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Challenges and Charter Schools:

*How Families with Special-Needs Students
Perceive and Use Charter School Options*

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March 2008

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Executive summary

This report addresses choices made at the intersection of two very important trends in education: special education and charter schools. Advocates of school choice contend that the diversity of the student population requires a diversity of schools to allow parents to select the right “fit” for their children. Students with special needs are at the far margins of diversity, and their needs by definition are above and beyond those of their more typical peers. In both school choice theoretical frameworks and special education legal frameworks, it is intended that parents are full partners and advocates for their children in making educational choices. The responsibility of the family for making positive choices is thus magnified when families of students with special needs consider a range of school choices, including charter schools.

This study used results from six focus groups in two cities with extensive school choice and charter school experience: Denver and Milwaukee. Focus group results were supplemented by the results of over 200 surveys submitted by self-selected respondents, mainly parents of students with special needs attending charter schools.

Put simply, the school choice process can be more complex for parents of special needs children. It is difficult to generalize about what these parents are looking for in a school, because what they are looking for is whatever their child needs in a school, which varies widely from child to child. The same may be said of typical children, but it is more so for these special needs children. These children are fragile, whether physically, intellectually, or socially. Their parents feel very keenly the responsibility to make sure these children are safe and cared for.

“Parents of special needs children have to look at schools differently. We can’t just send our children to any school.”

Milwaukee parent

If one must generalize about what parents of special needs children are looking for in a school, the following list probably works well:

- They want the school to fit their child, so that the child can be part of the school community with all the social and emotional benefits of community membership

- They want the school to want their child, not to view their different child as a burden that interferes with educating typical children
- They want the right academic program for their child, one that will strike a balance between ensuring any necessary accommodations and ensuring that their child achieves his or her potential
- They want consistent and thorough communications with and among all staff who have responsibility for their child, including classroom aides, teachers, principals, and district staff

The diversity of the charter school landscape can provide a very good fit for many special needs children, particularly those who simply need a different instructional approach, and most parents reported being satisfied with the special education services received by their children. In fact, some charter schools have an informal reputation as havens for children with special needs. However, charter schools are not viewed as silver bullets by parents of children with special needs. Instead, they represent one option in a landscape of choices which must be combed through carefully.

Participants in our focus groups described experiencing a choice process which is ongoing. The selection of a school is but a point in the journey. Parents of many special needs children see themselves as needing to be ever watchful, monitoring whether their child is being served well in the school they have chosen and engaging in an ongoing negotiations process with school staff. If the school is not working out, whether it is a charter or traditional school, parents of special needs children stand ready to change schools again.

Schools need not be perfect to satisfy parents of special needs children, and parents doubted whether the “perfect” school could ever be found. These parents are happy, however, when the school is willing to work with them to welcome their children, treat parents as an essential part of the educational team, and do their very best to serve the children well. This is clearly happening in many charter schools in Denver and Milwaukee.

Introduction

This introductory section will provide a brief overview of current population trends and decision-making research in both special education and charter schools, to provide context for the findings of this study.

What we know about parent choice and charter schools

Charter schools are public schools that are permitted by state law to operate under a contract, or charter, with a charter authorizer (a school district, institution of higher education, or a state, for example). Currently, 40 states and the District of Columbia permit the formation of charter schools.

A charter school is generally given autonomy and freedom from specified state and local rules that otherwise apply to public schools, and its authorizer decides whether or not the school's subsequent performance warrants extension or termination of the contract. This autonomy allows charter schools to provide a wide variety of instructional and curricular approaches that may not be available in traditional public schools. As a result, there is no "typical" charter school. The focus of a charter school may be anything from a Montessori approach to a school serving primarily pregnant teenagers. As public schools, charter schools are held accountable not only to their authorizer but also under state and federal accountability laws.

Charter schools have proven popular and their ranks have grown. The Center for Education Reform (2007) estimates that there are over 4,000 charter schools operating in the United States, serving more than 1.2 million students. This compares to about 90,000 traditional public schools. California has the greatest number of charter schools, with an estimated 710 schools. Colorado and Wisconsin, the two states in which research for this study took place, have 144 and 226 charter schools respectively, and rank high in the perceived "strength" of their charter school laws (Consoletti 2008).

In general, parents are more satisfied with schools when they are able to choose the schools themselves. (Buckley and Schneider 2006). Charter schools are schools of choice – they are not assigned students by the local school district. Instead, they must attract families by convincing them that the school represents a good educational choice for their children. In other words, serving students well would seem to be a key means by which charter schools survive.

Past state-level surveys of parent satisfaction with charter schools reveal most parents to be very satisfied (see, e.g., McCully and Malin (2003). A recent study of charter school parents in the District of Columbia found that charter school parents ranked their schools more highly than did parents of children enrolled in traditional schools (Buckley and Schneider 2006). However, the study also found that parent satisfaction with charter schools declined over time, so that satisfaction levels with both charter and traditional schools ended up at similar levels.

Teske and Reichardt (2007) looked at choices made by charter school parents in the districts in this study, Milwaukee and Denver, as well as in the District of Columbia. They found that the decision-making process of parents who ultimately chose charter schools was very similar to the decision-making process of parents making other choices. Like other parents, charter school parents relied on information sources such as other parents, school visits, and reviewing printed and web-based materials. Parents who ultimately chose charter schools were more likely to be satisfied with their choice than were parents who chose traditional schools.

What we know about parent choice and special education

Special education serves a category of students deemed to have needs above and beyond the typical student. This area is governed by a dense framework of federal and state laws

and regulations that seek to ensure students receive the services they need. Although gifted and talented students are often covered in the same statutes, this report focuses on the children fitting the traditional definition for special education – those who face additional challenges in meeting the academic and/or social environment of school due to physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities.

Nationwide, approximately 14 percent of students in public schools receive special education services. (NCES 2008). The range of disabilities eligible for special education services is wide. For example, some children in public schools have severe physical disabilities that confine them to a wheelchair; others are blind or deaf; others are mentally retarded or severely autistic. Other children have more “hidden” disabilities, such as learning disabilities or processing disorders, and may need only a few accommodations to participate in the usual education process. Often children will have multiple disabilities. This wide range of disabilities means that it is virtually impossible to find a single way to effectively educate all children with special needs; instead, their educations must be individualized to meet the needs of their specific disabilities.

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) contains extensive procedural requirements which mandate the involvement of parents in making decisions about the education of children with special needs. Parents must be involved, for example, in the drafting of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that identifies the services the child will receive along with individualized goals and indicators of progress. Parents are entitled to bring legal actions to enforce their rights and the rights of their children under IDEA to a free education in the least restrictive environment appropriate for their child’s needs.

While this process was designed to end the practice of schools effectively ignoring the needs of children with disabilities, it has been criticized as setting up an often adversarial relationship between parents and their child’s school. Parents and schools may differ on what services are appropriate to meet the needs of the child, with schools and districts often cognizant of budget issues and parents focusing solely on the needs of their child. Parents familiar with the IEP process and their rights under IDEA may be expected to pay particular attention to the school’s “fit” with their child.

A national survey conducted in 2002 by Public Agenda found that two-thirds of parents with special-needs children in public schools were satisfied with their children’s schools, rating the school as doing an excellent or good job of giving their child the help he or she needed. Thirteen percent described their school as doing a poor job of providing services. One in six parents surveyed had considered a lawsuit against the district, with as many as one-third of the parents of children with severe needs considering lawsuits. These results are consistent with prior findings. (Newman 2005).

The Public Agenda survey also found that nearly seven in ten parents agreed that there is much less stigma attached to special education today. In the past, parents often fought the identification of their child as eligible for special education, fearing that the label alone would have a deleterious effect on their child’s future. Today, many children are

eligible for special education as a result of learning disabilities or other hidden disorders such as attention deficit disorders. In fact, specific learning disabilities and speech and language disorders make up the majority of special education diagnoses today (NCES 2008). Parents understand that an IEP gains these children extra academic attention and accommodations on important tests, benefits that may outweigh any stigma.

The factors that lead special education parents to be dissatisfied with their schools include different views on the needs of their child, the quality and breadth of delivery of special education services, feelings of powerlessness or disrespect, lack of communication, and lack of trust (Lake and Billingsley 2000). Parents want to know that the school views their child as an individual with his or her own strengths and weaknesses.

What we know about charter schools and special education

The previous sections discussed the “uniqueness” of both charter schools and children with special education needs. These children have needs that are outside the normal parameters of public education, and these schools are operating outside the normal parameters applicable to traditional public schools. How do these populations intersect?

As mentioned above, students eligible for special education services make up approximately 14 percent of the public school population. In contrast, in 2003-04, approximately 11 percent of charter school students received special education services (Ziebarth 2007; see also Rhim et al. 2007). Of these, 10.3% were identified as having severe disabilities (Rhim et al. 2007). Charter schools were created in part to find new ways to serve at-risk students, and in 2003-04, eight percent of charter schools reported serving primarily students with behavioral problems compared to four percent of traditional schools. Three percent of charter school operators reported being set up to serve student with disabilities (Rhim et al. 2007); however, “[t]here is virtually no difference in the rates at which charter school principals and traditional school principals report an emphasis on special education ...” (Christensen and Lake 2007).

These statistics indicate that parents of children with special needs are choosing charter schools, if in somewhat smaller numbers than traditional schools. Previous literature has focused on the real and perceived difficulties of charter schools in delivering special education services (e.g., Rhim et al 2006). Charter schools, like all public schools, may not refuse otherwise eligible students on the basis of their need for special education services. Yet sometimes the delivery of special education services can be more difficult for charter schools. Special education services are traditionally delivered as part of the bundle of services a district provides to its schools. However, in the case of charter schools, this relationship is not automatically assumed.

Rhim, et al (2007) found that practice and policy regarding charter schools and special education varied widely among states. In some states, charter schools are solely responsible for delivery of special education services. In others, delivery of services to students in charter schools is the responsibility of the school district, or is a shared

responsibility between the district and the school. Depending on their situations, charter schools may enter into a contract for services with the local district, or may form regional cooperatives for this purpose. The flow of state dollars for special education also varies widely, with funding in some states going directly to the charter schools and in some states going directly to districts. State-level officials in charge of charter schools reported that charters experienced many difficulties in providing special education services, including having adequate funding levels, knowing and understanding legal and procedural requirements, working with parents, and finding qualified special education teachers.

Yet there is obviously something about charter schools that is leading some parents with special education children to choose these schools. Prior studies that took place in the early years of the charter school movement shed some light on the reasons behind these choices.

In a national study of charter schools and special education (Fiore 2000), researchers visited 32 charter schools in 15 states and conducted focus groups of administrators, teachers, parents, and students. The study found that parents of students with significant special needs tended not to enroll them in charter schools, except for those few schools specifically designed to educate these students. Instead, students with special needs in charter schools typically tend to have milder disabilities, such as learning disabilities.

Parents most often cited the negative aspects of their prior (non-charter) school as reasons for switching to charter schools. At over half of the schools visited, parents cited a general dissatisfaction with the prior school. Dissatisfaction with the special education program at the prior school was an equally popular reason for changing schools.

The positive characteristics of charter schools were also important, although not to the same degree as the negative characteristics of the prior school. At one-third of the schools, parents cited the charter school's small size or small class size. Parents at one-fourth of the school sample also mentioned the school's curricular focus or instructional approach, the quality of the staff, the school's reputation, a safe and community-like environment, and individualized attention.

Another 2000 study (Lange and Lehr) looked at charter schools in Minnesota. Researchers sent surveys to all parents at the sixteen charter schools that had been in operation for at least one year. These schools served significantly more special education students than is seen in other studies. Twenty-six percent of parents reported having one or more children receiving special education services at the charter school, and 36% of these children had been identified as having learning disabilities.

Parents of children with disabilities ranked the following factors as significantly more important to their school choice decision than did parents of children without disabilities: special education services available at the charter school; the special needs of their child; dissatisfaction with a prior school; and the need for their child to have a fresh start. Reasons listed as important or very important to their decision to attend the charter school

by parents of special needs students included class size, staff members, academic programming, special education services, school philosophy, discipline policy, school safety, the special needs of the child, and the number of students at the school.

Interviews with six charter school parents and administrators at two charter schools in Texas revealed similar themes (Shields 2005). Parents reported that the needs of their children had not been met in traditional school settings, which had resulted in emotional distress and academic difficulties for the children. When the children moved to charter school settings, their emotional and academic situations improved. The parents did report ongoing difficulties with underprepared teachers, but felt they had more influence over this situation in the charter schools than they had in the public schools.

This Study

Context

This study took place in the context of two medium-sized urban districts with relatively extensive experiences with school choice and diverse student populations. This section describes the context of these districts.

Denver Public Schools

The state of Colorado has encouraged school choice for over a decade. The state's Charter School Act was passed in 1993, and charter school enrollment has risen steadily. As of 2007-08, there were 141 charter schools in Colorado, serving nearly 57,000 students. (Colorado Department of Education 2008). Notably, however, the percentage of special needs children enrolled in the state's charter schools is significantly less than the percentage of children with special needs overall. In the 2004-05 school year, students with special needs represented 6.8 percent of the charter school population, compared to 11.1 percent of the general public school population (DeSchryver 2006).

The Denver Public Schools has been a leader in making school choice options available for students. In the 2007-08 school year, the Denver Public Schools enrolled more than 73,000 students at 151 schools, including 21 charter schools and seven alternative schools. Over 57 percent of DPS' students are Latino; 20 percent are white; and 18 percent are African-American. One in five DPS students is an English language learner, with the native language for the majority of these students being Spanish. Sixty-five percent of DPS students are eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program due to low family incomes.

Of DPS' total preK-12 student population in 2007-08, 11.9 percent receive special education services, compared to the 2007-08 state average of 9.7 percent. (The state of Colorado does not provide substantial funding for special education, which leads to probable underreporting of eligibility for special education). Special education services in the Denver Public Schools are administered by the district's Department of Student Services.

Many families in DPS exercise school choice. According to the Colorado Department of Education, over six thousand students residing in DPS choiced out to other districts and the statewide Charter School Institute, while about 4,800 students choiced in from other districts. The charter schools in DPS serve just under ten percent of the student population.

Milwaukee Public Schools

Wisconsin has also been an early innovator in school choice. Like Colorado, Wisconsin passed a state charter school law in 1993, and as of 2007-08, 231 charter schools were in operation across the state. (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 2008). Much of the innovation around school choice has focused on the state's largest district, the Milwaukee Public Schools.

The Milwaukee Public Schools serves 87,360 students in 212 schools. This is the lowest number of enrollments in MPS since the early 1980s, and more declines are expected. Fifty-seven percent of MPS students are African-American, 21 percent are Hispanic, 13 percent are white, four percent are Asian; three percent are "other"; and less than one percent is Native American. Current demographics reflect a substantial increase in Hispanic students and a decrease in white students. Seventy-seven percent of MPS students are eligible for federally subsidized lunch.

MPS has a notable variety of schools under its jurisdiction. Most schools (136) are "traditional," although the variety of traditional schools ranges from language immersion to Montessori-based to expeditionary learning and arts focuses. There are six alternative programs at the secondary level. Thirty-one schools are partnership schools, private schools at the secondary level that are run by nonprofit organizations to serve at-risk students. Four schools are contract schools. Milwaukee's 37 charter schools serve 15 percent of its students. Nearly 19,000 students attend 122 private schools in Milwaukee using vouchers issued through the district's Milwaukee Parent Choice Program, and around 6,600 students who live in the city attend public schools in the suburbs through Wisconsin's open enrollment system.

Approximately 17,300 students in MPS, or 18% of the student population, have been referred to special education and have individualized education plans. In 2001, MPS and the Wisconsin Department of Student Instruction were sued by plaintiffs alleging that the district was failing to identify and evaluate students with special education needs in a timely manner, in violation of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In 2002, the district implemented a Special Education Oversight Action Plan, which recentralized and aligned special education services, established a continuous improvement monitoring plan, and created a complaint resolution service for parents. The federal court recently issued a decision finding that MPS had violated the IDEA in several respects, and has asked for information about the improvements made by MPS in the meantime.

Methodology

Three focus groups of parents of school-age special needs children were held in each city. Parent focus group participants were recruited in Denver through a variety of networks and support groups that exist for parents of special needs children. The leaders of these groups assisted researchers by providing flyers and other sign-up opportunities for group members. Focus groups in Milwaukee were recruited through charter schools and through contracting with local consultants for identification and recruitment of parents meeting the study criteria.

In Denver, participation ranged from 10 to 12 participants at each group. One group consisted primarily of parents of special needs children attending traditional schools; another group consisted entirely of parents of special needs children attending charter schools; and the final group had a mix of parents from each school setting. Parents in Denver's all-charter school group were Spanish-speaking, and that group was conducted in Spanish and their discussion translated. In Milwaukee, poor weather contributed to lower turnout. Nine parents participated in a mixed group of charter and traditional school parents; five parents attended a charter school-only group; and five parents attended a traditional school-only group.

Surveys were also distributed to parents of special needs children in Denver and Milwaukee, primarily through the charter schools their students attended, but also through networks for parents of special needs children. The survey was intended for parents of children in charter schools, but researchers also received responses from parents of children in traditional schools, albeit at a much lower ratio. The survey was not intended to represent a random sample of parents, but rather to serve as an extension of information gathered from focus groups.

Responses were received from a total of 227 parents, 116 in Denver and 111 in Milwaukee. One hundred ninety-one respondents were parents of special needs students at charter schools and 34 were parents of special needs students at traditional schools. More than half of survey respondents reported family income below \$40,000, with 20 percent reporting income above \$80,000. About one-third of respondents reported an education level at high school graduate or less. Over 56 percent of respondents were minority, with the majority of these of Hispanic origin; however, in Milwaukee the majority of respondents were white. For nearly one-quarter of respondents, English was not their first language.

Researchers asked survey respondents to categorize their children's special needs by type and by severity. The most prevalent types of disabilities were learning disabilities and speech and language disabilities, both listed by nearly half of respondents. Nearly one-quarter of respondents' children had emotional or behavioral disabilities. Fourteen percent of respondents indicated that their children had cognitive disabilities, and six percent reported physical disabilities. Nine percent reported that their children had multiple disabilities. Eighty-four percent characterized their child's disabilities as mild or

moderate, and 16 percent reported that their child's needs were severe or profound. More Denver than Milwaukee respondents were dealing with severe or profound special needs.

The grade levels of their children spanned from kindergarten through 12th grade. Respondents' children attended a total of 49 schools. Some schools were overrepresented in the sample, such as KIPP Sunshine Peak and Fairview Elementary in Denver and Bruce Guadalupe Community School and Honey Creek in Milwaukee.

In describing survey results for purposes of this paper, we generally have combined results from all parents, whether their child is attending a charter school or a traditional school. As described above, survey respondents overwhelmingly had children in charter schools. However, the unexpected survey responses from traditional school parents offered the opportunity to compare differences between the responses of charter school and traditional parents, and where these differences were pronounced, we have noted this. Although the differences in sample sizes and the self-selected nature of the sample preclude any findings of statistical significance, some interesting trends were noted that help add substance to focus group responses.

Findings

The focus groups painted pictures of parents who are faced with a dizzying array of choices. Within that range of choices, they undertake a treasure hunt to find that elusive school that will serve their child willingly and well. Once they find a school, their work is not over as they monitor services and advocate for their child at school and with the district. If a school is not working out as hoped, the difficult search begins again. This seemingly never-ending process has different effects on different people. Many of the parents have accepted their roles as dogged and determined advocates for their children. A few others seem to have given up, defeated by repeated frustration.

Put simply, the school choice process can be more complex for parents of special needs children. It is difficult to generalize about what these parents are looking for in a school, because what they are looking for is whatever their child needs in a school, which varies widely from child to child. The same may be said of typical children, but it is more so for these special needs children. These children are fragile, whether physically, intellectually, or socially. Their parents feel very keenly the responsibility to make sure these children are safe and cared for.

“Parents of special needs children have to look at schools differently. We can't just send our children to any school.”
Milwaukee parent

If one must generalize about what parents of special needs children are looking for in a school, the following list probably works well:

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- They want the school to want their child, not to view their different child as a burden that interferes with educating typical children
- They want the right academic program for their child, one that will strike a balance between ensuring any necessary accommodations and ensuring that their child achieves his or her potential
- They want consistent and thorough communications with and among all staff who have responsibility for their child, including classroom aides, teachers, principals, and district staff

How do parents of special needs students choose schools?

Interestingly, most survey respondents reported that they did not consider other schools when making the choice about their children's current school. Just 34 percent reported considering other schools. This is in stark contrast to Teske and Reichardt's findings that over 70 percent of parents choosing schools had considered a number of schools. One factor that may be at work in the present study is the income level of parents. Just 23 percent of parents with incomes under \$40,000 and 35 percent of parents with incomes between \$40,000 and \$80,000 reported looking at other schools, while 71 percent of parents with incomes above \$80,000 did. Higher-income parents also tended to report more often that their children had attended other schools previously.

This result also contrasted with our focus group results, in which parents described the choice process as involved and ongoing, regardless of income levels. We hypothesize that the survey results may reflect that the choice process is different for special education parents, in that while the initial search is just as complex, ultimately the range of schools that are possible is extremely limited. For example, in some cases, parents may not consider a number of schools because the choice of school is fairly obvious: it is the only school with an autism program, for example. Thus, our parent survey respondents may have interpreted "considering other schools" as requiring an ultimate determination, after much research, that more than one school would be appropriate for their child. Thus, the subtleties of their searches would show up in focus groups, but not in the survey questions as worded.

Nearly one-third of parents (32%) ended up choosing the school closest to their house; this was consistent with the results obtained by Teske, et al. (2007) in looking at lower- to middle-income parent choice in Denver, Milwaukee, and Washington, DC. Again, this supports a conclusion that most special education parents are engaged in a school search, since families must actively choose to attend schools outside of their neighborhoods.

Like other parents choosing schools, parents of special needs students have a wide variety of information sources they use in selecting schools to consider for their children. We asked parents to identify how they heard about their current school:

- Other parents: 37%
- Teachers/school staff: 19%
- School is our neighborhood school: 19%

- District referral: 16%
- Open house: 9%
- District website: 4%
- District mailing 4%
- Nonprofit group: 4%
- Community meeting: 2%
- Doctor/therapist: 1%

This is fairly consistent with results obtained by Teske, et al (2007), with somewhat more reliance on other parents and somewhat less reliance on district websites and printed information (perhaps reflecting the need of these parents for more individualized information). Other sources of information spontaneously offered by parents included family members, organizations that help identify children with disabilities (such as ChildFind or Denver Options in Denver), and personal visits. It appeared from survey results that Hispanic parents were most likely to get their information from their social networks.

When we asked parents to identify which information sources were most helpful in making their decisions, most parents identified other parents and teachers as their most important resources. However, focus group participants clarified this result. Many focus group participants reported that they did “research” (such as talking to other parents, visiting websites, etc.) to identify potential school candidates based on school reputation and word of mouth, and then engaged in an extensive school visiting process. Ultimately, many parents reported that the school visit made the biggest impression on them.

For example, focus group parents in Milwaukee reported that visiting schools allowed them to see class sizes and how teachers interacted with children. One Denver parent reported researching schools online, and then visiting eight or nine schools. Another parent reported selecting two schools to consider, and then visiting each school eight times before making her decision. Parents of students who will be in self-contained classrooms reported visiting those classrooms to see whether the other students in the classroom will be appropriate peers for their children. In general, parents needed to “feel” the atmosphere of the school in order to understand whether that school was right for their children. This may be true whether the parent felt they had ten viable school options or just one.

The usefulness of district staff in parental decision-making varied substantially between the two cities. Parents in Milwaukee seemed to regard their district staff as knowledgeable and helpful, if not always the last word on the right school. For example, Milwaukee has an autism consultant on staff who has been known to drive parents around to different schools. On the other hand, parents in Denver did not view district special education staff as a resource in selecting schools. These parents commented that “[a]dministrators are very guarded. They don’t want to say or do anything wrong.” Denver parents also perceived that the district is more concerned about the issues of low-income children as a group, and that special education children receive lower priority.

Although the educational foundation of school programs was certainly important to many parents, only one focus group parent reported looking at school test scores, such as those found on Colorado's School Accountability Reports or the Wisconsin School Performance Report. This may be due to parental perceptions that their child, by definition, is not average, so it doesn't really matter how the average child at the school performs, or even how the average special education student performs.

Family convenience factors such as transportation and the location of other siblings' schools were often mentioned by parents as elements that factored into their school decisions, but these were paramount for only a few parents. The majority of survey respondents reported that transportation issues did not influence their choice of schools. Many of these children could be eligible for district-provided transportation as part of an IEP, but parents in focus groups expressed concern about the ability of their children to safely use even supervised transportation. Parents generally provided transportation for their children, although greater numbers of low-income parents relied on school buses.

Survey respondents were asked whether there was any information they needed or wanted but didn't have at the time they made their school decisions. Overall, parents felt they did have the information they needed. Just 11 percent of parents thought they were missing information when they made their decisions. However, this statistic appeared to vary by income and education levels (although not by ethnicity), with lower-income and less-educated parents tending to feel less sure that they had the information they needed. Although the majority of parents of children with severe or profound needs also felt they had the information they needed, larger numbers of these parents felt they did not have all the information they needed. By comparison, Teske, et al (2007) found that nearly 20 percent of parents felt they were missing information.

Despite the arduous process that many parents went through to find the right fit for their child, some parents expressed the feeling that finding the right school was more a matter of "blind luck." Parents talked about services that were promised, but not delivered, and the need to constantly monitor their child's education to ensure that the right school continued to be the right school. One parent described an exhaustive research process that resulted in enrolling her child in a school that seemed wonderful, but turned out to be disastrous. On the other hand, another parent found her child's school by accidentally entering the wrong building.

Faced with an overwhelming amount of information and an inability to know the future, human beings often "satisfice" by selecting options that are "good enough" rather than perfect. (Simon 1976). This seems to apply to parental decision-making as well. For example, Teske, et al (2007) suggest that low-income parents effectively use information to find several schools that are "good enough" in terms of meeting their child's needs, and then pick what they perceive to be the best one.

There are several ways in which the decision-making process of parents of special needs children seems to differ somewhat from this process. First, special education parents

generally believe that what will be “good enough” for a typical student may well not be good enough for their children, and that this mismatch could have devastating implications for these children. They are looking for schools that will meet their children’s specific needs. At the same time, these parents have a sense that there is no school that will always meet their child’s specific needs. There is an understanding that they will need to monitor the school closely and be prepared to move again if the school does not work out as hoped. As a result, the decision-making does not end with the selection of the current school. As one parent put it: “You won’t find the perfect school, so you have to find the best possible and then work with what you have.”

Are charter schools perceived as a viable option for special education students?

As the previous discussion showed, concern has been expressed about the ability of charter schools to meet the needs of special education students, whether the concern stems from financial issues, staff knowledge issues, or the like. However, we found that parents seemed to consider charter schools as part of the greater universe of schools that may or may not be able to meet the needs of their children. The designation of a school as a charter school, traditional school, or private school did not by itself direct the searches of most parents. This makes sense, given the wide variety of instructional approaches and the wide variety of children’s needs.

Contrary to past findings, we also did not see strong indications that parents were “fleeing” from traditional schools to charter schools because of a specific opinion about the nature of traditional schools vs. the nature of charter schools. While the survey results did show that most current charter school parents who had changed schools had previously attended traditional schools, there was a wide variety of “switching” going on. With that said, parents in Denver were noticeably unhappier with the district’s approach to special education.

Focus group conversations revealed that parents seemed to be quite willing to change schools in any direction, guided more by their children’s specific needs than by the label attached to a school. Parents who had left other schools reported issues with safety and special education services in both charter and traditional schools. In making their decision, parents currently in charter schools reported also looking at traditional schools, and vice versa. Some traditional school parents also reported looking at traditional schools in nearby districts that had positive reputations for special education services (although parents in both Milwaukee and Denver reported that other districts were highly reluctant to accept out-of-district special education students). The districts studied have long-term experience with charter schools and school choice, so that parents may be used to charter schools as simply an option, rather than viewing charter schools per se as the new answer to all their problems.

We did not find that parents were counseled away by school staff from charter schools on a regular basis. We found that some parents were on occasion counseled away from particular schools. Thirteen percent of survey respondents reported this had happened to them. This did not seem to be limited to charter schools; in fact, most of these parents

reported being counseled away from traditional schools. This seemed to happen a lot to parents of autistic children. In general, parents did not perceive an unwillingness of charter schools to serve their children as compared with other types of schools. In fact, some charter schools enjoy an informal reputation among parent networks as providing a haven for special education students, as do some neighborhood schools.

“They don’t advertise as a high needs school, but it is known.”
Milwaukee traditional school parent

Why do parents of special needs students choose charter or traditional schools?

We asked survey respondents for reasons why they chose their current school, and received the following responses:

Safe: 78%
Curriculum/instructional approach: 76%
Reputation of school: 71%
Special education services: 70%
Better fit for child: 69%
Small class size: 69%
Individualized attention: 68%
Staff qualifications: 67%
School philosophy: 58%
Convenient location: 55%
Teacher child likes: 54%
Referred to school: 43%
Child wanted to attend: 35%
Other: 6%

Lower-income parents were more likely to mention safety as a key factor, probably reflecting the neighborhoods in which they live, and also paid more attention to special education services. Higher-income parents were more likely to mention smaller class size and school curriculum/instructional approach.

Although for the most part we perceived that parents viewed charter schools as part of a wide array of possible choices, some parents did mention what they felt to be specific benefits of charter schools compared to traditional schools. Others mentioned school characteristics that are often thought of as more likely to be present in a charter school setting.

For example, many parents mentioned that they appreciated the way in which their children were included in the regular classroom at charter schools. At many traditional schools, children with special needs are “pulled out” to work in resource rooms or other self-contained classrooms for part of the day. This can be very stigmatizing to children, especially those with less visible disabilities who keenly want to fit in. One Milwaukee

parent described appreciation for the inclusive nature of her child's charter school because "they aren't made to feel stupid by going to dumb class."

Some charter schools appear to be using resources and setting up classrooms in ways that are minimizing the need for pullouts. Instead, the special education needs of individual children are met within the classroom, either through instructional techniques or staffing that occurs within the classroom. Some parents mentioned that charter schools have flexibility to "finagle" resources to put more teachers in the classroom, which leads to smaller student-teacher ratios and greater opportunities for individualized instruction. Other charter schools have instructional approaches that allow for fluid groupings of children, another way to meet individual needs. However, parents also mentioned traditional public schools that offer similar benefits, such as the state-funded SAGE classrooms in Milwaukee that offer a 15:1 student teacher ratio.¹

It is also important here to distinguish between the instructional needs of children with mild/moderate disabilities and those with more severe disabilities. Some children will benefit hugely from being able to stay in a regular classroom, and their parents make choices based on that benefit. However, other children have levels of disabilities which benefit much more from instruction in a self-contained resource room, surrounded by peers of like ability. As a result, what one parent looks for in an instructional setting will be the exact opposite of what another parent looks for.

Consistent with this theory, survey respondents who had children with more severe special needs tended to be in traditional public schools, which are more likely to provide a self-contained classroom approach. This was consistent with the national results found by Fiore (2000). Overall survey results indicated that 15 percent of the children had severe or profound disabilities, yet these children represented 30 percent of respondents in traditional schools. Nearly 90 percent of the charter school respondents reported that their students' disabilities were mild or moderate. For parents of students with less severe needs, the flexibility and individualized nature of some charter school classrooms can provide benefits on par with more formal interventions written into an IEP.

However, charter schools themselves are very different from school to school. At least one charter school in both districts had been or was being established specifically to meet the needs of children with severe special needs. In some charter schools, classroom sizes are too large to satisfy parents that their children would receive individualized attention. A focus on rigorous academics at some charters is appealing to some parents who feel their children's abilities are being unfairly discounted, but unappealing to parents whose children may get left behind very quickly in that type of environment. Other charter schools were criticized for being "too loose" or failing to use report cards.

¹ The SAGE program, however, is an example of the ways in which even a simple student teacher ratio can be perceived very differently by parents. Parents reported that in some cases, schools were complying with the SAGE ratio by simply inserting more teachers into large classrooms, an approach that will not benefit students who have difficulties with auditory or sensory processing issues, for example.

We asked charter school survey respondents whether their school had a specific instructional program or curricular approach that brought them to the school. A large number of parents did not answer this question, perhaps indicating unfamiliarity with these specialized terms. Of those who did answer the question, 55 percent reported that these factors did bring them to the school. Twenty-three percent answered in the negative, and twenty-two percent reported that they did not know. Parents were invited to write in the program or curriculum that brought them to the school, and this resulted in a wide variety of spontaneous responses. Some parents chose their schools because of special education emphasis and/or experience; others chose college preparatory curricula and math and science-focused schools. Some parents were very clear about the approach used by the school, mentioning specific reading programs or curricula by name; others simply reported that their school was “a school where kids learn different” or “they help better” (“ayudan mas major”).

Nearly one-quarter of charter school respondents reported that their school served primarily special needs children. When we compared this result to the actual list of schools attended, it appears that either parents are mistaken or that some of these schools have in fact developed significant special education populations through these “word of mouth” parent networks.

What makes parents of special needs students stay at a particular school?

As discussed above, our focus group participants described an ongoing decision-making process. These parents not only pay a lot of attention when they initially select a school, but also are continuously engaged in monitoring services provided and advocating for their children after a school is selected. If a school isn’t working out as hoped, these parents often will pull up stakes and leave.

We asked survey respondents whose children had previously attended other schools for the reasons why they left those schools. About one quarter cited reasons such as moving or grade transitions; for example, moving from an elementary school to a middle school. However, the majority reported being dissatisfied with some aspect of the prior school:

- The school was not a good fit: 48%
- Dissatisfied with teacher: 45%
- Child was struggling academically: 43%
- School didn’t communicate: 42%
- Dissatisfied with special education services: 39%
- Child needed fresh start: 32%
- Class sizes too large: 31%
- School was unsafe: 30%
- Too far away: 12%
- No transportation was available: 11%
- Unable to take child to school: 4%

In focus groups, parents who were unhappy reported the sense of being in a constant battle with the school to receive services mandated by their children's IEPs. The most notable difficulty parents had was getting a paraprofessional or classroom aide to be with their children. Schools would often promise a classroom aide and then either not provide one at all, or divide up the aide's time among several children. Some parents had solved this problem by simply paying a classroom aide to be with their child full-time out of their own pocket. This sense of frustration was most notable in Denver, although it was also mentioned in Milwaukee.

In general, however, parents reported being satisfied with the special education services their children received at their current schools. Eighty-one percent of survey respondents reported that they were "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with special education services at their current schools. Just six percent reported being "very" or "somewhat" dissatisfied. Eighty-four percent of parents reported that they were very or somewhat satisfied with how their school's staff and teachers communicate and work with them. Again, these numbers are consistent with national results (Newman 2005; Johnson and Duffett 2002).

Parents in focus groups viewed the school principal as key to establishing a culture that served special needs families. Schools that received high praise were described as open and welcoming, with staff that were responsive to families and communicated with them regularly and well. Spanish-speaking parents also were pleased with programs that helped them understand how they could help their children. A good principal was seen as essential to setting this type of tone at a school.

Other parents reported that the combination of a "good" IEP and a school that would work with them in delivering the services mandated under the IEP made for a positive school experience. These parents were well aware that the IEP was a powerful tool in their hands as they advocated for their children; however, whether the intentions of the IEP would come to fruition at a particular school depended on the willingness of the school staff to meet their child's needs. Other parents did not appear as cognizant of their legal rights to enforce the IEP.

Conclusion and Implications

Despite the difficulties inherent in maneuvering legal and financial special education requirements within an autonomous school structure, charter schools do seem to be viable options for a large number of families with special-needs students. In fact, some charter schools have developed informal reputations as havens for special-needs students. In many cases, particularly with respect to the needs of students with less severe disabilities, the variety of instructional approaches offered by charter schools can serve as beneficial interventions for these students. Effective inclusion for students with less severe needs seems to be a particular strength of many charter schools.

The parents of special-needs children look very much like parents of typical children in the information sources they use to engage in school choice decisions. However, parents of special-needs children view their children as fragile, and susceptible to greater damage

if the wrong school is chosen. As a result, the school choice process seems to be even more focused on the needs of the individual child, and parents continue to monitor the school closely to make sure that initial expectations and ongoing needs are met. Parents feel that no one will advocate for their child as strongly as they will. They also understand that the needs of their child and the financial pressures experienced by schools and districts are often at odds. This is exhausting and frustrating for many parents. Establishing parent networks that provide information and emotional support for these families as they embark on a challenging search process would be beneficial.

Because of the highly individualized nature of this process, differences across schools seem to be more important to the parents of special-needs children than are more general differences between charter schools and traditional schools. Whether they attend charter schools or traditional schools, parents want schools that accept and care about their children, that both challenge and support their children, and that work with parents as active and respected partners in the ongoing education of their children.

Resources

Note: all website links current as of March 15, 2008.

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