Buying Homes, Buying Schools: School Choice and the Social Construction of School Quality

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In this article, Jennifer Jellison Holme explores how parents who can afford to buy homes in areas known "for the schools" approach school choice in an effort to illuminate how the "unofficial" choice market works. Using qualitative methods, Holme finds that the beliefs that inform the choices of such parents are mediated by status ideologies that emphasize race and class. She concludes that school choice policies alone will not level the playing field for lower-status parents, as choice advocates often suggest.

Suzanne Holland and I were scheduled to meet on a warm summer morning at a Starbucks coffee shop located in a shopping center near her suburban home.[1] I arrived early, and waited at a patio table shaded by a large green umbrella before Suzanne, a tall blond White woman in her early forties, pulled up in her sport utility vehicle. I introduced myself, and after we got our coffees we sat down to talk about why Suzanne had moved to the community of Rancho Vista, and what role schools had played in that decision.

Before she and her husband moved to Rancho Vista, Suzanne informed me, they had lived for many years in a large home in a predominately White, upper-middle-class neighborhood. This neighborhood, however, was located within a large urban school district that had, according to Suzanne's friends and acquaintances, low-quality public schools. In fact, these schools were considered of such poor quality that almost everyone Suzanne knew either sent their children to private schools or simply moved out of the area to one considered to be in a better school district. As the eldest of their three chil-

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[1] The names of all respondents and places in this study are pseudonyms.

dren neared school age, Suzanne and her husband found themselves faced with a dilemma: should they stay in their home and pay for private schools for three children, or should they buy a home five miles to the west in Rancho Vista, a suburb that, according to their friends, had an excellent public school system (and get a tax break on mortgage interest besides)? For Suzanne and her husband the choice was clear. They moved.

The ability of high-income parents like Suzanne Holland to obtain access to high-quality schools by moving to a good school district or paying private school tuition has been pointed to by school choice advocates — particularly voucher advocates — who argue that poor families should be provided with the same educational choices that wealthier families have long had (see, e.g., Coons, Clune, & Sugarman, 1970; Nathan, 1998; Peterson, 1990; Viteritti, 1999). As Nathan (1998) argues in his call for expanding public school choice through charter schools:

> This nation already has a massive school choice program favoring wealthy families. Federal and, in most places, state tax policies permit deductions for real estate taxes and for home mortgage interest. This means tremendous tax advantages for wealthy families, which can and have moved out of inner cities and into suburbs. The price of admission to many "public" suburban schools is the ability to purchase a home with hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars and to pay real estate taxes. Wealthy families already have choice. And they use it! (p. 502).

Choice advocates argue that because upper-income families have the means to "choose" their schools by choosing where they live, equity requires that low-income parents be granted the same kinds of choices through charter schools or vouchers (Nathan, 1998; Peterson, 1981, 1990, 1997; Viteritti, 1999).[2]

These equity arguments for giving school choice to low-income families are highly compelling: few can dispute the inequity of granting tax subsidies to wealthier families in search of a better education for their children while denying similar choice to families who are unable to afford a home in a better neighborhood with presumably better schools. Advocates of school choice have highlighted this point in recent years to garner support from a diverse array of politicians, policymakers, and community leaders (Molnar, Farrel, Johnson, & Sapp, 1996; Witte, 1990). Support for expanding school choice is also growing among the general public (Rose & Gallup, 1999), and lawmakers are responding: Wisconsin, Ohio, and Florida have instituted voucher laws that grant low-income public school students funds to attend private schools, and attempts are being made in other states to pass similar

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[2] Charter schools are public schools of choice that are granted freedom from state and local regulations in exchange for increased accountability. Vouchers are stipends of public education dollars granted to parents to use at public, private, or parochial schools of their choice.

legislation (Rees, 2000).[3] Twenty-nine states have passed open-enrollment laws that permit students to transfer either to public schools within their home district or to a neighboring school district. And thirty-seven states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have passed charter school laws. Clearly, the political support for giving school choice to families from all socioeconomic backgrounds is growing (Molnar et al., 1996).

While researchers have been providing increasing information about the potential and the pitfalls of various choice policies, they have generally overlooked the "unofficial" choice market critiqued by choice advocates — that is, high-income parents' ability to buy a home that gives them access to good public schools. Yet it is these parents, who comprise 70 percent of parents who make school choices for their children (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997), who can offer policymakers and educators an ideal test of the most basic claims that school choice advocates make: that parents will choose schools that are "good" by some measure, academic or otherwise, and that schools will seek to live up to these parental expectations.

For this study, I set out to examine the choices of the parents who advocates believe are unfairly privileged in the existing system. I interviewed forty-two parents who used their financial resources to buy a home in what they believed was the best school district they could afford. These parents were almost all White and middle to upper income, or what I call high-status parents (Jankowski, 1995; Lamont & Fournier, 1992; Winant, 1995). These parents had a wide range of school choices, as they had the financial resources to choose almost any public or private school they desired, and were unlikely to encounter housing discrimination in choosing to live in a particular neighborhood for the schools. I wanted not only to learn how these parents approached their school choices, but also to understand their beliefs about which schools were "good" and which were not. If policymakers intend to grant children of low-income parents access to some approximation of the educational opportunities that children of privileged parents have, it is important to know what types of schools these parents seek, and why.

Through these interviews, I found that most of the parents in this study did not know a great deal about their chosen school's instruction and programs prior to making their choice. In fact, of the twenty parents who had moved out of their neighborhood because of their dissatisfaction with their children's school, just one had actually visited the rejected school. The vast majority — thirty-four of the forty-two of the parents I interviewed — had not obtained test-score data for the schools in their old neighborhood, or for other schools or school districts that they determined were "bad" and consequently avoided. Of the thirty-six parents who bought their homes "for the

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[3] These laws have been challenged in court in all three states. While the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld that state's law, the U.S. Supreme Court will review Ohio's law in 2002. Florida's law is currently being contested.

schools," less than one-fourth actually visited the school they ended up choosing before buying their home. And, finally, twenty-five of these parents had not obtained test-score data for their chosen school before they decided to move to that area for the schools.

As I illustrate in this article, most parents stated that they based their judgments about the school quality primarily on information from individuals in their social networks. These social networks, however, did not provide information about a school's curricula or instructional quality, as they have been said to do in a great deal of school choice research (see, e.g., Maddaus, 1990). I found that they instead passed around the opinions of other parents about the quality of particular schools, that is, whether the school was considered generally good or bad by a number of high-status parents. As I will illustrate, the reputations of "good" schools were not simply passed through the social networks of high-status parents, but were actually constructed through such networks.

Status, in fact, dominated every aspect of these parents' choices. They not only implicitly trusted the information given to them by other high-status parents, but also read a great deal into these parents' own school choices. As such, the parents in this study assumed that those schools serving the children of high-status parents — whether neighborhood schools or private schools — were superior to those serving the children of lower-status parents. Thus, for the parents in this study, the assumed quality of the schools was directly associated with the status of the families they served (Jankowski, 1995; Metz, 1990).

When I asked parents why they chose or rejected particular schools, they did not talk about the quality of curriculum and instruction. Instead, they rationalized their choice of schools that serve the children of other high-status parents through "status ideologies" — seemingly commonsense beliefs held by dominant status groups to explain why members of other groups seem to fail disproportionately in a society where opportunity is theoretically open to anyone with the will and drive to achieve (Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997). Through these ideologies, members of dominant status groups are able to downplay or outright deny the role of discrimination in the unequal economic and status outcomes of Whites and people of color by emphasizing cultural explanations of success and failure. These ideologies, then, enable a dominant status group to lay claim to a superior status position by claiming "that it is different not because of its wealth or power, but because of its greater nobility, its honor, its politeness and artistic taste, its technical skills, or whatever the prevailing status ideology happens to be" (Collins, 1985/1994, p. 89). In the United States, such ideologies have protected a social-status hierarchy that confers "social estimation of honor" (Weber, 1930/1978, p. 932) on Whites and majority-White institutions (Jankowski, 1995; Lamont & Fournier, 1992; Winant, 1995). One of the most enduring of these ideologies is the culture of poverty theory, which attributes the low status of

people of color to supposed deficiencies in their cultural values, rather than to a long history of racial discrimination (Solorzano & Solorzano, 1995). Conversely, according to this theory, the success of Whites can be ascribed to their supposed positive cultural values.

These parents acted on such status ideologies in making their school choices, expressing concerns about the values and behavior of students in the schools they considered unacceptable. They believed that students in these schools, who were mostly low-income students of color, cared little about education and would hinder their own children's educational experience by holding them back academically, or through physical violence or intimidation. They also believed that the values and conduct of students in schools they presumed were better, who were mostly White and from high-income families, were more conducive to a good education.

Although these parents' choices were certainly influenced on some level by an understanding of the material advantages of sending their children to a school with a predominately White and wealthy student body, my analysis of the interview transcripts suggests that their ideologies allowed them to discount or ignore the material advantages they gleaned through their choices. I will illustrate how equating a school's or district's quality with the assumed behavior and academic ability of its students allowed these parents to rationalize their choice of majority-White neighborhoods and schools on the premise that their choices were based on the school's quality, rather than on the race or status of the school population. These findings stand in stark contrast to prior research on school choice, much of which fails to examine how race and status might influence the ways parents make meaning of their school choices.

Conceptualizing School Choice

A number of studies of school choice have been undertaken with the interrelated goals of understanding the particular aspects of schools that are most important to parents and the way parents translate their preferences into school choice decisions. Most of these studies have employed large-scale surveys that ask parents to select and rank factors that were important to them in choosing their children's schools (see, e.g., Echols & Wilms, 1995; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1996). Such research implicitly conceptualizes parental choice as a rational process, whereby parents first discern and rank the factors that are important to them and then set out to find the school that objectively matches their criteria (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995).

These studies, however, fall far short of providing a holistic, contextualized understanding of the reasons parents choose particular schools. By consolidating parental preferences into an "aggregate parent" with an aggregate set of school preferences (Bowe, Gewirtz, & Ball, 1994), this research ignores parents' personal histories and their class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, in

addition to the racial, economic, and social divisions of the school systems in which they are making choices (Cicourel, 1981; Cookson, 1994; Wells & Crain, 1992). Moreover, these studies treat the so-called criteria for choice — such as academic quality, school atmosphere and discipline — as though their meaning is commonly understood — that, in fact, they are concrete, measurable things instead of the social constructs that they are. As Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball (1994) observe:

> "Reasons" [for choice] such as examination results, discipline, uniforms and the child's happiness are not unambiguous. Their precise meaning is contextually specific and most of the research to date has failed to recognize this specificity and explore the multiple meanings parents attach to what this kind of research simply designates as factors or reasons for choice. (p. 71)

Bowe, Gewirtz, and Ball have attempted to remedy some of the flaws they find in choice research, particularly the lack of attention to the *process* of choice over content or criteria (see Gewirtz et al., 1995). Few researchers to date, however, have sought to correct one of the central flaws identified by Bowe et al. (1994) in existing research: specifically, none has critically examined the content or the multiple meanings of parental criteria for choice (Coldron & Boulton, 1996).

Understanding how parents make meaning of their school choices is particularly important, given that a number of studies have found that the racial and ethnic makeup of schools appears to be important to parents. These outcome-based studies, which have analyzed school choice patterns from quantitative data sets, have found that White, upper-income parents often choose schools that tend to be Whiter and wealthier (Glazerman, 1998; Henig, 1996; Lankford & Wyckoff, 1997; Saporito & Lareau, 1999). In addition, several studies have found that parents of color tend to choose schools where their children are better represented (Glazerman, 1998; Henig, 1996). Henig (1996), for example, found in his study of transfer patterns among magnet schools in Montgomery County, Maryland, that White parents tend to choose Whiter schools, and parents of color tend to choose schools that serve larger numbers of students of color. Glazerman (1998) found similarly that parents in Minneapolis tend to transfer their children to schools in which the majority of children are of the same racial and ethnic background as their child. In their study of student transfers in a large urban school district, Saporito and Lareau (1999) found that White families tend to avoid schools that serve a large number of Black students, regardless of a schools' class composition. Lankford and Wyckoff (1997) also discovered, in their analysis of U.S. Census and district-level enrollment data, that the racial and ethnic makeup of local schools strongly correlates with parents' residential and school choice decisions; in particular, they found that White families tend either to move to neighborhoods with majority-White schools or to send their children to private schools in which White students are the majority.

While studies of school choice show that race appears to influence decisions of both White families and families of color, none of the surveys of parents' choice preferences found race to be a salient factor. Furthermore, opinion polls have found that a majority of parents of all races express strong support for the principle of integrated schools (Farkas & Johnson, 1998; Orfield, 1995).

How can we make sense of this discrepancy between parents' stated school preferences and the racially biased choices they end up making? A substantial part of this discrepancy is traceable to the methodology and theoretical approaches of existing school choice research: while outcome-based studies provide strong evidence that choice can lead to racial and ethnic stratification, they fail to explain how parents make meaning of these seemingly race-based choices. Yet, clarifying how parents make meaning of their school choices and how these meanings may vary by context can lead to a more complex picture of school choice that reflects the experiences of parents living in diverse (and often quite segregated) locales. It can also provide insight into the potential and the pitfalls of choice policies, and how and why the meaning that parents make of school quality may serve, even inadvertently, to reproduce existing inequitable social arrangements. Through this research, therefore, I was interested in learning about the ways more privileged parents make meaning of school quality, and how these meanings may lead them to choose schools, through their residential choices, with Whiter and wealthier student bodies.

The Study and the Setting

For this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with forty-two mostly White upper-middle-class parents who sought out what they believed to be good public schools for their children when buying their homes.[4] I found these parents by selecting four case study sites — two schools and two school districts — that had good reputations and were known by real estate agents to be draws for homebuyers with children. I identified these sites through an analysis of real estate advertisements, through which I discerned which schools and/or districts were mentioned most frequently as a selling point. To gain insight into which schools and districts were most popular with homebuyers and why, I also conducted preliminary interviews with seven real estate agents who worked in different parts of the metro region and who listed schools in their advertisements.

Through this preliminary investigation, I found that parents in this region were making two types of residentially based school choices: some parents were seeking homes in a reputable school district in which the particular school mattered little, and other parents were seeking homes in the area of a

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[4] One parent was Asian American.

particular grade school. While all of the schools in the most popular districts were predominately White, I found that when a particular grade school was a drawing point in the real estate market, it was often located in a predominately White enclave within a more racially diverse, and less highly regarded, school district.

I ultimately decided on the two school districts and two schools as case study sites. They were all located in a large metro area surrounding a central city I call Westland, which was the social and political center of this region (see Figure 1). Westland's school district, Westland Unified, was the point of reference for many of the parents, realtors, and educators I spoke with when they discussed the quality of education in their respective schools and school systems. For these people, who were mostly high-income Whites, Westland Unified, a large urban district serving mostly low-income African American and Latino students, epitomized the worst in public education. In many ways, parents' sense of the "goodness" of the schools and the school districts they chose was based in large part on their belief in the poor quality of Westland's schools.

Westland Unified is typical of many urban school districts across the country. Its student body is predominately non-White and poor; in the 1998–1999 school year, over 70 percent of its students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and one-fourth were welfare recipients. Almost half of the students in Westland are identified as limited English proficient (LEP) (California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit–CBEDS [CBEDS], 1999).

Though Westland Unified serves few White students, a large number of Whites reside in Westland: according to 2000 U.S. Census data, 29.7 percent of Westland residents are non-Hispanic Whites, 10.9 percent are Black non-Hispanics, 10 percent are Asian or Pacific Islanders, and 46.5 percent identified as Hispanic. Although there is greater socioeconomic diversity in Westland than in the district's public schools, White residents of the city on average have substantially higher incomes than other racial and ethnic groups. Whites are also segregated residentially within the city, concentrated into a few high-priced enclaves. Most of these White parents do not send their children to Westland public schools, opting instead for private schools if they can afford to, or moving out of the district once their children reach school age. As one parent in this study said when making her school choice, "We purposely did not want to be in Westland, as most people don't."

The two school district sites I selected, both known for their excellent school systems, are located on opposite edges of the Westland Unified School District. Rancho Vista Unified School District, a site in the north, consists primarily of gated suburban tract home developments, and it is widely known that many parents move to Rancho Vista because of the quality of the public schools. The real estate advertisements for homes in the area

FIGURE 1   *Geographic Location of Study Sites*
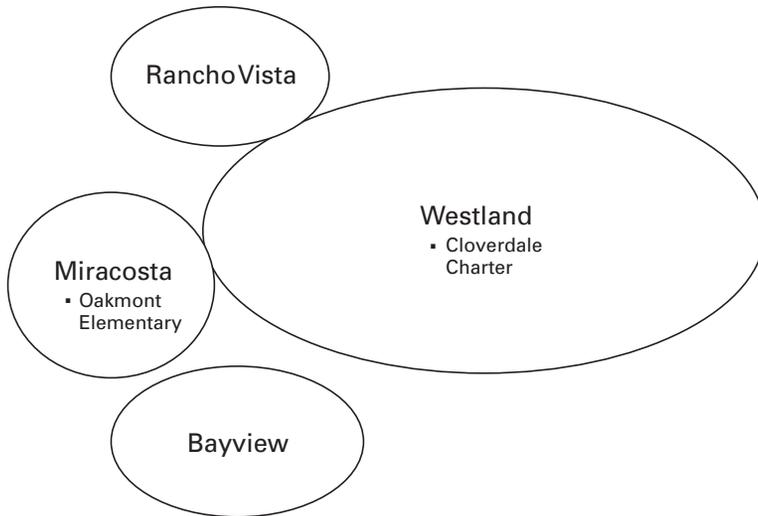
frequently tout "the Acclaimed Rancho Vista Schools!" or "Access to Rancho Vista Schools!" And as real estate agent Ginny Ingham observes:

> The average person will call me up, and if I say, "Give me your wish list of the three things that you want in a home," the first thing they'll say is "schools" — that's the first thing out of their mouth. Four bedrooms, and a view. [laughs] But you always hear schools as one of those three. Always.

The school system is a strong source of pride for Rancho Vista residents, real estate agents, and educators themselves. The district's reputation extends far across the metro area: parents and realtors at my other sites — over thirty miles away — mentioned this district as a place with a good reputation and high-quality schools. Demand for these schools has driven up housing prices; many realtors I interviewed noted that identical homes located on the Westland/Rancho Vista border can cost $50,000 to $100,000 more if they are located in the Rancho Vista Unified District.

Rancho Vista is overwhelmingly White, as are its schools: in the 1998–1999 school year, the district's students were 85 percent White, 7.6 percent Asian, 4.8 percent Hispanic, and 1.5 percent African American. The students in the district are not poor: only 2.8 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch, and only 0.6 percent are CalWorks (formerly AFDC) recipients.[5] Only 3.8 percent of the population is identified as limited English proficient (CBEDS,

[5] CalWorks emerged as California's response to the 1996 national welfare reform legislation. It replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the national welfare program that provided financial assistance to low-income families with children. The new CalWorks program instituted lifetime benefit limits and work requirements for recipients (Klerman, Zellman, & Steinberg, 2000).

1999). Rancho Vista is also wealthy, and access to its neighborhoods is not cheap: the median home price in November 1999 was $720,000, and prices range from $550,000 to over $1 million.

The other school district site I selected, which I call Bayview Unified School District, is located over thirty miles south of Rancho Vista, past the southern border of the Westland district. When I asked realtors what draws people to this area, they say one of the top draws is the school district. As Bayview realtor Gerald Iverson notes, "I think if you talk to realtors around here, you'd find that literally 100 percent of the people that come from out of the [immediate area], if they have children, are coming here for the schools. . . . I mean, I'd say 100 percent. It might be 98, but I'd say it's 100 percent. Because they are very, very, very concerned about it." The school system has an excellent reputation and, like Rancho Vista, is a source of pride for the city's residents.

Demographically, like the city it serves, Bayview Unified School District is overwhelmingly White: in the 1998–1999 school year, the district was 81.7 percent White, 8.9 percent Hispanic, 7.1 percent Asian, and 1.9 percent African American. It serves few poor students: 6.3 percent of the students received free or reduced-price lunch in 1998–1999, and 0.4 percent were recipients of CalWorks. It also has few second-language learners: only 2.6 percent in the same year (CBEDS, 1999). As one Bayview district educator noted, "Most of the people coming into Bayview are successful, affluent . . . lawyers, professionals, doctors."

The two schools I selected for this study were also highly sought after by parents and were mentioned frequently in real estate advertisements. These predominately White schools were located in racially and economically diverse school districts that had poor reputations: one was in Westland Unified, and the other was in a smaller neighboring school district. I elected to include these two schools in my study so I could understand how parents seek access to a particular school, rather than to an entire district.

Oakmont Elementary, one of these two schools, is part of a racially and ethnically diverse school district that borders Westland Unified, which I call Miracosta. The school is located in a prestigious White and wealthy enclave in the district, where home prices averaged over $1 million in November 1999. While Oakmont's student population was 80.7 percent White in the 1998–1999 school year, 9.1 percent Asian, 6.3 percent Hispanic, and 3.3 percent African American, the Miracosta Unified School District's overall K–12 population was much more diverse: only 58.1 percent White, 27 percent Hispanic, 9.1 percent Asian, and 8.5 percent African American. While only 5.6 percent of Oakmont's students received free or reduced-price lunch that year, 25.9 percent of the district's students did. And, while only 4.5 percent of Oakmont's students are designated LEP, 14.3 percent of the district's students are LEP (CBEDS, 1999). Scores on the Stanford Achievement Test, Form 9 (SAT-9) are also high: fourth graders in 1999 averaged 82 in the na-

tional percentile ranking for reading, 80 in math, and 74 in language. Though Oakmont's feeder middle school is slightly more diverse, Oakmont students first meet up with a wide range of racial and ethnic groups when they reach the district's only high school. By this time many parents from the Oakmont area have enrolled their children in private schools.

The second of these schools is Cloverdale Charter, which is located within the Westland Unified School District. Cloverdale is considered one of the shining stars of this troubled urban school district, and one of the few truly neighborhood schools within the district's boundaries, drawing almost all of its students from the surrounding, predominately White neighborhood. Cloverdale Charter was not always considered such a desirable place by these neighborhood parents, who largely abandoned the school when busing for desegregation began in the district in the 1970s.

Parents continued to avoid Cloverdale long after busing had ended, and until recently the school's vacant seats were filled by students of color who were bused out of their neighborhood schools because of overcrowding. Since Cloverdale became a charter school in 1993, however, neighborhood parents have come flocking back, and now the school serves mostly children from the neighborhood, with little space for nonresidents. Real estate agents, educators, and parents also observe that, since the return of neighborhood parents to the school, real estate prices have taken off in the neighborhood, as more wealthy parents with school-aged children demand homes in the area. The home prices are fairly high, averaging $472,000 in November 1999, according to real estate data in the local newspaper.

The students served by Cloverdale are mostly White, an unusual phenomenon in a district that is just over 10 percent White: in the 1998–1999 school year, Cloverdale's student body was 70.1 percent White, 10.5 percent Asian, 8.5 percent Hispanic, and 8.5 percent African American (CBEDS, 1999). Barbara Ettinger, Cloverdale's principal for over twenty years, noted that "it's not nearly as diverse as it used to be. The more of a neighborhood school it becomes, the less diversity we have. We're 70 percent White just about right now. We used to be 50 percent White. So the more the neighborhood fills us up, the less diverse it will be."

The student body is also financially better off than most of the students in Westland Unified: 9 percent of its students received free or reduced-price lunch in 1998–1999, as compared with over 73 percent in the district; only 5.5 percent received CalWorks, as compared with over 25 percent in the district. Only 8.9 percent of its students were identified LEP, as opposed to 45 percent in the district (see Table 1 on page 188 for site comparisons). Cloverdale's students have done very well on the state tests: the national percentile ranking for Cloverdale fourth graders in 1999 was 75 for reading, 78 for math, and 80 for language. Cloverdale parents all seem to feel they have found a sort of haven in a district that has a reputation for being, as one parent stated, simply "horrible."

TABLE 1   *Comparison of Student Demographics across Study Sites*

	Cloverdale Charter Elementary School	Oakmont Elementary School	Rancho Vista Unified School District	Bayview Unified School District
White	70.1%	80.7%	85.0%	81.7%
African American	8.5%	3.3%	1.5%	1.9%
Latino	8.5%	6.3%	4.8%	8.9%
Asian	10.5%	9.1%	7.6%	7.1%
Free and Reduced Lunch	9.0%	5.6%	2.8%	6.3%
CalWorks	5.5%	0.7%	0.6%	0.4%
Limited English Proficient	8.9%	4.5%	3.8%	2.6%

At each of these four sites, I interviewed school principals and asked them to refer me to parents they considered to be involved in their schools (in the more middle-class conception of parent involvement, such as volunteering at the school, etc.) because I wanted to talk to parents who would be more likely to have researched their school choice decisions. I then talked to more parents through referrals, or "snowball sampling" (Merriam, 1988). Although this sampling strategy excluded many parents who were less directly involved in the school, I felt that the parents I sampled were particularly important to speak with, given that they were more likely to aggressively seek out a neighborhood with good schools, and therefore were able to offer more insight on the school choice process.

I conducted semistructured, open-ended interviews lasting between 40 and 90 minutes with a total of forty-two parents: ten each at Bayview, Cloverdale, and Rancho Vista, and twelve at Oakmont.[6] All but one of these parents were White, all were upper middle income, and all but three were women.[7] While the three fathers I interviewed worked full time, thirty-four of the thirty-nine women were either stay at home moms, or worked part-time around their children's schedules. Of this sample, thirty-two said they specifically bought their home "for the schools," four said that schools were an important but secondary factor to their home purchase decision, and six said that schools were not a factor in their home choice at all.

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[6] The Oakmont interviews occurred earlier in the data collection process, prior to my decision to limit the number of parents interviewed at other sites to ten so that the sample size would be robust yet manageable — hence the larger number of parents interviewed at this site.

[7] I explained to parents that this study was about understanding the choices of parents who bought their homes to get access to a particular school or school district.

I talked to these parents about the role the schools played in their home-buying decisions, how they found out about the schools they chose, how they decided to reject others, and what attracted them to their chosen school or district. The goal of this study was not to make generalizations about the "average" choice preferences of the "average" parent and base predictions of parents' future choices on such generalizations. Indeed, too much school choice research has focused on summarizing the choice preferences and behavior of the statistically "typical" parent. As such, it has lifted parents out of their local contexts and denied or controlled for the influence of race, class, and personal backgrounds on their choices. In this study, these contextual factors were at the center of my analysis. I sought to capture the meanings that the forty-two parents I interviewed made about school quality, as such meanings related to the diverse and, importantly, racially and economically segregated contexts in which parents are actually living and making their schooling and residential choices.

In the following sections I examine the ways these parents' beliefs about school quality were formed through their social networks, and how such beliefs were supported by their status ideologies. These networks and ideologies were mutually reinforcing; together they led parents to conclude that the schools serving the highest-status or White and high-income clientele were the best, and the schools serving low-income students and students of color were the worst. Taken together, these networks and ideologies led the parents in this study to choose schools that served White, high-income clientele, and thus to make schooling choices that perpetuated both residential and school segregation.

Social Networks, Status, and the Social Construction of School Quality

As stated previously, the parents in this study obtained little firsthand information about the schools they chose or rejected before deciding to move "for the schools," relying instead on their social networks for school information. However, they did not rely on information from just anyone; as I will illustrate, these parents relied primarily on the opinions of other high-status individuals, including their friends and coworkers.

These social networks did not provide parents contact with other parents who had more concrete knowledge about the instructional quality or academic offerings at particular schools, as such networks have often been characterized to do in school choice literature (Maddaus, 1990). Rather, these networks passed on parents' overall opinions about the quality of a school as either good or bad — which then, in the eyes of these parents, gained validity, largely because the opinions came from one or more high-status individuals. Parents in this study, then, arrived at their beliefs about school quality

via social interaction with other high-status parents (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969).

The Construction of "Bad" Schools

For parents who moved for the schools, beliefs about which schools and school districts were not good were important in deciding where to live. Such beliefs led these parents to avoid buying homes in particular neighborhoods or, in many cases, entire cities — particularly for those parents who chose to move out of the city and the Westland School District.

For example, Betsy Anderson, an Oakmont parent who moved out of her Westland neighborhood because she deemed the local school unacceptable, noted that she had obtained no "objective" information such as test scores before deciding to leave the neighborhood because of the schools. Instead she based her decision on her neighbors' opinions: "I don't even know that there was anything specific that somebody said. It was just that . . . its reputation was not good, and I know that there were these neighbors of mine . . . both of them were very knowledgeable about education, and [they] had said, 'naaaahhh, not very good.'" Clearly, the opinions of Anderson's immediate neighbors, who could all afford high-priced homes like her own, were central to her beliefs about the local school, as she rejected it based on their opinions alone.

Penny Easton, who relocated from the East Coast to Rancho Vista, noted that she and her husband decided not to look for homes in Westland based on information from people her husband was working with at his new job: "[The decision not to look in Westland] was mostly based on just reputation and what we had heard. We didn't do a lot of research ourselves on the schools."

The high-status parents' "grapevine" was relied on equally by parents at the four sites who moved for the schools. However, there were some differences in the opinions passed along these networks, depending on where the parents lived. For parents in the two school district sites (Rancho Vista and Bayview), information about bad schools led to their wholesale rejection of districts with large numbers of students of color. The networks of parents who chose to live in more racially diverse districts (Westland and Miracosta) provided specific opinions about which schools in those districts were good or bad. Thus, they shared the perception that good public schools did exist within these districts, and that it was just a matter of finding out which were good.

The Construction of "Good" Schools

Parents who chose a neighborhood because of its schools also relied on high-status individuals for their information. Most noted that they heard about their chosen school's reputation from other mothers in their social circles, or through colleagues of their white-collar husbands. It was important to

many of these parents that they were told about a school's reputation by a number of high-status parents. When asked how they learned about the school they chose, thirty-five of the forty-two parents interviewed simply stated they had heard about the school from other parents in their preschools, neighborhoods, day-care centers, and offices. These high-status social networks seemed to create a consensus among high-status parents about which schools were good.

For example, Cloverdale parent Samantha Thomas recalls talking to other parents before buying her home, and noted that the fact that more than one parent said the school was good made an impression on her. However, these individuals did not tell her anything specific about the school's curriculum or instructional quality:

> I remember when we were looking and I would say [that] we're looking in this area, this area, and they have the Cloverdale School, and people would go "Yeah, that's a good school." And I don't even know what they know, but they probably just have heard that's a good school. "Oh, that's the charter school, that's good."

Another Cloverdale parent, Patty Anderson, observed similarly that people in her networks agreed to a great extent about which schools were good, which she then accepted as fact. She notes, "You just hear . . . through other families whose kids go to . . . elementary school what the good schools are." Cloverdale parent Susan Murray explained that she got a lot of the information about the quality of various schools from parents they met at her private preschool:

> There's a lot of buzz amongst parents. We see each other all the time in different situations. . . . You hear from people how things are going, what schools are having trouble. . . . I could keep you here another hour talking about all the rumors about the schools. [laughs] So, information really flows.

Angela Beckman, an Oakmont parent, said that other parents were her primary source of information about school quality: "It was word-of-mouth, moms talking to moms, mostly. And you just got a sense of what was . . . a good school."

Laurel Epstein, who lives in Bayview, has a master's degree in education and is currently employed in the district's administrative offices. She noted that everyone in her social circle was talking about Bayview before she decided to buy a home there. This made an impression on her: "I heard the same thing from everyone. Everyone said, 'Move to Bayview.'" Rancho Vista parent Penny Easton noted that people in her social networks had told her that the Rancho Vista district was not only good, but was sought out by other high-status parents: "The biggest thing was just that the overall school district — we'd heard it was good and that this was the place to be." Many parents, therefore, not only trusted in the grapevine as a source of information,

but also felt that the fact that a school or district was being talked about by their friends was a desirable feature in itself.

Sixteen of the forty-two interviewed said they relied particularly on the advice of one or two individuals they trusted. For example, Penny Easton said that her husband's coworkers gave her what she perceived to be the most reliable information:

> I think we probably relied more on the people that my husband worked with. . . . Because they were . . . giving us information about the schools, but also about the communities in general and where you were getting the most house for your money . . . based on reputation of the areas, and all that. So, we probably relied on what they thought more, because you hope you're getting a more truthful picture than maybe from the relocation company.

I did find subtle differences among the four study sites in the operation of this high-status parents' grapevine. I found that the parents at the two schools in racially diverse districts — Oakmont and Cloverdale Charter — were connected to other parents who were willing to live in a racially diverse district if they could send their children to what they believed to be an acceptable school within that district. This attitude required greater awareness of the variety of schooling options, such as magnet or charter schools or good neighborhood elementary schools within the vast Westland district or in the Miracosta district where Oakmont was located. The parents in the two district sites — Bayview and Rancho Vista — were connected with other individuals who tended to reject any schooling options in Westland.

Ultimately, what was important to these parents was that high-status friends and acquaintances considered a school good. As I illustrate in the next section, parents also often judged a school's quality by the status of the families it served.

Other Parents' Choices: Status and Neighborhood Schools

I also found that parents in the study drew conclusions about the quality of schools based on where other high-status parents sent their children. The fact that high-status parents felt a school was worthy of their own children often signaled to parents in this study that the school was considered good by parents whose opinion or standards they trusted. While who was talking about a particular school was an important indicator of its quality, who was attending a school was often the determining factor for parents about which schools to send their own children to.

Conversely, one of the primary ways parents decided that a school or district was to be avoided was that high-status parents in their neighborhood did *not* send their children there. Parents who rejected schools in Westland often cited the fact that the parents in the neighborhood — meaning other White, high-income parents — were not using the school as proof of its perceived low quality.

Olivia Russo, for example, who moved out of Westland to the Oakmont neighborhood because of her dissatisfaction with the schools, said that she had intended to send her child to the Westland Unified elementary school in her old neighborhood, but changed her mind when she noticed that "it didn't seem to be a real community school. . . . Our neighbors weren't using that school." Although low-income children of color were using the school, the fact that neighbors of her social status were not using the school signaled to her that it was not acceptable for her children. Rebecca O'Connor, who had moved out of Westland into Bayview, noted that she decided her local school was not acceptable, because her neighbors did not use it: "Most of . . . the kids in my neighborhood went to Catholic, private schools. They didn't go to the public schools."

Patty Armstrong, a White Cloverdale parent who moved out of a predominately Latino neighborhood in Westland, also made this point. People in her old neighborhood were using the local school, but because they were not in her status group or social circle, Armstrong determined that she should not send her own children there: "You know, it was a primarily Latino neighborhood, and so a lot of [those] parents [used the local school.] I mean, the parents that we knew . . . didn't." Armstrong clearly assumed that if parents of her social status were not sending their children to the local school then it must not be good, though she had no information about the school itself.

Allison Clarke, who had relocated from the East Coast to Rancho Vista, explained that she and her husband would have liked to live in another area of Westland, but they rejected the area because the schools didn't serve the predominately White neighborhood and thus she assumed they were unsatisfactory: "We didn't even look because the schools . . . they're just bad. Everybody we know who lives in [that area], they all send their kids to private school."

Linda Ullrich, who also relocated to Rancho Vista from the East, decided not to move into Westland because she had heard that people did not use the public schools: "I don't know if this is true, but we heard that [the] public school . . . really, it's not very good, so then most of the people there send their children to private school." While Ullrich knew that people in the vast Westland school district did in fact use the public schools, she rejected Westland because people using the schools were not from her social-status group.

Suzanne Holland, another Rancho Vista parent, also rejected the local school in her former Westland neighborhood because the majority of students were not from the neighborhood. She explained that Mesa Verde Elementary, the school her children currently attend, is "a neighborhood school. Most of the kids go there. They don't go to private schools. I wouldn't have minded if my child went to public school in Westland, had everyone in the neighborhood sent their kids to public school." Holland's concerns about the school in her old neighborhood clearly centered less around ac-

tual school quality — which she said little about — than around who was using the school.

Stacey Thomas, another Cloverdale parent, also considered the popularity of a school among high-status parents an important indicator of a school's quality. She believed that Cloverdale Charter was better than her neighborhood school because neighbors of her same social status were trying to get permits to attend Cloverdale. She recalls: "I knew people in [my old neighborhood] were trying to get their kids into Cloverdale, so that kind of tells you that . . . [they'd] rather go to this school in another neighborhood, that that school's better." Clearly, other parents' choices influenced Thomas' own perceptions about the relative quality of schools.

Ideology and the Social Construction of School Quality

The parents in this study surmised a great deal about a school's quality by the status of its students: those schools serving higher-status (Whiter and/or wealthier) students were presumed to be good, while those serving lower-status students (lower income and/or students of color) were presumed to be unsatisfactory. When I talked with parents about their school choices, status concerns were far more salient to them than a school's curriculum and instructional quality, which they knew little about before making their residential choices. While it is possible that these parents assumed that the quality of instruction and resources went hand in hand with schools serving high-status families, no parent said this explicitly. I found, rather, that parents rationalized their rejection of schools serving predominately low-income and/or children of color and their choice of schools serving predominately White, high-income children through status ideologies — seemingly commonsense beliefs attributing the motivation, behavior, and academic ability of students to their race and socioeconomic status. In my interviews, parents explained their rejection of "bad" schools by stating that they believed the students in those schools had learning difficulties and posed a physical threat to their own children, and contrasted them with the students in the "good" schools that they chose, who they believed were more academically able and who had more positive social values.

Through these status ideologies, these parents constructed a symbolic boundary around their chosen school community (Bourdieu, 1986; Lamont, 1992). Such boundaries are, according to Lamont (1992), a means by which individuals make subjective distinctions between themselves and others and are, therefore, "an essential medium through which individuals acquire status, monopolize resources, ward off threats, or legitimate their social advantages, often in reference to superior lifestyle, habits, character, or competencies" (p. 12). As I will demonstrate, parents in this study used their status ideologies to construct boundaries in a way that legitimized the privileges they obtained by choosing wealthy White schools and neighborhoods.

Student Ability and School Quality

One way parents rationalized their choices for schools serving mostly White, high-income students was to express concerns about the schools' ability to meet their children's academic needs. In fact, most of these parents believed that their children were in some sense gifted and needed an academic environment with other high-achieving kids in order to be stimulated. By equating children of color with low academic achievement, these parents were able to express their concerns about diversity not in terms of racial or class prejudice, but in terms of concerns about the academic and social needs of their own children.

For instance, many parents explained that they avoided or left neighborhoods where schools had large numbers of second-language learners because of their concerns that these students' language needs would hold their children back. When talking about what he and his wife were looking for when making their choice to live in Bayview's school district, William Ebeling explained:

> We also looked at the mix, the ethnic mix . . . that type of thing to . . . see if we could determine if there was a lot of foreign students, I guess you'd call them. From Asia or . . . Latin countries. We just felt like if there is . . . might be a language barrier or things like that to overcome, that might cheat the education process a little bit. . . . I believe it's good to be shown other cultures and everything, anyway, but there definitely seemed to be a correlation and a stumbling block between language, other second language. . . . I just thought, we were going to try to avoid that.

Katy Irving, who chose the Oakmont school community, said that the school in her old neighborhood in the Westland district "has lots and lots of recent immigrants. Which is not a problem, except for language was the problem. Lots of kids were learning English for the first time, and it would've been difficult for my kids who are already speaking English." Again, she rationalized her aversion to linguistic-minority schools based on her belief that students learn best in homogeneous groups. This belief was shared by Gail Osgood, a parent who chose the Rancho Vista School District and described why she wouldn't have considered public schools in her old neighborhood in Westland: "Well, there was a lot of busing [and] lots of different languages. I thought that my children would not be able to excel the way that they should."

Other parents did not specifically mention language issues, but expressed concern that their children would be held back by the overall low level of achievement of the students at the lower-income and minority schools. Steven Terzian, who has a Ph.D. in education, said of the school in the Westland neighborhood that he left:

> It's interesting, it's a school that had been abandoned by the neighborhood. And it was mostly kids who were bused in, and I didn't object to that as much as

> I did the fact that when I went there, the curriculum that . . . was being taught in the first grade was behind where my son was in his . . . kindergarten. Either that or it was their kindergarten that was behind where he was in his preschool. At any rate, the local school . . . seemed to not have the press for, the right level of achievement for where my kids were . . . and I didn't think it would be to their advantage to be . . . ahead, that they'd get [more] if the norm in the school was closer to where they were.

Rebecca O'Connor, who bought a home in Bayview, also noted that she was worried about the low level of achievement in the Westland schools: "My sister-in-law worked [in Westland Unified], and there was . . . just culturally a difference, even though it's very close in location . . . which was okay, but . . . my sister-in-law just informed me that academically my kids would be ahead, and so they would be kind of going backwards if they went to Westland."

Some parents used a socialization rationale for leaving neighborhoods with predominately non-White neighborhood schools, expressing fears that their child would be in the minority and would have trouble at the school socially. Patty Armstrong spoke of the school in the neighborhood she had left: "You know, I hate to put it this way, she would have definitely been a minority, . . . which is not a problem, but . . . she was like maybe one of two White kids in her class, which just . . . it didn't seem like it was gonna work for us."

Several parents at Cloverdale Charter said that they did not mind diversity in their child's middle school, as long as it was the "right type" of diversity. They believed having larger numbers of students of color in their school was acceptable if those students were, in these parents' eyes, motivated to achieve. Janet Astin, a Cloverdale parent, noted that the right type of diversity would counterbalance her concerns about her child being in the minority socially. She compared a well-respected magnet middle school to the very diverse and low-income feeder middle school for Cloverdale Charter:

> [The magnet school is] a very urban feeling school . . . where maybe . . . 30 percent of the kids are gonna be White, like my child. But they're all going to college, those kids. And I guess I don't really care. They're all interested in success. And to me, that . . . kind of makes the other stuff insignificant. But I have then heard . . . people say that it's hard to find a big enough peer group in a school like that, where . . . you're gonna find lots of people that are like you. . . . Another piece of it, and a big reason why I . . . want public schools is for diversity. I want my child to be in a really diverse environment, but I want her to not feel like she's . . . only got a small number that are like her. So, I want the best of both. Don't we all?

For Astin, the presence of minority students in her child's school was acceptable as long as those students were perceived as being motivated. In fact, most parents at Cloverdale — seven of the ten interviewed — said they were comfortable sending their child to a middle or high school with large numbers of students of color as long as the school had a separate gifted or magnet program for children like theirs.

While parents defined the unacceptable schools as places where kids achieved at a low level, had language issues, and would hold their children back, the schools they chose were by implication places where students performed on the same academic level as their own relatively gifted children. As such, notions of intelligence became a cultural and normative boundary for parents in their distinctions between good and bad schools, as they assumed that good schools were those that served high-achieving kids. For these parents, having their child enrolled in a high-achieving school seemed to elevate or reinforce the intellectual ability of their own child (Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, & Guskin, 1996).

For example, Oakmont parent Elizabeth Nichols pointed out that Oakmont's test scores were very high and stated that the school was "for high achievers." By implication, lower achievers belonged elsewhere. Another Oakmont parent, Angela Beckman, who works as a teacher's aide in the district, not only noted that it was better to send her child to a school with "smart" people, but also concluded that economic inequality was a natural outgrowth of the unequal distribution of intelligence and ability (Fischer et al., 1996):

> This is really weird, but I have to say it. . . . I've found as an aide in this area . . . but it's just my theory — that a lot of people that are successful with money are smart. And so their children are smart. Because that's why they have a lot of money. [laughs] I mean, it's not always true, but they didn't get money because they weren't very creative . . . so usually their children are. It's very interesting, and I don't know if that's really true, but I have the feeling like, naturally some of these kids are so amazing and they come from these families, where the families, maybe both parents [have] really amazing high IQs.

These parents, therefore, rationalized their choices of schools serving mostly high-income White students through ideologies associating academic ability and intelligence with race and class (Oakes et al., 1997). Thus, their beliefs that children from high-status families are more academically able than those from low-status families, and that children learn best in homogeneous ability groups versus heterogeneous groups led parents to seek out more homogeneous — and thus privileged — educational settings for their children.

Student Discipline and School Quality

Parents in this study also made assumptions about student discipline based on students' racial and class backgrounds. Though no parent obtained actual statistics on school violence, many of them said they were concerned about the purported violence in the predominately low-income, minority schools they had deemed unsatisfactory for their children, and used this concern to rationalize their decisions. Parents often based their concerns on anecdotal information from friends and others in their social networks, and

on their own assumptions about the violent propensities of low-income children of color. For example, Malorie Austin, a parent who considered buying a home in Westland but instead bought one in Bayview, described the stories she had heard about kids in Westland schools: "We knew that we would have three kids in private school. The horror stories I have heard of the schools over there, where if a kid gets an award for excelling — well now, they don't even give a kid an award for excelling because the other kids beat them up."

Patricia Lampert, who bought a home in Rancho Vista, reflected: "I understand [Westland has] magnet schools, which are supposed to be pretty good. And my son's fairly bright. I don't know if he would get into one, but if he could . . . I probably wouldn't have a problem. But, I talked to friends of mine who are teachers and I just hear about the most horrible things going on in terms of discipline, behavior problems, and instruction is not that great." Lampert clearly based her judgments about the discipline of children in the Westland schools on the opinions of others in her social networks.

Rancho Vista parent Suzanne Holland observed that she wanted to expose her kids to the right kind of culture — not the "lower-class" culture she saw in Westland's high schools: "I don't need to subject my kids to knives and guns in school, to people smoking pot in the hallway. My kids don't need to be part of that. I want them to be exposed, but I want them to be exposed to culture" and not to the dangers and negative values she believed existed in Westland.

Holden Andrews, a parent and real estate agent living in the Oakmont area, gave an interesting rationale for moving into his wealthy White neighborhood and using Oakmont Elementary rather than paying for private school. He noted that he and his wife were unhappy with the local school in his old neighborhood in Westland because of his perceptions of crime problems there:

> As we thought about it, we realized, well gosh, if we go to private school, when our sons come home from school they're going to play in the same neighborhood and they're going to probably play with the kids that go to this neighborhood school, and if we don't like the school, what does it say? That we're not comfortable with these kids.

For Andrews, safety issues were paramount in his school choice decision. He moved to Oakmont primarily to get his child into a school where he was comfortable with the other children, a "neighborhood school" that specifically served a White, upper-middle-income neighborhood.

Many parents in this study avoided schools serving low-income and/or students of color based upon the assumption that such schools were plagued with discipline problems and that their children would be threatened by what they assumed were more violent children. By implication, many parents believed that the students in the schools they did choose were less of a danger. Much of their search for a neighborhood with good schools was, there-

fore, based on the presumption that the children in the higher-status community, and thus the schools, would pose less of a physical risk to their children.

Suzanne Holland, for example, explains that by living in her predominately White, upper-income community she is assured that her children will attend safe schools:

> I mean, it's peaceful here, the crime rate's low. It's protected [even if] it's probably a little bit too . . . what do they say, White bread, or stale.

Angela Beckman from Oakmont states that her preference for neighborhood schools stems from a sense of control, a feeling that she can trust the families in her neighborhood:

> I think that you're more comfortable when you know that the families are in the neighborhood than . . . if you don't know the families. So, it's not, it's probably just a perception rather than a reality. . . . I would be more hesitant, especially when my kids were little, to have my kid at a house somewhere I wasn't familiar with, than to have them over up the street, you know, next door. Unfortunately.

By purchasing a home in a community with families they felt comfortable with, parents believed that their children would be in a safer school environment.

Socially Conscious Parents

In the course of my interviews, I found that fifteen of the forty-two parents interviewed recognized the relationship between race and class in their and other parents' evaluations of school quality. These parents expressed what Apple (1982) calls "countervailing tendencies" within their own largely self-serving, status-driven ideologies. Their insights ranged from critical thoughts about race, class, and schooling to simple acknowledgments of the advantages their schools receive as a function of their community's wealth.

The latter observations were common, and often related to the issue of unequal resources. The statement by Allison Clarke of Rancho Vista is typical: "If I want my kids to have art and music, the parents pay for it, which is really lovely because I happen to be in an affluent area that can support that. But if I was not, what would my children be receiving? And it really is kind of heartbreaking to know that they would probably receive [only] pencil and paper and shared textbooks."

The most astute reflections about the relationship between race, class, and perceptions of school quality ironically came from the parents in the wealthiest school community in this study, Oakmont Elementary, which is located in a neighborhood with million dollar–plus homes. In fact, the principal of this school was insightful about the racial and class biases in parents'

evaluations of her school, and she organized a parent inquiry group where they discussed, among other topics, racial biases in standardized testing. Because I interviewed this principal after I had interviewed most of the parents at Oakmont, I was unable to ask the parents whether they had participated in the inquiry group. However, several parents I interviewed did talk at great length about the racial biases in parents' beliefs about school quality, and in particular about the way testing related to such biases.

For example, Oakmont parent Elizabeth Nichols offered insights into the reputation her school had attained:

> I've really come to believe that the reputation and the test scores and all of those kind of very superficial things that people look at are a function of the . . . demographics and the socioeconomic class of the people who live in this neighborhood, and who send their kid[s] to this school. I think, by and large, the kids who go to this school come from highly educated, highly motivated, highly successful parents . . . and those kids would do well and would score well no matter where they went to school. [laughs] And I think that a lot of Oakmont is living off of that. [laughs] I really do. I hate to say it. . . . And I personally, from all of this, all of my experiences, do not believe that the teachers that teach at [a lower-income school] are worse teachers than the teachers who teach at Oakmont. I just think that . . . it's who they're teaching!

Thus, even though Nichols had some significant insights into the relationship among race, income, and the reputation of Oakmont, she was reluctant to let go entirely of the ideology she ascribed to, and still claimed that Oakmont parents were more motivated. Another Oakmont parent, Grace Robinson, was even more critical of the constructions of school quality by parents at her school:

> I think . . . the socioeconomic level of the neighborhood . . . attracts people. They like . . . my belief is that they like putting their kids with . . . you know, in schools that have similar children to theirs. . . . You can't really say that Oakmont has better teachers. They do have some good teachers. They have some excellent teachers. But they also have teachers that probably shouldn't be teaching. [laughs] The . . . amount of funds that are raised for the particular school site, again, correlates obviously to the neighborhood wealth, and Oakmont is among the highest in this district. It's not the highest, but it's amongst the highest. It probably has the least diversity. Which unfortunately I think is a factor to a lot of people. I don't think anyone would admit it, but I think in a subconscious if not quiet way that's what they're looking for. There's a misconception that it's safer that way.

In the end, despite these insights, the few socially conscious parents who saw through the social constructions of the quality of their chosen school still chose wealthy White schools and communities. As Oakmont parent Angela Beckman explained, it was easier for her to recognize the inequality than to make an individual choice to counteract it. While she believed more school integration in the Miracosta School District would be beneficial, she

observed that she would not choose to be an integration pioneer. Referring to an idea circulating among some parents to make the elementary schools in the Miracosta district more integrated, she said, "I mean, I would consider myself quite the liberal as far as my attitudes, but I'm still not willing to have my children be the first ones to change that. [laughs] So I have to say, that's why I said earlier 'guilt.'"

Conclusion

As I embarked on data collection for this study, I found myself feeling ambivalent about the parents I interviewed. On a personal level I came to like many of them, and I empathized in many ways with their almost fervent desire to make choices they thought were best for their children. It was clear that these mothers and fathers were earnest in their belief that by deciding to move to the neighborhood they did — and making financial sacrifices to do so — they got their children the best public education they could afford.

Yet, as I stepped back from my personal encounters with these parents and began to analyze my data, it became clear that these parents' school choices were not based on school quality, because they actually knew very little about the schools they were choosing — or, for that matter, those they had rejected. Most parents neither gathered their own information about schools nor visited prospective schools themselves before deciding to buy their homes "for the schools"; rather, they based their choices primarily on information from other parents in their social networks.

Yet what became clear was that these networks did not function in the way they have been characterized in a great deal of school choice literature. These social networks were not conduits of factual information between parents about particular schools (see, e.g., Maddaus, 1990). Rather, they passed along general opinions of a school, that is, whether or not a school was considered good by a number of high-status parents. Furthermore, the parents in this study placed their faith more in the information or opinions shared with them by another high-status parent than in specific facts about instruction or programs. Factual information about good schools was not often passed through high-status social networks; rather, the reputations of schools were socially constructed through the interaction of parents in such networks (Becker & McCall, 1990; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1969).

Status dominated every aspect of the study parents' choices: not only did they trust the opinions of other high-status parents in their social networks, they also read a great deal into those parents' own school choices for their children. The facts that parents did obtain, which consisted primarily of test scores, confirmed what they had heard about particular schools through their social networks — that schools serving Whiter, wealthier students were, in fact, better.

A number of educational scholars (Orfield, Eaton, & Harvard Project, 1996; Wells, 1995; Wells & Crain, 1994, 1997) make the compelling argument that the schools and school districts I have described in this study are in fact good, based on their position in the social structure. Schools serving high-status families do indeed benefit tremendously from the political power and social status of those they serve. Many scholars have pointed out that high-status schools can and do raise a great deal of private funding that is not tapped by the needs of low-income students (Scott & Jellison, 1998). Researchers have also found that high-status schools tend to attract more well-qualified teachers, who in turn can provide the students with a more challenging curriculum (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Oakes & Lipton, 1998). Such schools also benefit from extra personnel resources, as the White, middle-class parents in the school communities who have time, resources, and are comfortable with the school culture tend to volunteer a great deal of time to the school (Lareau, 1989). And, finally, education policy scholars have argued that high-status schools are better precisely because they not only confer status on those who attend them, but also provide both students and parents with vital connections to other influential members of society — ties that are made less easily in schools with lower-status families (Granovetter, 1983; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Wells, 1995; Wells & Crain, 1994, 1997). Taken together, these advantages are a strong incentive for parents to choose such schools.

Yet it is clear from my interviews with these parents that the factors that make schools serving high-status families "better" are not the reasons parents gave for choosing a particular school or school district. Had these parents actually recognized the advantages conferred upon schools serving high-status students, they would also have had to acknowledge the unfairness of the entire social system upon which their privilege has been built (Oakes & Wells, 1998). Instead, these parents justified their choices not by referring to the quality of instruction and curriculum at a school, but through status ideologies that led them to make assumptions about the culture and values of those within various school communities. These ideologically driven assumptions allowed parents to rationalize their choices through language that not only masked the privileges that they had, but in fact justified the privileges they obtained through their choices (Lamont & Fournier, 1992). Parents' school choice decisions are, therefore, not the individualized endeavor that choice proponents portray them to be, nor are they simply about obtaining a good education. Rather, such choices are fundamentally a struggle for status and distinction, a means by which privileged parents seek out high-status institutions that will confer both material and social advantages on their children (Bourdieu, 1986; Lamont & Fournier, 1992).

Ultimately, then, the findings from this study suggest that the market model of accountability touted by school choice proponents as a way to improve the public educational system through competition is inherently

flawed. This study indicates that, given choices, parents will not necessarily choose schools that have the best or most appropriate curriculum and instruction for their child, nor will they "punish" schools that are academically inferior by exiting such schools. Rather, this study suggests that parents with resources will most likely choose the schools with the highest-status clientele, and therefore, if choice is expanded, the most serious market pressures schools will face will be the pressure to attract a higher-status student body (Gewirtz et al., 1995). Finally, these data counter choice advocates' claims that school choice policies will give less-affluent parents access to the same good schools that privileged parents with resources currently seek out for their children, as the most coveted schools are, from the most privileged parents' perspectives, those schools without low-income students or students of color.

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