & Appelbaum, 2008; Teske, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2007; Van Dunk & Dickman, 2004).

HOW DO PARENTS CHOOSE?

When choosing schools for their children, parents really consider only a handful of options (Schwartz, 2003). A survey of parents in Washington, D.C., found that 88 percent considered, at most, four schools (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007). Evidence indicates that, in Denver, parents considered even fewer schools. This is partly a factor of geography, as is evident from families who choose private and charter schools—parents certainly will send their children to a school that is farther away than their assigned school in the neighborhood (see Figure 1). But realistically, the costs of transporting children to schools can constrict choices, especially for low-income, single-parent, non-English-speaking families. A recent survey of families in Denver and Washington, D.C., found that one third of low-income parents would have chosen a different school for their child had transportation been provided (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & O'Brien, 2009). Not surprisingly, free transportation—and knowledge of these free options—increases the likelihood that parents consider more schools.





After narrowing for location, school-choice decision making follows a sort of hierarchy of needs. The most basic element of schooling—a safe environment—needs to be in place before students can learn. In many large urban districts, safe facilities have not been a given, so it is no surprise that low-income parents first assess security before anything else. Middle-income parents with children in more orderly, functional schools probably can skip ahead and look right to the next level of need, perhaps good test scores. Affluent parents in communities where test scores are high as a matter of course can focus on finding schools that help students achieve their full potential and develop as lifelong learners.

To aid families in this decision-making process, a district needs to provide three main types of information: information about the choice process, to equalize families' knowledge of how the system works; information about schools' environments and programs, to help parents determine which school will best fit their children's needs; and information about school performance, to help families hold schools accountable for outcomes.



INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHOICE PROCESS

School choice tends to be complicated and governed by many elements. Parents, especially those in communities where choice is relatively new, will need the district, and perhaps another entity, to help demystify the process. The district should provide parents with clear and comprehensive information regarding available options, enrollment timelines, application materials, overall rules, transportation, and the actual lottery or selection process.

INFORMATION ABOUT SCHOOLS' ENVIRONMENTS AND PROGRAMS

Universally, parents want to know what a school offers and how well their children will fit in at the school. A majority of parents in recent surveys say that they seek to match the programs or environment of the school with their child's own characteristics, rather than simply looking for a generic school with good test scores. The most important way to convey this information is through site visits that are open to both parents and children. Printed materials also are useful for getting a sense of what a school is like. Ideally, such materials need to be written in highly accessible language, with no complicated jargon.

INFORMATION ABOUT SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Providing parents with high-quality performance data is often seen as an important way to hold schools accountable. When parents are aware of a school's low performance, they put the pressure on the school by opting for a higher-performing school. Surveys from Washington, D.C., Milwaukee, and Denver suggest that parents making choices consider academic outcomes in their decisions (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007). When D.C. parents were asked why they made the choices they did, the largest proportion, 37 percent, said they chose their child's current school for reasons related to academic quality. In Denver, 49 percent of parents who chose a school other than their neighborhood school gave academic quality as the primary reason. By comparison, of the parents whose children remained in the neighborhood school, just 16 percent cited academic quality first.

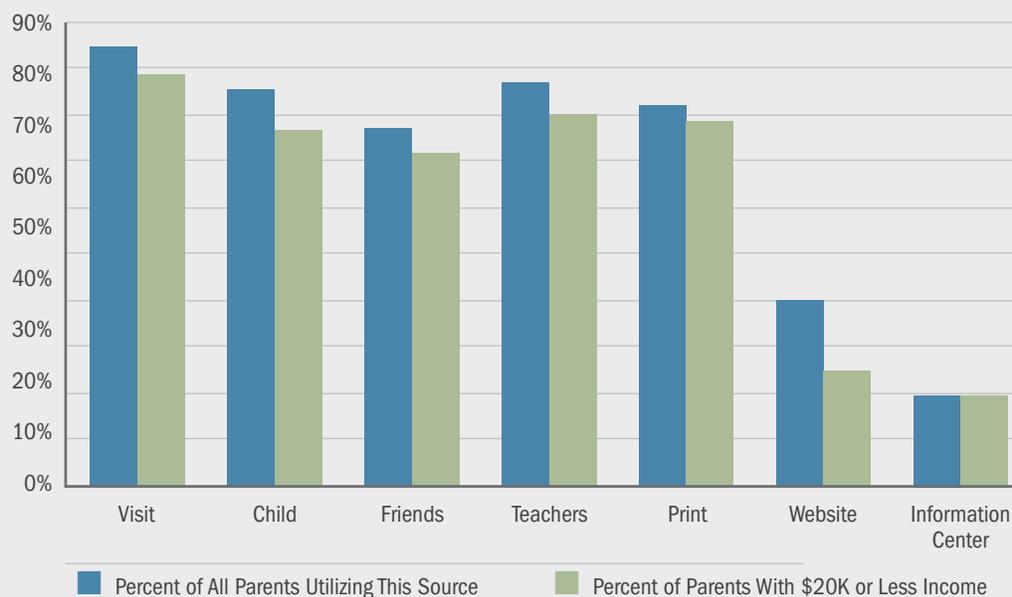
Evidence indicates that low-income parents make decisions based on school performance somewhat less often than do affluent parents. In Denver, Milwaukee, and Washington, D.C., parents who make \$20,000 or below are 30 percent less likely than parents who make between \$20,000 and \$50,000 to say they made their choice based upon academic quality. They are about 20 percent more likely to cite school location as a key element of their decision (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007).

When parents do not have access to good performance information or do not fully understand ratings of school quality, they are more likely to select a new school that may not be an improvement over their prior school (Bell, 2005; Howell, 2006).

WHERE PARENTS GO FOR INFORMATION

When approaching school choice, most parents rely on “soft” sources of information—conversations with parents, teachers, and principals and their intuitive feelings about schools—rather than on hard data such as test scores or demographics. Reputation, word of mouth, and school visits are by far the most important sources for most parents. In one survey, more than 80 percent of parents reported visiting schools, and nearly 80 percent of them brought their children with them. During these visits, parents want to have time to talk to other parents, teachers, and principals. More than 75 percent of parents reported discussing the school with teachers (Teske et al., 2007). As well, parents talk about schools with people in their social networks and read printed information about the school. Far fewer parents use web-based materials and parent information centers (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Information Sources



Source: Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan (2007)

When parents access more sources of information, surveys show, they are more satisfied with their school choice. This bodes poorly for low-income parents, as evidence indicates that the information networks available to low-income parents are smaller and less informed than the networks available to affluent parents (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2009). Networks are particularly important because parents report that they put more trust in school information they get from personal interactions than from printed information—especially interaction with other parents, rather than school officials.

According to a 2010 Pew Research Center survey (Jansen, 2010), only 57 percent of Americans with annual incomes below \$30,000 use the Internet, compared to 95 percent of Americans who make at least \$75,000. This poses a growing problem, because districts are placing increasing amounts information and application materials regarding school choice processes online.

Districts should design their information strategies to reach parents where they naturally access information and to bridge the information gaps between low-income and affluent families.

BETTER WAYS TO INFORM PARENTS

The challenge for districts engaged in choice is to provide the guidance parents need in the forums that they will access and trust. The information parents seek is not encyclopedic—parents simply want to feel informed, not overwhelmed. But districts should provide information beyond just what parents seem to want. If parents are showing a primary interest in safety, the district should provide this information and more. Districts should help parents become good consumers of schools. Evidence indicates that parents, especially low-income parents, want some guidance making school decisions (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007).

There are some obvious places to start. Consolidate information about the various choice programs into one messaging tool. Publish this information in multiple formats in multiple languages. Offer family-friendly hours at information centers and, when relevant, staff the centers with bilingual counselors. To improve information that flows informally through personal networks, send representatives to venues where parents already congregate: churches, community organizations, and neighborhood events.



Consider the work being done by the Cambridge Public Schools in Massachusetts. Cambridge has a district-level plan to recruit students, especially to schools selected by a low number of families through the choice process (O'Brien & Hupfeld, 2009). Each family accesses the district via the Family Resource Center (FRC), the office responsible for student applications and registrations, which is open at convenient times. FRC staff participate in school fairs, assist each elementary school in developing marketing materials, conduct kindergarten information meetings at community locations such as public housing sites and community centers, coordinate appointments for parents to visit and tour schools, collaborate with an early childhood transition team, and advertise all informational meetings using a variety of mass media and websites.

CREATE COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Parents want guidance in making school choices but prefer that the guidance come via parents and local foundations instead of directly from the district. Districts should build partnerships with community organizations and try to make direct contact with parents in their neighborhoods, as officials in Minneapolis and Chicago have done. Given many parents' extensive reliance on word-of-mouth information, Chicago's Parents for School Choice campaign recruited volunteer parents to attend special events such as the New Schools Expo. In 2008, Chicago's Parents for School Choice introduced about 750 volunteers to schools opened under the Renaissance 2010 initiative and then sent out the volunteers to distribute fliers about school choice options and to visit community locations such as churches, laundromats, beauty shops, and other public venues in neighborhoods that have been underserved by traditional schools. In addition, Chicago has community transition advisory councils comprised of parents, community members, and local leaders who develop lists of guidelines about types of schools they would like in their neighborhoods, conduct outreach activities to deliver information to community members about the selection of new school operators, and host public forums to aggregate information about the choice process.

In Minneapolis, school district officials polled families and learned that 75 percent of the families had Internet access, which led to their creation of a school choice website to assist parents. But to reach the 25 percent of families who were not online and to assist all families in understanding their choice options, Minneapolis hired district parents to act as community liaisons. The liaisons, wearing

district-issued T-shirts and backpacks, knock on doors in their designated neighborhood, distribute flyers, participate in community events, speak at local churches, and answer parents' questions about school choice.

BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE BY BRINGING TOOLS TO PARENTS

While low-income parents are less likely to access web tools, much of a district's information regarding schools, school visit calendars, and application materials is presented online. In Portland, Oregon, officials bridged this gap by bringing web tools directly to parents. Portland Public Schools provides a detailed explanation of the lottery process on its website, which can be accessed in English, Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese, or Russian. Portland placed computer kiosks in every school and trained staff to assist parents with using the computers to access school choice information.

MAKE SCHOOL PERFORMANCE DATA CLEAR

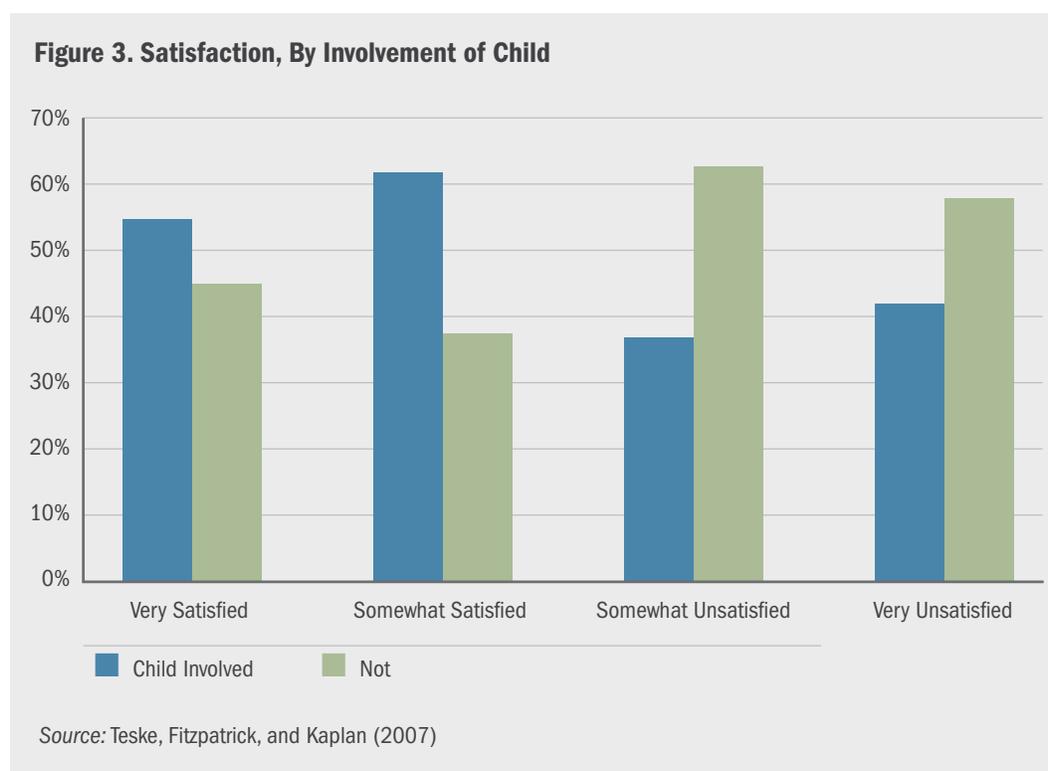
Districts need to figure out how to present better school performance data to parents in all income brackets. Currently, this information often resides in online report cards, which are out of reach for many low-income families. Districts should make sure parents who are not familiar with the school system and the analysis that goes into the school system's performance ratings can make comparisons across schools. Some states, such as Florida, have boiled down school performance ratings to a single grade; other states have more complicated ratings. While simple grades might be easier to communicate, parents also might want to look at multiple factors, such as graduation rates and behavior data.

DEVELOP THE DEMAND FOR HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Because low-income parents may be new to school choice, it can take time and effort for them to become well-informed consumers of schools. Districts can help by hosting events organized around resources such as *Picky Parent Guide: Choose Your Child's School With Confidence*, a book by Bryan and Emily Hassel (2004) that includes simple checklists of what experts advise parents to look for in schools. Given that children are important players in their own school choices, districts also might teach middle and high school students about the choices they have and will face in coming years—training that also could be beneficial for the college selection process.

ENGAGE THE CHILD IN “FAMILY” CHOICE

We think about school choice as a parental decision, but in many cases children visit the choice options with their parents and play a critical role. In fact, research has shown parents are more satisfied with their school choice when their children were involved in the decision (Teske et al., 2007). High school students especially tend to have a strong say in choice decisions, as they consider options and factor in peers, reputation, afterschool activities, and other elements that children may know more about than their parents. In families in which English is not the first language, the child may be the family member most able to understand and navigate the choice system. School systems can provide choice materials and selection forms directly to students, increasing the chances the students will engage in the process and, in turn, enhancing the chances for parent satisfaction (see Figure 3).



ACTIVELY MARKET CHOICE IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

Districts may need to build excitement, via marketing and advertising, to get parents to realize the importance of making good school choices. Duval County Public Schools (DCPS), in Florida, shows how a district can build a message and

actively market the message to low-income families. In developing its magnet program, DCPS attempted to survey every district parent about school choice issues. The district asked parents about school themes and factors that might influence their choices and then used the information to create new magnet schools and to develop marketing materials. DCPS uses the slogan “Scream Your Theme!” to encourage schools to sell themselves and works with an outside marketing agency to produce brochures that outline the magnet options. Districtwide marketing focuses on two major events: Magnet Mania, a hugely attended magnet school fair held at the Jacksonville fairgrounds, and open houses for which eighth graders are bused to different high schools they are considering.

CHOOSING EXCELLENCE

School districts can make strategic and aggressive efforts to improve the quality and equity of information across families making school choices. But without the presence of good choices, these efforts will be wasted. Having more information about what is essentially a range of bad options is not going to help anyone very much.

In Washington, D.C., for example, fewer than one third of families that made a school choice in 2009 moved their child into a school that showed higher student proficiency levels than their previous schools (Schneider & DeVaux, 2010). Denver, one analysis found, needs to add 36,000 seats—nearly half the capacity of the district, which now enrolls 75,000 students—in high-performing schools to provide enough good options (National Association of Charter School Authorizers & IFF, 2009).

In that regard, districts should encourage public policy that focuses on developing new, better options, including charter schools, located relatively close to the lower-income populations with the greatest need. School systems should pursue innovative transportation options so that more families choose schools based on quality rather than location and convenience. With more great choices and more useful, accessible information, school districts can improve satisfaction for parents and, most important, outcomes for students.



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