

PARENT PREFERENCES AND PARENT CHOICES

The Public-Private Decision about School Choice

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**Parent Preferences & Parent Choices:
The Public-Private Decision about School Choice**

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One of the most important ways in which parents are involved in their children's education is through choosing the school they attend. Parents typically choose a school de facto, according to where they live. However, within the past decade, more parents are able to exercise explicit school choice because of specific educational policies, such as magnet schools, charter schools, open enrollment, tax credits, and vouchers.

In the public school arena, magnet schools are the most prevalent type of school choice. Magnet schools played a central role during court-ordered busing to prevent white flight by providing avenues for voluntary integration; many parents chose magnet schools over cross-town bus rides. However, during the past decade, the role of magnet schools has changed as an increasing number of federal courts have lifted desegregation orders in urban school districts. Magnet schools are now a mechanism to provide public school parent choice. Thus, the market-place for parents in many urban districts includes magnet schools, charter schools, and private schools. Private schools are available to a broader group of parents because of the increasing availability of private-school vouchers that are targeted to low-income households in low-income, high minority, school districts.

Most research on private school choice compares parent choices between public and private schools. However, it is important to analyze the behaviors and processes of parents

who are actually in the choice 'market place' by, for example, studying parents who apply to magnet schools, the most prevalent school choice option. The purpose of this paper is to examine why parents choose, how they make school choices, and the dynamics of the choice process with an emphasis on public schools of choice applicants, specifically parents who apply to magnet schools and also consider private schools.

The focus of comparing parent choice between magnet schools and private schools is important because of the emerging interest of voucher plans that target low income, minority families in urban cities. Parents in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida can use state-funded vouchers to choose private schools. In Washington DC, the federal government has recently approved its first federally funded voucher program for low-income children. In addition, private tuition scholarships are also being used across the US to provide privately funded vouchers to low income parents to attend private schools (Moe, 2001; Howell and Peterson, 2002; www.scholarshipfund.org).

Many of the parents involved in voucher programs are the same parents that have been traditionally served by magnet schools (Steele & Levine, 1994). Magnet schools are typically established in urban school districts with large student enrollments (over 10,000). According to the U.S. Department of Education, 53% of large urban school districts include magnet school programs, often stemming from their desegregation plans, as compared to only 10% of suburban districts. For example, in the City of Chicago Public School District, 45% of all public schools are magnets, serving 48% of the student body (NCES, 2001). Over half of all magnet programs are located in low socio-economic districts (Levine, 1997). Although they can involve all grade levels, more than half of the nation's magnet programs

serve elementary school students; only 20% of magnets are located at the high school level (Yu & Taylor, 1997; Levine, 1997).

Parent Choice

Two strands of educational research on the process of parent school choice have emerged. The first has focused largely on factors associated with parents' reasons for school choice. This literature indicates that parents choose private schools for their academic and curricula emphases, discipline, and safety (i.e. Bauch, 1988; Erickson, 1986; Greeley, McCready & McCourt, 1976; Kraushaa, 1972). Catholics are much more likely to attend private school than other students, often choosing for religious values (Lankford & Wyckoff, 1992). As family income and parents' levels of education rise, so does the propensity to choose a private school (Buddin, Cordes, & Kirby, 1998). There is some evidence that lower public school test scores in elementary schools increase the likelihood of private school choice (Buddin, Cordes & Kirby, 1998; Lankford & Wyckoff, 1992). In the public school arena, parents indicate they choose schools for academic reasons (quality), because of dissatisfaction of their zoned school and for safety and convenience (Smrekar & Goldring, 1996; Hamilton & Guin, 2006). Charter school research suggests that parents choose for the promise of smaller class size, which parents believe will provide better educational quality (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000).

The second strand of educational literature on choice concentrates on types of public school choice arrangements, including magnet schools, charter schools, intra-district and inter-district choice plans and focuses on how parents exercise school choice (Smrekar & Goldring, 1996; Wells & Crain, 1997; Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Hamilton & Guin,

2006). This research indicates that there is social class creaming as parents with wider social networks and more access to information are more likely to participate in the choice process. Wells and Crain (1997) found that higher status groups have greater cultural capital and fewer market constraints, which provides them an advantage over the poor in a choice system. Despite this social class creaming, there is relatively strong evidence supporting choice as an effective tool to achieve racial and ethnic desegregation with some controlled choice plans (Russell & Clarke, 1988). Research suggests parents are concerned with school demographics in their information gathering and choice making (Hamilton & Guin, 2006).

This literature often lacks coherence in that it tends to examine reasons for school choice and the processes of school choice in public or private schools in isolation thus obscuring the underlying reasons for differences in school choice between the sectors in the same community. Previous studies have had little or no information on the range of choices that are available to families in the same community or district (Buddin, Cordes & Kirby, 1998). More recent research on vouchers has certainly compared public and private schools in terms of winners and losers from lotteries (Rouse, 1998, Howell, & Peterson, 2002), but the main interest here is on achievement effects. When attempting to understand choice programs Fuller cautions researchers, “you’ve got to look and see how the program interacts with the demographic and economic make up of the community” (cited in Viadero, 1995, p.32).

This literature is also limited because not all public school parents are in the ‘market place’ of school choice. Thus, comparing private school choosers with a sample of public school parents may not be the correct comparison. Specifically, Goldring and Hausman (1999) showed that in a school district some parents are non-choosers; they do not seek

information to engage in the decision-making process regarding schools choice; they never consider any other school than the school they are zoned for or assigned to, and thus comparing them to those who are actively engaged in the school choice process may not be a valid, or interesting comparison. Non-choosers are distinguished from passive and active choosers, parents who engage in the choice process, by either seeking out information to choose an alternative to their zone school, or actually enrolling in a choice school, a magnet school. In the Goldring and Hausman study, non-choosers were relatively satisfied with the public schools in their community and had lower socioeconomic status than active and passive choosers. Active choosers were most likely to be dissatisfied with the public schools in their community, have relatively higher income levels, and have little concern about the distance required to attend a magnet school.

This paper explores the dynamics surrounding public and private school choice in one urban school district to take into account the specific context of real choices available to families. We examine a sample of active choosers, parents who applied to magnet schools. We examine which of these parents would consider a private school, how they make school choices, and the dynamics of the choice process with an emphasis on comparing those who only consider magnet schools with those who also consider private schools and private religious schools. Specifically, the paper addresses the following questions: Who—in terms of demographic indicators such as income and education levels—would choose private schools and who would choose magnet schools? We also explore additional differences between those active choosers who do and do not consider enrolling their children in private schools, including satisfaction with previous school, parental involvement, parents' priorities in school choice, and parents' social networks.

Characteristics of Parents who Choose

The school choice literature indicates that parents who participate in school choice differ from non-choosers in five important ways: demographics, satisfaction with previous school, parental involvement, educational priorities, and social networks. Choosers tend to differ in terms of education level, family income, and race. They also tend to be less satisfied with their children's education prior to participating in school choice. Parents who choose also tend to be more involvement in their children's education, and they also place more emphasis on educational priorities that are associated with academic outcomes such as student achievement. Choosers are also more likely to have social networks that facilitate participation in the process of school choice.

Demographic Differences

Existing literature has determined that parental education, family income, and student race are important factors in determining private school choice. Parents who have more education are more likely to place higher value on educational attainments; therefore, their attitudes and actions tend to reflect their interest in education (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). In other words, parents with higher educational attainment believe that education is important; therefore, they are more likely to be familiar what types of educations different types of schools have to offer, and they are more likely to find themselves in positions where they can make informed decisions and choices about their children's education. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates a positive relationship between parents' education and the likelihood that they would send their children to a private school (Coleman et al., 1982; Noell, 1982; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Long & Toma, 1988; Lankford & Wyckoff, 1992).

Family income is another demographic indicator that has been positively related to

choosing private schools. Family income is often thought of as an indicator of resources (Yang & Kayaardi, 2004)—a higher family income increases one’s chances of affording a private education. Schneider and colleagues (1996) concluded that families with more resources are more likely to send their children to private schools than lower-income families who simply cannot afford to do so. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) also found that the higher the family income, the higher the private school enrollment.

While family income is associated with an increased access to resources, it also—at least in our sample—is highly correlated with parents’ highest level of education. Families with high incomes are likely to have high incomes because the parents have attained high levels of education. Even though the literature often treats these indicators as independent from one another, we exclude parental education in our analysis to avoid confounding variable problems. In so doing, we expect family income to be a positive predictor of private school choice.

The choice literature also identifies child’s race is also an important predictor of private school choice, though the results are often inconclusive. For example, Coleman and associates (1982; 1987) found that black and Hispanic students are under-represented in private schools when compared to white students. However, when controlling for religion, they found that black children were just as likely as white children to attend a private school. However, Long and Roma (1988) found that whites are more likely to attend both religious schools and private schools than non-whites. Since racial minorities on average possess less resources than whites, we expect that all else held constant, parents of black children will be less likely to consider private schools than parents of white children.

Parental Satisfaction

Of those parents who are *able* to participate in school choice, some parents may choose schools in an attempt to increase their satisfaction with their children's schools. For example, parents might choose a school—public or private—because they are dissatisfied with their child's previous school. Thus, in a sense, they are choosing away from a certain school or school type in hopes that they might be more satisfied with an alternative to their current situation (Martinez, Thomas, & Kemerer, 1994). The school choice research consistently demonstrates that parents tend to be more satisfied with the school their child attends if they are able to choose the school when compared to parents who are assigned to a school (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992; Witte, 1996; Martinez, Godwin, & Kemerer, 1996). Nevertheless, the extent to which parent satisfaction affects parents' decision to stay within the public school choice market or enter the private school market is less understood.

Critics of research investigating the influence of parent satisfaction on school choice argue that satisfaction is difficult to measure because it is always relative to parents' previous experiences. "Satisfaction is almost always relative. While surveys usually ask questions about satisfaction as if it were an absolute, people can only answer relative to what they know or expect" (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000, p. 129). Therefore, it is unclear how such a measure of satisfaction would play out in this paper where we use parents' satisfaction with their child's previous school to predict whether or not they would be more likely to choose a public choice school or a private school.

Parental Involvement

Much of the available research linking parental involvement to school choice indicates that parents who participate in school choice (both public and private school

choice) are likely to be more involved in their children's education when compared to parents who do not participate in the choice marketplace (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Martinez et al., 1996; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). However, little is known about the differences in parental involvement between choosers of private schools and choosers of public schools.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995, 1997) model for parental involvement suggests that parents are motivated to be involved in their children's education for three major reasons: first, because they have constructed roles for themselves that include involvement in their child's schooling; second, they experience a personal sense of efficacy for helping their child succeed in school, meaning that they believe they are able to make a difference in their child's education; and third, they respond to the demands of both their children and their children's schools regarding opportunities for involvement. Related to these major reasons for parental involvement, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) outline several ways in which parents can exercise involvement in their child's education: parents can assist their child at home; they can participate at their child's school; they can communicate with their child about school; they can accept invitations from the school and collaborate with the school to better help their child in school; and finally, they can believe their actions, attitudes, and abilities make a difference in their child's education (sense of efficacy). The extent to which parents are able and willing to participate in each of these five avenues of parent involvement offers a more contextual backdrop for how parental involvement might influence parents' participation in school choice. Within the school choice marketplace, we hypothesize that parents who are likely to choose away from public schools are likely to be more involved in their children's education because choosing a private school represents a significant financial investment for parents.

Priorities in School Choice

The school choice literature also demonstrates that parents exercise choice to the extent that the choices available fall within the academic priorities they place on their children's education. Most notably, parents exercise choice in accordance with the priorities they place on academics, convenience, school characteristics, and safety.

Several studies find that parents who choose typically cite academic priorities as the major impetus for changing schools (Armor & Preiser, 1998; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000). These studies also note slight differences between whites and non-whites when academic priorities are concerned. Non-whites are slightly less likely to be the *most* important factor in choosing schools for their children.

Convenience is another priority parents consider when choosing a school for their child. Because most school choice options do not provide transportation to and from the schools, "convenience" includes issues associated with the distance to and from the school and transportation. Kleitz and colleagues (2000) find that within each racial subgroup (including anglo, black, and Hispanic as well as low, moderate, and high income groups) a majority of the parent indicate that school location is important. Additionally, those who are most likely to say that location is important are those who are least likely to have the resources necessary to sustain daily transportation to and from a faraway school.

School characteristics—aside from academic factors—are also important to some parents when choosing a school for their children. For example, school size, school neighborhood, and the diversity of the school are important to some choosers. One study indicates that minority parents and lower-income parents are much less likely to report that school values and racial diversity are important considerations when choosing a school for

their children. However, parents with a college education cite diversity and teaching values as important concerns for their child's education (Schneider, Marschall, Teske, & Rock, 1998; Schneider, Marschall, & Teske, 2000).

Safety embodies another educational priority that parents may consider when engaging in the school choice process. In fact, Schneider and colleagues identify safety as one of the overriding concerns that parents consider when choosing schools for their children. However, others contend that safety is more of a concern for minority and low-income parents than it is for middle-class, white households (Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1996).

Differences in educational priorities among parents who participate in school choice have been studied and documented; however, differences between parents who are more likely to participate in private school choice and those who are more likely to choose within the available public school choice options are less known. We hypothesize that the parents in our sample who have considered choosing private schools are more likely to cite academics as a high priority when choosing schools for their children. Because the private schools that the parents in our sample would consider tend to be less diverse and have high academic reputations, parents with a propensity for choosing a private school will most likely not consider school characteristics (aside from academics) to be an important factor. In the particular district from which our sample was drawn, neither public nor private schools of choice offer transportation to students who choose to attend. Therefore, convenience is not likely to be a differentiating factor between public and private school choosers. Safety is also not likely to be an issue for either set of choosers.

Social Networks

When participating in the school choice marketplace, parents often rely on two types of networks to inform their choices about their children's education. The first includes information gathered from people they know from their neighborhood and other social groups. We refer to this type of social networks as "interpersonal networks." The second type of network addresses the extent to which parents rely on publicly available information such as brochures and pamphlets, public meetings, published results of test scores by school, school and district websites, etc. We call this type of access to important information "formal networks."

The social network literature demonstrates that interpersonal networks are efficient means of gathering information (Schneider, Teske, Rock, & Marschall, 1997). Therefore, these networks are important when parents are able and desirous to choose a new school for a child. "Word of mouth" and "talking to others" are the most typical ways parents use to find out about schools and about school choice options (Boyer, 1992; Wilson, 1992; Witte, 1996). But this method of learning about schools is not the same of all groups of people. For example, Schneider and colleagues (1997) find that parent's levels of income and years of formal education almost always lead to stratification in social networks: "higher status individuals are embedded in better networks that can act as more efficient sources for information about schools" (pp. 1219-1220). Because parents with a propensity to exercise private school choice tend to represent higher income brackets, we predict that such parents will also tend to have more interpersonal social networks.

Formal networks are also methods of gathering information to make informed educational choices. Much empirical evidence demonstrates that parents typically hold very little information about their children's schools or the available school choices (see Scheider

et al., 2000). In fact, one report argues that “few parents of any social class appear willing to acquire the information necessary to make active and informed educational choices” (Ascher, Fruchter, & Berne, 1996, pp. 40-41). Thus, information about school choice may be available, but few parents might know where to find it or how to use it. Hence, we hypothesize that the number of formal networks parents use to make decisions about their children’s schools may not be different between choosers who are likely to enroll in a private school versus those who are likely to enroll in a public school of choice.

Methodology

To provide a context for this study of parental choice, our sample is drawn from the population of parent applicants from one school district who submitted magnet school applications for at least one of their children for the 2002-03 school year. The district from which the sample is drawn is a countywide system that serves 70,000 students in 129 school buildings. The district serves students of diverse ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Fifty-one percent of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch; 40% of the students were White, 48% Black, and 8% were Hispanic during the 2003-04 school year. Each of the magnet schools is designed to attract students with specific interests, such as math and science, or the arts. Some schools have a specific teaching philosophy such as Montessori and Paideia. Enrollment in magnet schools is voluntary and students are admitted through an application process and a random lottery if the school or grade is oversubscribed. While three of the magnets have academic entrance requirements where students must meet specific criteria to participate in the lottery, the criterion for enrollment in the majority of the magnets is simply to have been selected through a random lottery. Approximately 10% of students in the district attend magnet schools. For the purpose of this

study, the parents of students who applied to magnet schools are considered to be “active choosers,” indicating that they are active participants in the school choice market place.

Data collection

Our survey on school choice and parental involvement was conducted via telephone interview using the CATI (computer assisted telephone interview) method. Interviewers were instructed to survey the parent or guardian who reported that he or she knew the most about the schooling of the children in the household. Interviewers prompted respondents to only answer questions for their child in preschool, kindergarten, 5th grade, 7th grade, or 9th grade. We selected these particular grades because they represent the grades in which students in the district either enter school for the first time or change schools naturally (i.e., move from elementary school to middle school, or from middle school to high school). If a respondent had children in two or more of these grades, he or she was instructed to answer the questions for the child in the oldest grade. Respondents were interviewed toward the end of the 2002-2003 school year; thus, magnet school applicants were interviewed approximately one calendar year from the time they participated in the magnet school application process.

Sample

Our research includes parents of magnet school applicants and parents who considered applying to a magnet school for their child. The sample was random and stratified by the school a parent applied to and the racial makeup of the magnet school. In Nashville, parents may apply to more than one magnet school for a child; therefore, stratifying the sample by school applied to created unique challenges. In the case of multiple

applications, applicants were randomly assigned to one of the schools for which they applied and were stratified accordingly. We were provided with lists of applicants for each of the district's 14 magnet schools as well as the aggregate percentages of applicants by ethnicity for each school. In an effort to sample approximately 600 magnet school parents, we set response quotas for each magnet school to match in that particular school's percentage of total magnet school applicants. For example, if 15% of all of the magnet applications were to a particular magnet school, then 15% of the completed telephone interviews were collected from applicants to that school.

Because our list of magnet school applicants received from the school district did not include the race of the child for whom the application was made, we could only determine this toward the end of the actual telephone interview. However, we did know the percentage of our sample that should be White and the percentage that should be Black in order to represent the population of active choosers. Therefore, interviewers were instructed to continue conducting surveys (even after the quota for school applied to had been met) until the racial percentages were aligned (as much as possible) with that of the population. Our total sample for magnet school applicants was 748; the response rate for the sample of magnet school applicants was 56.7%.¹

Because this paper aims to portray the differences in parents who participate in the school choice market place, we are interested in the differences between White and Black respondents. In this paper, respondents who reported their child's race as other than White or

¹ Response rates were calculated by dividing the number of completed calls by the number of completed calls + mid-terminated calls + initial refusals + language barrier calls + non-qualified calls. An example of a non-qualified call would be a respondent who had no school-aged children in the household. It was often the case that parents who did not have telephones listed their parents' phone number on school records from which we selected our sample. Therefore, we called the grandparents of the child, but the grandparents did not live with the child and were not qualified to answer survey questions about the child.

Black were excluded from analyses. The number of ethnicities other than White and Black represented in our samples was quite small (53 respondents, or 7% of the total sample).

Additionally, any cases with missing data are listwise deleted in each analysis.

Private school choice

To determine the extent to which active participants in the public school choice marketplace (process) are likely to also consider private schools, we asked “Did you ever consider sending your child to a private school?” About 40% of respondents said “no,” while the other 60% said “yes.”² Responses to this question serve as our outcome measure in describing which parents in the school choice market would consider a private school as well as public school of choice. The measure is coded 1 if parents considered sending their children to private schools and 0 if they only considered public schools when participating in school choice (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics associated with all measures).

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Independent variables/measures

This paper examines five sets of variables related to parental participation in the school choice process: two background measures—family income and child’s race ; a measure of parent satisfaction of their child’s previous school; five composite measures of parental involvement; four composite measures of parents’ priorities in school choice; and two measures of social networks and access to information (including a measure of formal networks and one of interpersonal networks).

² Of the 60% who said they have considered sending their child to a private school, about 60% indicated that a private non-parochial school would be their first preference. The other 40% indicated that a private religious school would be their first preference.

Background variables. Of the descriptive variables, the two that are most essential to our analyses are family income³ and child's race. Income was calculated similarly: 1 = \$29,999 or less, 2 = between \$30,000 and \$59,999, 3 = between \$60,000 and \$79,999, and 4 = \$80,000 and above.⁴ Child's race was coded 1 for Black and 0 for White.

Parent satisfaction. To measure the extent to which parents were satisfied with their child's previous school, we asked the following question: How would you characterize the overall quality of your child's previous school? Parents rated the schools as 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, and 4 = excellent.

Parental involvement variables. Measures for the parental involvement variables were derived from instruments used in previous research (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, in press). Five measures of involvement were constructed: "parent assistance at home," "parent participation at school," "parent communication with child about school," "parent-school collaboration," and "parent self efficacy." Factor analysis and reliability testing confirmed the soundness of all five constructs.

"Parent assistance at home" is a mean composite of the following five items intended to measure the extent of a parent's involvement with their child's schoolwork. Parents were asked how many times per week they engaged in the following activities with their child: Help him/her study for tests or quizzes; Work with him/her on homework assignments; Look

³ Parents' highest level of formal education has also proved to be important in such analyses; however, in our dataset, family income and parents' education are highly correlated and should not be used simultaneously in the statistical models we describe below. We use family income in our models because it is more easily interpreted as parents' ability to afford private schooling for their children.

⁴ About 32% of the cases used in analyses were missing values on the income variable. These values were imputed using regression imputation to limit the distortion in the variable's distribution and provide more realistic variance in the measure (Little & Rubin, 1990; 2002).

over or check his/her homework; Help him/her get or prepare materials for school projects; Help him/her organize work. Response categories were 1 = Never, 2 = 1-2 times per week, 3 = 3-4 times per week; and 4 = 5 or more times per week ($\alpha = .85$).

“Parent participation at school” is also a mean of 5 items; however, these items are intended to measure the extent to which a parent is involved with their child’s school. Parents were asked how often (1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, and 3 = often) they participated in the following: Attend school programs that include their child; Volunteer to help in their child’s classroom; Go to school open houses and “first day” events; Help out with class trips or field day events; and Send supplies for class projects ($\alpha = .72$).

The “parent communication with child about school” composite is a mean of 2 items associated with how parents talk with their child about school. Parents indicated how often they talked to their child about the school day and how often they talk with their child about the importance of doing well in school. Response categories were 1 = Never, 2 = 1-2 times per week; 3 = 3-4 times per week; and 4 = 5 or more times per week ($\alpha = .44$).

Eight items were used to construct a composite measuring “Parent-school collaboration.” The composite aims to measure the extent to which parents and schools are jointly involved in the child’s education. Parents were asked to what extent they agree with the following statements: I feel welcome at my child’s school; I find it helpful to talk with my child’s teachers; Teachers and staff at my child’s school respond to my questions and needs; I have enough information about overall school and teacher policies; The school or teacher keeps me well informed about how well my child is doing in school; I feel that communication between home and school could be better (reverse coded); My child’s teachers ask me for my advice on how to help him/her learn; My child’s teachers really listen

to my ideas. Response categories included 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree ($\alpha = .83$).

The final parental involvement composite, “parent self efficacy” is the mean of 5 items that measure the extent to which parents feel that they are able and capable of being involved in their child’s education. Parents were asked to report the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: I know how to help my child do well in school; I make a significant difference in my child’s school performance; I exchange phone calls, notes, or emails with my child’s teachers; I get involved in my child’s education because he/she wants me to be involved; I get involved in my child’s education because I want him/her to do well in school. Response categories were 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree ($\alpha = .63$).

Priorities in school choice variables. The reasons for choice composites were created from a battery of questions asking parents to rate criteria they thought about when choosing a school for their child. Respondents were asked to rate each one as being high, medium, or low priority in their thinking about school choice. The composites derived from factor analysis, and consistent with previous studies, are as follows: “academic priority” ($\alpha=.68$), which includes items such as overall reputation of the school, the school’s test scores, and quality of teachers; “convenience priority” ($\alpha=.62$), including items such as closeness to home, closeness to work, before and after school care programs at the school, and transportation; “school characteristics priority” ($\alpha=.61$), created from such items as school size, school neighborhood, and racial mix of the student body; and “safety priority” ($\alpha=.64$), including items such as safety to and from school, and safety in the school (Bauch & Goldring, 1995).

Social networks variables. Social networks are measured with two composites: formal social networks and interpersonal social networks. Because the sample of parents surveyed were parents who initiated participation in the choice process by expressing interest in public school choice options (i.e., magnet schools), parents were asked how they learned about magnet school choice options in Nashville (respondents were able to choose up to five options). “Formal social networks” include brochures/pamphlets/letters, magnet school fairs, magnet school program staff, mailings from the magnet school office, meetings with teachers or principals, newspapers, magnet school open houses, presentations by school staff, public meetings, PTA meetings, school administrators, school visits and walkthroughs, teachers/personnel at other schools, test scores, television/radio, and district or school websites. “Interpersonal social networks” include information from the child, church, community organizations, family/friends/neighbors, friends of the child, older siblings, other parents, and school’s reputation/word of mouth. All items in each category were summed, and for ease of interpretation, each measure was centered on its grand mean.⁵

Analyses

Because we use a dichotomous outcome measure, logistic regression is used to predict whether or not parents are likely to consider private schools when choosing a school for their child on the basis of family background, parent satisfaction, parental involvement, priorities in school choice, and social networks. A total of six models were run. Each model includes the background measures of family income and race. The first model uses only background measures to predict private school consideration, and each additional model

⁵ “Formal social networks” ranges from 0 to 4, with a mean of .83; “interpersonal social networks” ranges from 0 to 3, with a mean of .46.

includes (separately) an additional group of variables (parent satisfaction, parental involvement, priorities in school choice, and social networks). The final model includes all of the variables together in one model. Because this model seems to fit the model better than the individual models, as is indicated with a lower -2 Log Likelihood and a higher Chi-square, all results are presented in accordance to the findings in Model 6 (see Table 3).⁶

Results

Before discussing the results of the logistic regression analysis, we present descriptive differences between parents who considered private schools and those who did not. Because all of the parents in our sample are considered “active choosers” in that they all actively participate in the school choice marketplace, descriptive differences indicate the degree to which parents’ choices about their children’s schools are constrained.

Differences among Active Choosers

Differences among active choosers are determined by independent sample t-test results, indicating statistically significant differences between parents who considered sending their children to private schools and those who did not. As suspected, parents who considered private schools among their school choice options are likely to earn higher family incomes ($p < .001$) and have more education ($p < .001$) (see Table 2). Interestingly, even without holding income and education constant, parents of black children were no less likely to consider sending their children to private schools than parents of white children.

Therefore, in this sample of active choosers, black parents do not seem to experience more

⁶ A similar set of models were run on a subset of parents who said they had considered sending their child to a private school. These models predicted the likelihood that parents would choose private schools over private religious schools. However, the models simply indicated that parents who reported high family incomes were more likely to consider a private school (rather than a private religious school). This finding is well documented in the existing literature; therefore, these results are not the focus of this paper and are not presented.

constraints on choice—neither economic nor social—than white parents.

[Insert Table 2 Here]

Parents who considered sending their children to private schools were slightly more likely to be satisfied with their child's previous school (3.07, or "good") than parents who did not consider private schools (3.02, or "good"). However this difference was not significant. In any case, parents who wish to leave the public school system do not seem to be more dissatisfied with their children's experiences in previous schools—most of which are public schools.

Several differences between parents who considered private schools and those who did not emerged when parent involvement was considered. Parents who considered private schools were more likely to give assistance to their children at home ($p < .10$); they were more likely to participate in their children's schools ($p < .01$); they were more likely to communicate with their children about school ($p < .01$); and they were more likely to feel that their participation in their children's education was meaningful and helpful to their children's academic success (parent self efficacy) ($p < .001$). Parents who considered private schools did not feel that communication between home and school was as abundant, as helpful, or as meaningful as those parents who did not consider private schools. However, this finding is not statistically significant.

Additionally, parents' educational priorities were slightly different between those who considered private schools and those who did not. Parents who considered private schools were slightly more likely to set higher priorities on academics ($p < .05$) and lower priorities on convenience ($p < .10$) when compared to parents who did not consider private schools. No significant differences are evident from the t-test when considering the priorities

placed on school characteristics and safety when parents consider schools for their children.

Parents who considered sending their children to private schools also tend to have slightly more interpersonal social networks than parents who did not consider sending their children to private schools ($p < .10$). Nevertheless, they also tend to rely on fewer formal social networks than parents who do not consider sending their children to private schools; however, this difference is not statistically significant.

Logistic Regression Results

Even though descriptive differences exist between parents who consider sending their children to private schools and those who do not, we also examine these differences within the context of the other variables in our analyses. Some would argue that the differences we find in our independent sample t-test analysis are functions of differences in social class. To test this, we hold background differences constant as we use the other indicators to predict membership in the group of active choosers who considered sending their children to private schools.

[Insert Table 3 Here]

As is consistent with previous research, we find that active participants in the school choice marketplace who considered sending their children to private schools are significantly different than those who have not (see Table 3, Model 6). Those who have considered sending their children to private schools tend to come from higher family economic backgrounds.⁷ In fact, for every one unit increase in family income, the likelihood of considering a private school increases by about 36.5% ($p < .001$). For example, a family

⁷ Parent's highest level of education is excluded from multivariate analyses because it is highly correlated with family income.

earning below \$60,000 per year is about 37% less likely to consider a private school than a family earning \$60,000 or more per year. Likewise, a family earning \$80,000 or more annually is about 74% more likely to consider private schools for their children than families earning less than \$60,000 annually. Race, however, does not affect the likelihood of considering a private school in this particular sample.

Parent satisfaction with their child's previous school also had no effect on the likelihood that parents would consider private schools for their children; however, two of the parental involvement composites significantly impacted the likelihood that parents would consider a private school for their children, and two additional measures of parental involvement were marginally significant. A one unit increase in "parent communication with child about school" was associated with a 45% increase in the likelihood that parents would consider private schools ($p < .01$). Parents, on average, talk to their children about school a little more than 3-4 times per week. However, parents who talk to their children 5 or more times per week are 45% more likely to consider sending their child to a private school. When all else is held constant, a one unit increase in "parent-school collaboration" was associated with about a 42.3% decrease in the likelihood that parents would consider a private school ($p < .05$). On average, parents in our sample were likely to "agree" that teachers and parents communicated openly about children's needs and that such a collaboration was helpful. However, if parents were to "disagree," they were about 42% more likely to consider a private school. Again, most of the students in our sample attended a public school before participating in school choice (87%). Such a finding could suggest parents who consider sending their children to private schools are somewhat dissatisfied with the communication between home and school.

Two additional parent involvement variables yielded marginally significant results. A one unit increase in “parent participation at school” was associated with a 32.6% increase in the likelihood that parents would consider sending their children to a private school ($p < .10$). That is, parents who reported that they “frequently” participated in events and volunteer activities at their child’s school were about 33% more likely to consider sending their child to a private school when compared to parents who “sometimes” participated in such activities. Similarly, a one unit increase in parent self efficacy was associated with a 45.2% increase ($p < .10$) in the likelihood that parents would consider sending their children to a private school. Parents on average “agreed” that their engagement in their child’s schooling was an important contributor to that child’s academic success. However, should a parent “strongly agree” that their actions helped their child succeed in school, this difference would be associated with a 45% increase in the probability of considering sending the child to a private school.

Interestingly, the four composites representing parents’ priorities when considering school choice options for their children were not significantly related to the likelihood that parents would consider a private school. However, having one more interpersonal network in addition to the average number of networks, increased the likelihood that a parent would consider sending their child to a private school by 30.6% ($p < .05$). Nevertheless, formal networks—those usually established by schools and school districts to advertise school choice options—were not significantly related to the likelihood that parents would consider a private school.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the discussion regarding how and why parents exercise school choice. Much of the research on processes of parent choice in education examine public schools and private schools in isolation; in this paper we try to understand the dynamics at play when active parent choosers may be deciding between magnet schools and private schools. We believe this line of inquiry is important today given the increasing attention to vouchers and tuition tax credits and other policies that diminish the financial barriers to private school choice, coupled with the increase in public school choice options such as charter schools.

The data in our study have some noticeable limitations related to the sampling frame that suggests our findings should be interpreted with caution. Our sample is drawn from magnet school applicants. We do not know if there are differences between parents who participate in choice, but not public school choice. We also cannot extrapolate our findings to parents who considered public schools but ended up sending their children to private schools because most of our sample includes parents who entered a public school application system and stayed in the public school system (even though they considered a private school).

Nevertheless, our findings suggest that when considering parent choices between public magnet schools and private schools, it may be helpful to think in terms of ‘push and pull’. We highlight some of the important findings. First, in the context of our study, where there are no vouchers or other financial arrangements to attend private schools, it is not surprising that income is a main factor in determining consideration of a private school.

Second, our research suggests that parents are not necessarily ‘pushed’ out of their public schools because of dissatisfaction. Our analyses indicate that parent satisfaction with their child’s previous school had no affect on the likelihood that parents would consider a private school. In this case, parents are not being ‘pushed’ away from public schools. This is contrary to much public rhetoric that suggests private schools are somehow inherently ‘better’ than public schools and parents, who are dissatisfied with their public schools, will opt for private schools.

In contrast, parent involvement seemed to be a very important aspect of parents’ choice processes. Parents who communicate very frequently with their children about school and are more involved in school are more likely to consider private schools; and parents who felt that the level of collaboration between teachers and parents was not adequate, were also more likely to consider private schools. These findings suggest a ‘pull’ towards private schools. Parents may perceive that parent involvement and parent communication are more easily facilitated and valued in private schools. Perhaps since many private schools are smaller and have fewer formal rules and regulations, parents believe they will have more opportunities for involvement and communication. This finding is consistent with the literature that suggests that parent involvement is valued by active choosers and that parents are more involved in private schools (especially Catholic schools). In this case parents may be indicating that they think parental involvement will be greater in private schools than in magnet schools.

Lastly, we highlight the finding that informal networks are important for school choice in the private sector as well. This finding is consistent with other research on parent choice that suggests that parents use informal social networks as a key source of information

(Smrekar & Goldring, 1996). The research here once again confirms the importance of social capital as a key mechanism in brokering information about choice options, in this case, private school options. Social capital refers to the ability to gain access to resources by virtue of the connections between individuals or membership in social networks and other social structures (Coleman, 1988). The more parents have access to social capital through informal networks, the more likely they are to consider private schools. Not surprisingly, the formal information channels used by schools are not a factor in the public-private choice process.

As noted, we believe more and more educational choices will become available to parents because of greater supply, and barriers to various choice options will be reduced because of changes in the financial arrangements of schooling and broader access to information and transportation; we predict education will resemble more of one common marketplace. This 'new', expanded marketplace will include a healthy mix of private and public choice schools. This paper begins to address those factors that may influence families as they consider choices between public and private schools in the same market.

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Table 1. Variable Descriptions & Descriptive Statistics

	<u>Mean for Parents Who Did Not Consider Private Schools</u>	<u>Mean for Parents Who Considered Private Schools</u>
Dependent Variable:		
<i>Preference in School Choice</i>		
"Did you ever consider sending your child to a private school?"	—	—
Coded as: 0 = No		
1 = Yes		
Background Variables:		
<i>Family Income</i>		
"What was your approximate total household income, from all sources, before taxes in 2001?"	2.48	2.80
Recoded as: 1 = \$29,999 or less		
2 = \$30,000 - \$59,999		
3 = \$60,000 - \$79,999		
4 = \$80,000 or more		
<i>Parent's Highest Level of Education</i>		
"What is the highest level of education you (or your spouse or partner) have received or the highest degree you have received?"	2.46	2.8
Recoded as: 1 = High School Diploma or Less		
2 = Vocational/Proprietary School		
3 = Bachelor's Degree		
4 = Post Graduate Education		
<i>Child's Race</i>		
"What race best describes your child?"	0.46	0.45
Recoded as: 0 = White (reference group)		
1 = Black		
Parent Satisfaction:		
<i>Satisfaction with Previous School</i>		
"How would you characterize the overall quality of <Child's previous school>?"	3.02	3.07
Coded as: 1 = Poor		
2 = Fair		
3 = Good		
4 = Excellent		

Table 1. Variable Descriptions & Descriptive Statistics (continued)

	<u>Mean for Parents Who Did Not Consider Private Schools</u>	<u>Mean for Parents Who Considered Private Schools</u>
Parent Involvement:		
<p><i>Parent Assistance at Home (an average of 5 items; " = .85)</i> "How often do you or other family members do the following in a normal week: (1) Help <Child> study for test or quizzes; (2) Work with <Child> on homework assignments; (3) Look over or check <Child's> homework; (4) Help <Child> get or prepare materials for school projects; and (5) Help <Child> organize work." Coded as: 1 = Never 2 = 1-2 times per week 3 = 3-4 times per week 4 = 5 or more times per week</p>	2.38	2.49
<p><i>Parent Participation at School (an average of 5 items; " = .72)</i> "Could you tell me how often you or other family members do the Coded as: 1 = Rarely 2 = Sometimes 3 = Frequently</p>	2.20	2.30
<p><i>Parent Communication with Child about School (an average of 2 items; "</i> "How often do you or other family members do the following in a normal Coded as: 1 = Never 2 = 1-2 times per week 3 = 3-4 times per week 4 = 5 or more times per week</p>	3.44	3.56
<p><i>Parent-School Collaboration (an average of 8 items; " = .83)</i> Parents were asked to rate the degree to which they agree with the following Coded as: 1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Agree 4 = Strongly Agree</p>	2.89	2.86
<p><i>Parent Self Efficacy (an average of 5 items; " = .63)</i> Parents were asked to rate the degree to which they agree with the Coded as: 1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Agree 4 = Strongly Agree</p>	3.07	3.16

Table 1. Variable Descriptions & Descriptive Statistics (continued)

	<u>Mean for Parents Who Did Not Consider Private Schools</u>	<u>Mean for Parents Who Considered Private Schools</u>
Priorities in School Choice:		
<i>Academic Priorities (an average of 3 items; " = .68)</i>	2.66	2.72
"When you thought of choosing a magnet school for <Child> last Coded as: 1 = Low Priority 2 = Medium Priority 3 = High Priority		
<i>Convenience Priorities (an average of 4 items; " = .62)</i>	1.93	1.86
"When you thought of choosing a magnet school for <Child> last Coded as: 1 = Low Priority 2 = Medium Priority 3 = High Priority		
<i>School Characteristics Priorities (an average of 3 items; " = .64)</i>	1.98	1.95
"When you thought of choosing a magnet school for <Child> last Coded as: 1 = Low Priority 2 = Medium Priority 3 = High Priority		
<i>Safety Priorities (an average of 2 items; " = .64)</i>	2.60	2.60
"When you thought of choosing a magnet school for <Child> last Coded as: 1 = Low Priority 2 = Medium Priority 3 = High Priority		
Social Networks:		
<i>Interpersonal Networks (sum of 8 items; centered on the grand mean on</i>	-0.0488	0.0213
"How did you learn about the school choice options in Nashville? (1) Coded as: 0 = Respondent did not mention 1 = Respondent mentioned		
<i>Formal Networks (sum of 16 items; centered on the grand mean on.83)</i>	0.0327	0.0003
"How did you learn about the school choice options in Nashville?" Coded as: 0 = Respondent did not mention 1 = Respondent mentioned		

Table 2. Independent Sample T-Tests Identifying Mean Differences between Parents who Considered and Did Not Consider Private Schools

	Mean for Parents who Considered Private Schools	Mean for Parents who Did Not Consider Private Schools	Mean Difference	P-Values
Background Variables:				
Family Income	2.80	2.48	0.32	***
Parents' Highest Level of Education	2.80	2.46	0.34	***
Child's Race is White (ref)	0.55	0.54	0.01	
Child's Race is Black	0.45	0.46	-0.01	
Parent Satisfaction:				
Satisfaction with Previous School	3.07	3.02	0.05	
Parent Involvement:				
Parent Assistance at Home	2.49	2.38	0.11	†
Parent Participation at School	2.30	2.20	0.10	**
Parent Communication with Child about School	3.56	3.44	0.12	**
Parent-School Collaboration	2.86	2.89	-0.03	
Parent Self Efficacy	3.16	3.07	0.09	***
Priorities in School Choice:				
Academic Priorities	2.72	2.66	0.06	*
Convenience Priorities	1.86	1.93	-0.07	†
School Characteristics Priorities	1.95	1.98	-0.03	
Safety Priorities	2.60	2.60	0.00	
Social Networks:				
Interpersonal Networks (uncentered)	0.49	0.42	0.07	†
Formal Networks (uncentered)	0.82	0.85	-0.03	

*** = $p < .001$; ** = $p < .01$; * = $p < .05$; † = $p < .10$

Table 3. Logistic Regression Models Predicting the Likelihood of Parents Choosing a Private School vs. a Public School

	<u>Model 1</u>		<u>Model 2</u>		<u>Model 3</u>		<u>Model 4</u>		<u>Model 5</u>		<u>Model 6</u>	
	Log Odds	SE	Log Odds	SE	Log Odds	SE	Log Odds	SE	Log Odds	SE	Log Odds	SE
Constant	-0.434 †	(.24)	-0.600 †	(.36)	-2.094 *	(.84)	-0.922	(.68)	-0.458 †	(.24)	-3.314 **	(1.13)
Background Variables:												
Family Income	0.396 ***	(.40)	0.414 ***	(.08)	0.353 ***	(.08)	0.379 ***	(.08)	0.406 ***	(.08)	0.365 ***	(.09)
Income Imputation Flag	-0.774 ***	-(.77)	-0.717 ***	(.19)	-0.630 ***	(.19)	-0.716 ***	(.18)	-0.794 ***	(.18)	-0.541 **	(.20)
Child's Race is White (ref)												
Child's Race is Black	0.225	(.23)	0.221	(.17)	0.128	(.17)	0.255	(.17)	0.247	(.16)	0.146	(.19)
Parent Satisfaction:												
Satisfaction with Previous School	---		0.024	(.09)	---		---		---		-0.008	(.09)
Parent Involvement:												
Parent Assistance at Home	---		---		0.015	(.12)	---		---		0.036	(.13)
Parent Participation at School	---		---		0.204	(.19)	---		---		0.326 †	(.20)
Parent Communication with Child about School	---		---		0.206	(.14)	---		---		0.450 **	(.16)
Parent-School Collaboration	---		---		-0.386 *	(.19)	---		---		-0.423 *	(.21)
Parent Self Efficacy	---		---		0.535 *	(.23)	---		---		0.452 †	(.24)
Priorities in School Choice:												
Academic Priorities	---		---		---		0.265	(.23)	---		0.202	(.25)
Convenience Priorities	---		---		---		-0.098	(.16)	---		0.007	(.18)
School Characteristics Priorities	---		---		---		-0.068	(.17)	---		-0.159	(.18)
Safety Priorities	---		---		---		0.041	(.15)	---		0.033	(.16)
Social Networks:												
Interpersonal Networks	---		---		---		---		0.234 †	(.14)	0.306 *	(.15)
Formal Networks	---		---		---		---		-0.024	(.11)	0.063	(.12)
<hr/>												
N	754		754		754		754		754		754	
Chi-square	34.935 ***		32.064 ***		48.906 ***		37.051 ***		38.488 ***		60.706 ***	
df	3		4		8		7		5		15	
- 2 Log Likelihood	959.224		882.100		945.254		957.109		955.672		853.457	

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; †p<.10