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Julie Spencer-Robinson
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Active Choice or Default Decision?
When Families Who Reside in a Competitive School Choice Environment Enroll Children in Their District Schools

A Dissertation Presented

by

JULIE SPENCER-ROBINSON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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College of Education
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I felt like I won the jackpot when Katie McDermott agreed to be my advisor, and that sense never diminished over the eleven years I have known her. It has been one of the greatest joys of my life to have had the opportunity to learn from her and be mentored by her both academically and professionally. Katie is smart and generous and kind. She is also a consummate educator, setting high standards and providing the necessary supports to achieve them. It was Katie who suggested I ask two fabulous colleagues of hers to be on my committee, Jennifer Randall and Betsy McEneaney. Their feedback throughout the process was so helpful, and our interactions left me feeling like a true scholar.

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ABSTRACT

ACTIVE CHOICE OR DEFAULT DECISION?
WHEN FAMILIES WHO RESIDE IN A
COMPETITIVE SCHOOL CHOICE ENVIRONMENT
ENROLL CHILDREN IN THEIR DISTRICT SCHOOLS

MAY 2022

JULIE C. SPENCER-ROBINSON, B.A.,
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

M.A., COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Ed.S., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Kathryn A. McDermott

The expansion of public school choice was an important component of the
sweeping educational reforms enacted in the United States at both the state and federal
levels during the 1990s. At that time, it primarily took the form of charter schools and
inter-district open enrollment programs. Scholars have thoroughly studied the multitude
of effects on students who exit their geographically-assigned schools and on those who
are left behind. However, there has been little investigation of the school enrollment
decision making processes of families who live in competitive educational environments
and send their children to the district schools. Such scholarship is necessary in order to
have a complete understanding of the impact that school choice policies have on
educational achievement and equity of opportunity. This mixed methods study helps fill
that research gap. It took place in a small district in western Massachusetts that was both
a top sender and a top receiver of students. Findings show that the local public schools
were an important factor in participants’ decisions to live in the district, almost all of the
parents were aware that they had educational options at the time of their children’s school enrollment, and the majority of parents explored them. Furthermore, participants gave consideration to academic and social-emotional characteristics of schools under consideration during their decision making processes. Families who reside in competitive educational environments and send their children to the district schools should therefore be considered as actively exercising school choice. This has implications for researchers and lawmakers who should include this population when they create, implement, and assess school choice policies. It is also important for district leaders to recognize that they are part of the local educational marketplace and should respond competitively. Further research is needed to understand the extent to which parents of color and parents with limited household incomes who reside in places with similar conditions are intentionally choosing their district schools.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>iv</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of tables</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of figures</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions and Purpose of Study</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Site and Design</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissertation Organization</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Review of the Literature</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Choice: Theory and Policy</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Roots of School Choice</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Forms of Public School Choice</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public School Choice Policy Assumptions</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Choice and Equity of Opportunity</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence on Student Sorting: Inter-district</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public School Choice</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence on Student Sorting: Charter Schools</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Choice and District School Improvement</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence on School Improvement: Inter-district</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public School Choice</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence on School Improvement: Charter Schools</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors That Influence Parents’ School Choices</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Parents Want</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where Parents Get Their Information and How They Make Their Decisions</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Political Economy of School Choice</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Segregation and Integration in the Suburbs</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice and Property Values</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence on Parent Empowerment</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale for Study Site</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts on Leading Edge of School Choice Reform</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northampton Located in Competitive and Innovative Educational Environment</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northampton Students Have Accessed Expanded School Choices</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northampton School Committee Recognized Costs and Benefits of School Choice</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded School Choice Has Impacted Northampton in Several Ways</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection and Analysis</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Data Collection</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Data Analysis</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Data Collection</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Data Analysis</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration of the Quantitative and Qualitative Results</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. FINDINGS</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Data Findings</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence Selection and Access to District Schools</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Characteristics That Appealed to In-district Parents</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Awareness and Consideration of Educational Options</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of Information Used by Parents During</td>
<td>..........................................................</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
School Enrollment Decision Process .........................................................70
Barriers to Exit from the District Schools .............................................71

Qualitative Findings ............................................................................71

Residence Selection and Access to District Schools ...............................71
Ideological Support for District Schools ................................................72
School Characteristics That Appealed to In-district Parents .....................75

Very Common Reasons ........................................................................76
Locality/Neighborhood .........................................................................76
Racial and Ethnic Diversity ................................................................77
Community ............................................................................................80

Somewhat Common Reasons ..............................................................81
Special Education Services ................................................................81
Other Somewhat Common Reasons .....................................................83

Less Common Reasons .........................................................................84
Parents’ Awareness and Consideration of Educational Options ...............85
Sources of Information Used by Parents During School Enrollment Decision Process ........................................87
Barriers to Exit from the District Schools ............................................89
Buyer’s Remorse ..................................................................................92

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings .............................94
Limitations .............................................................................................96
Conclusion .............................................................................................98

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS .......................................................101

Introduction ..........................................................................................101
Discussion and Implications for Policy and Practice ..............................103

Residence Selection and Access to District Schools ................................104
District Enrollment As Active Choice Not Default Decision ..................105
Sources of Information Used by Parents During School Enrollment Decision Process ........................................106
Barriers to Exit from the District Schools ............................................107

Conclusion .............................................................................................107

APPENDICES .........................................................................................109
REFERENCES ........................................................................................123
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 School Attending Children 2017-2018</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Northampton Students’ Changing Preferences for Private Schools 1992-2018</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Area Charter Schools Attended by Northampton Students 2017-2018</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Crosstabulation of Participants’ Education by Income</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Crosstabulation of Participants’ Race by Income</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Crosstabulation of Participants’ Race by Education</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 First School Location of Oldest Child Enrolled in the Northampton Public Schools</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8 Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Important School Characteristics and Frequency of Participant Mention</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Race and Ethnicity of Northampton Residents, Students, and Survey Participants</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Number of Information Sources Used by Parents Thinking About School Enrollment</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Where Did They Go? Thirty Years of Educational Choice in Northampton MA</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Positive Opinion of School Characteristics as Factors in Parents’ Enrollment Decisions</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Parents’ Positive and Negative Opinions About Fourteen School Characteristics</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Important to District Enrollment Decision: Quantitative Participants (n=304)</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Important to District Enrollment Decision: Qualitative Participants (n=18)</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

School choice is an issue long considered by educational theorists, policy makers, and commentators in the United States, who have examined the different forms that choice takes, the extent to which choice is and should be available to families, and its benefits and costs. In the mid-twentieth century, conservatives sought to use school choice as a market-driven mechanism for efficiently delivering public education. Other conservatives advocated choice as a means by which White families could exit integrated schools. Liberals recognized the pedagogical value of school choice for meeting the diverse learning interests of children and families. Some liberals used choice as part of racial desegregation remedies. The current iteration of school choice policy and practice grew out of the Reagan-era conceptualization of government as hindering rather than advancing societal progress, and the work of two influential political scientists who contended that increased parental satisfaction and higher student achievement would result if public schools were freed from democratic control.

Today, the range and number of public school choice opportunities available to American students have greatly expanded. Charter schools represented a new approach to public school choice in the late twentieth century and drew support from across the political spectrum. Inter-district choice policies were developed by state legislators during the same time period as new charter school laws with similarly broad political support. The participation of families in both types of school choice has been growing steadily. Researchers have thoroughly examined the educational achievement and equity impacts of school choice policies on students who leave the districts where they live, and
on the students and schools that are left by those who exit. However, there has been little investigation of the motivations of families who enroll their children in the district public schools where they reside. This group currently comprises two-thirds of school-age children in the United States, and it is important to understand their school enrollment decision making processes in the context of expanded public school choice opportunities.

Do parents consider other educational options and ultimately select the district schools? If so, for what reasons? Do some families intentionally choose housing in their preferred district so that their children can attend the schools? When it is time to enroll their children, to what extent are district families aware of the other educational choices that are available to them? Do race, socioeconomic background, and parent education level play a part in the degree of awareness? Do parents face obstacles to leaving the district? Are district schools viewed differently among local families based on their racial, socioeconomic, or educational backgrounds?

**Research Questions and Purpose of Study**

The study was designed to answer these questions:

1. To what extent did families intentionally choose to live in Northampton so that their children could attend the district schools? Are there differences in this group related to parents’ race, socioeconomic background, or education level?

2. At the time of student enrollment, what school characteristics appealed to in-district parents? Were parents aware of other educational options for their children? To what extent did they consider other options, and for what reasons? Was there variation in the consideration of schooling
options by families according to their racial, socioeconomic, or educational backgrounds? Which sources of information did they draw on to explore the options under consideration?

3. To what extent do parents of Northampton public school students report that they would have enrolled their children elsewhere had they been able to? What barriers did they face? Would they still choose to exit the district schools if they could? Why or why not?

4. What results emerge from connecting the qualitative data gathered from interviews with in-district parents about their school enrollment decisions with the quantitative data measured using a survey?

The study had several aspects to it. One research area was determining the extent to which parents were exercising school choice when they decided where to live. It is commonly accepted that many people give consideration to the public schools where their preferred home is located as part of the purchase or rental process, and also that some parents identify the school or district where they want to enroll their children and then intentionally select a residence within the desired assignment zone. The study revealed that the estimated size of this group was significant, meaning it might be desirable for researchers and policymakers to explicitly include these parents when considering the benefits and costs of school choice. Furthermore, bringing some transparency to in-district parents’ school enrollment decision making processes could create an opportunity for those who are able to exercise the privilege of school choice through residence selection to contemplate its consequences for educational, social, and community equity.
A second area of investigation for the study was to learn the extent to which parents of school-age children who lived in a competitive educational environment realized there were numerous educational alternatives that existed beyond their assigned public schools, and to what degree awareness of the local choices varied by group. The study site was located in a competitive educational marketplace, and participants were asked about their sources of information regarding school enrollment. Almost all of the quantitative participants and all of the qualitative participants knew about the educational options available to them. However, both data sets were skewed toward wealthy, well-educated, White parents. More research must be done to learn about the degree of school choice awareness among parents who belong to other demographic groups. There was wide variability in the types and number of information sources used by the participants, suggesting an opportunity for policymakers and district leaders to disseminate clear and useful explanatory materials about educational options that all families could rely on.

The third aspect of the school enrollment decision making process explored by the study was whether or not families considered other educational options besides the district schools, the positive qualities that attracted them to the district schools, and any negative qualities of the district schools that may have led them to consider schooling alternatives outside the district. One of the policy assumptions undergirding the expansion of school choice opportunities is that parents will seek schools that offer the best available educational experiences for their children. This study identified the factors that did and did not drive parents’ school enrollment decisions which ultimately supported this assumption.
Also bolstered by the findings is an argument in favor of school choice that it creates intentional communities of students, families, and educators. The parents who lived in this competitive educational marketplace were found to be purposefully choosing their district schools, and it will benefit district leaders to learn more about the qualities that were found attractive. This information will allow leaders to continuously align district policies, pedagogy, and programs with the priorities and interests of district families. Knowing more about the motives of families who intentionally chose in-district schools after considering their alternatives can help district leaders effectively position their schools in a competitive educational marketplace by broadcasting the appeal articulated by these parents. It would be essential, as well, to recognize and effectively address the elements of the district’s offerings that were identified as undesirable or deficient. Study findings will also help districts respond strategically to losses of students and funding through public school choice.

Finally, it was important to know if families who enrolled their children in the public schools would have preferred to send them to another public school, to a private school, or to homeschool their child, but faced barriers to doing so. A second policy assumption that underlies expanded public school choice is that it offers equity of opportunity by allowing students to exit underperforming schools. Study participants identified several obstacles that prevented them from leaving the district: insufficient financial resources for private school; inability to homeschool; no open seats in area charter schools; and lack of transportation. To further expand access to educational choices, policymakers could consider increasing publicity about existing private school financing options and developing a tax-funded transportation network for students.
traveling to and from area schools. District leaders could negotiate with local private schools to offer tuition vouchers to under-resourced families and offer site-based instructional support to parents interested in homeschooling their children.

Whether families actively chose the public schools, made a default decision based on their residence, or would have preferred not to enroll their children in them at all, any misalignment between the educational desires of families and the district’s programming in the schools would be felt most by under-resourced families who lacked the financial means to supplement the public education or to move to another district, and who lacked the political power to influence the public system (Hirschman, 1970). Identifying mismatches could be the catalyst for further study of this possible area of inequity.

**Study Site and Design**

The study site was in Massachusetts, a state that led the nation in crafting legislation that radically reformed the state’s public education system in the early 1990s and included the establishment of charter schools and the expansion of inter-district public school choice. Northampton is a small city in western Massachusetts at the center of what had become a competitive local educational marketplace. Several charter schools and numerous private schools were located in the area, and there was a dynamic transfer of students to and from neighboring traditional public school districts. Such characteristics made Northampton an ideal site for an examination of the educational decision making processes used by resident families who enrolled their students in the city’s public schools.

The study used both quantitative and qualitative methods and had an explanatory sequential design. Parents who lived in Northampton and sent their children to their
geographically assigned public schools were surveyed about their school enrollment decision making considerations. The survey results were analyzed to detect if there were response patterns related to the participants’ race, education, or socioeconomic backgrounds, and to identify any common themes in parents’ decision making processes.

After that, a small, demographically representative subset of this population was interviewed for an in-depth understanding of the selected parents’ thought processes. These were semi-structured interviews lasting an average of fifty minutes. Qualitative data analysis was conducted throughout this stage using reflexive notes taken after each interview, memos written periodically throughout the coding process, and such tools as field notes, reflective memos, a coding template, and several frequency matrices. The qualitative results helped explain the quantitative results, and the two data sets were integrated in the final analysis.

**Dissertation Organization**

This dissertation will discuss the ideological roots and policy context of contemporary public school choice in the United States. It will examine the literature on how expanded choice impacts district schools in three areas: increased equity of opportunity, student sorting on the basis of race and class, and performance improvement. Research will also be reviewed concerning the factors that influence parents’ school choices and the political economy of school choice.

The study will then be detailed. A thorough description of the Northampton, Massachusetts school district and how it was impacted by school choice will be provided. This will be followed by an explanation of the researcher’s quantitative data and qualitative data collection methods. Next will be a presentation of the findings from the
study and its limitations. Finally, recommendations for policy, practice, and further research will be put forward.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Public school choice opportunities, and parents’ access to them, have grown tremendously since the early 1990s, when a wave of education reform legislation was enacted at the state and federal levels in response to a 1983 report issued by President Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education. Entitled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform*, it grabbed the public’s attention with its pronouncement that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (Gardner, 1983, p. 5). The new legislation typically included a combination of increased funding for public schools, statewide learning standards, student and teacher performance accountability measures, and expanded public school choice opportunities. It is the latter component that will be the focus of this literature review.

The first part of the literature review will be an exploration of the history and assumptions of school choice policy. Because the contemporary iteration of school choice policies enjoyed broad political support, it is relevant to trace the policies’ ideological roots. The assumptions that policymakers made when they crafted the most recent set of laws expanding access to public school options were that equity of educational opportunity would increase and school performance would improve. Meanwhile, many policy analysts were concerned that the new laws would exacerbate the racial and socioeconomic sorting of students. The literature in these three areas will be investigated, with a particular focus on how district schools have been impacted.
The second part of the literature review will examine the research on school choice. Because the proposed study will explore the decision making processes of in-district families, it is important to know what has already been learned about how parents choose schools for their children. Therefore, research will be reviewed that analyzes what drives parents’ school searches, where they get their information from, and how race factors into the school choice process. Parents’ local educational options were shaped by state legislators and closely tied to property ownership, so the literature relating to these aspects will be considered. And finally, because it has implications for the effective functioning of a democratic society, the evidence on choice and parent empowerment will be examined.

School Choice: Theory and Policy

Ideological Roots of School Choice

School choice as a tool for education reform has its historical roots in both conservative and liberal ideologies. In 1955, economist Milton Friedman argued that public schools were monopolies that limited the potential for citizens to exert influence through the exit option, and were protected by the legitimacy and authority they gained by association with democratic processes and commitment to the common good (Henig, 1994). Friedman thought that every family should get vouchers for their school-age children and be able to redeem them at the school of their choice. He envisioned competition for those vouchers that would result in a variety of educational options for consumers, which would be more efficiently delivered than in the public school system (Friedman, 1955). It is important to note that at the time, choice was being used in the South to sidestep the pressure to racially integrate public schools (Henig, 1994), although
in later years school choice in the form of magnet schools was a strategy used by education reformers to advance racial integration.

Legal scholars John Coons and Stephen Sugarman, writing in 1978, asserted that there was no national agreement about the values that should inform children’s education, and no consensus among educators about the best way to deliver instruction. Therefore, a uniform public education that endorsed majoritarian social and political norms did not serve the interests of most children, who differed widely in their interests and talents, abilities and potential. Coons and Sugarman believed that the family was the best agent for finding the most appropriate fit between child and educational experience, and that a workable model of educational choice would authentically support the cultural and ideological diversity of this nation (Coons & Sugarman, 1978). They noted a double standard in American education: “Among those who can afford private school, society leaves the goals and means of education to the family; for the rest of society, the informing principles are politically determined and implemented through public assignment to a particular public school” (Coons & Sugarman, 1978, p. 2). The poor were hurt most by the denial of educational choice because they lacked the resources at home to redress educational shortcomings, they couldn’t escape the schools by moving to another district, and they lacked political power to influence the public school system (Coons & Sugarman, 1978). As a remedy, Coons and Sugarman proposed that state-funded vouchers be provided to families in under-resourced districts in order to raise educational spending to the level of better-funded districts while also extending the privilege of choice to disadvantaged families (Miller, 1999).
The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 marked the beginning of a new era in American politics and policy, in which government was seen not as the solution to the nation’s problems, but as the problem itself. When *A Nation at Risk* was published, many educators responded to its call for reform and succeeded in improving some of the nation’s public schools (Honig, 1990). There were others, however, who advocated the complete restructuring of public education in America. The work of two policy analysts in particular, John Chubb and Terry Moe, provided “the campaign for school choice with powerful and contemporary arguments” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 120).

Like Friedman before them, Chubb and Moe identified the problem as government bureaucracies that handcuffed capable school leaders and teachers. They recommended that schools be freed from democratic control and regulated by markets instead, just like private schools were. School leaders would be autonomous and therefore more responsive to the needs of their educational community. Decisions about their children’s education would be put into the hands of parents, who were in the best position to make that choice. This structure would ensure the efficient delivery of education, and more importantly, lead to higher student achievement. The authors proposed redefining what constitutes a public school and letting any educational group that applied to the state and qualified be chartered as a public school (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

The National Governors’ Association echoed the call for the introduction of market competition in public education, contending in their 1991 report that “[i]f we ... implement choice among public schools, we unlock the values of competition in the educational marketplace. Schools that compete for students ... will by virtue of their environment make those changes that allow them to succeed” (“Time for Results,” 1991).
Chubb and Moe’s ideas had a significant impact on the school choice debate in part because of the political climate at the time, which favored privatization of government services. Moreover, they linked their proposal to a broad theory of politics and democracy, grounded it in their own and others’ empirical research, and described a model for choice in specific detail (Henig, 1994). Their ideas appealed to people who subscribed to free market economics, wanted less government intrusion in their lives, and were interested in self-segregation. Although Chubb and Moe envisioned a revenue structure of tax-funded scholarships that would flow to the schools chosen by the students, school choice policies did not move in that direction.

**Contemporary Forms of Public School Choice**

Instead, public school choice opportunities expanded significantly and took a variety of forms, including charter schools, inter-district choice, magnet schools, voucher programs, and privately managed schools. During the 1990s surge of legislative activity related to education reform, both charter schools and inter-district choice programs found wide support from policymakers across the political spectrum.

Charter schools are created when a group or organization receives a charter from the state government, agrees to meet certain minimum requirements and academic targets, and receives public funding for its students. The management group can be non-profit or for-profit, a national organization or a local community group (Ravitch, 2010). The charter school model was put forth by two different educators at about the same time: Ray Budde and Albert Shanker.

Budde imagined a program whereby teams of teachers would apply to their school districts for charters to run innovative programs that addressed an identified need or
implemented cutting edge pedagogy (Budde, 1989). Shanker thought that an antiquated bureaucratic structure in schools resulted in high school graduates ill-prepared to enter the workforce, and he wanted to increase the autonomy and responsiveness of educators who could be given charters for implementing alternative educational programs (Shanker, 1988).

The charter school idea appealed to school choice advocates because charters would not be seen as a threat to public education. However, as the charter movement spread throughout the nation, Shanker became strongly opposed to its takeover by corporations and entrepreneurs. He “steadfastly insisted that the biggest problem in American education was the absence of a clear national consensus about the mission of the schools” (Ravitch, p. 125).

At the time that state legislatures across the country were authorizing charter schools, they were also enacting inter-district open enrollment laws. Some of these open enrollment laws required the participation of every district in the state, while with others, district participation was voluntary. The first mandatory statewide inter-district program was implemented in Minnesota in 1991, and by 2011, only eight states were without some form of compulsory inter-district open enrollment policy. Most inter-district choice programs have three features: a process by which students can attend a public school in a district other than the one in which they reside; conditions under which school districts can refuse to accept inter-district transfers; and per pupil state funding disbursement to the receiving district rather than the district of residence. The amount transferred to the receiving district is typically greater than the marginal cost of educating an additional student (Lavery and Carlson, 2014).
Public School Choice Policy Assumptions

Public school choice rests on two underlying policy assumptions. The first is that expanding access to educational options will promote equity of opportunity by allowing any student the freedom to transfer to a better performing public school, to a charter school, or to a school that offered a better curricular or pedagogical fit to the student. Many critics expressed concern that broadening public school choice would exacerbate student sorting on the basis of race, socioeconomic background, and student ability. The second policy assumption is that exposing district schools to the pressure of competitive market forces will bring about increased responsiveness to students and parents which will ultimately result in meaningful school improvements.

It is important for researchers and policymakers to have a better understanding of how parents decide to send their children to their geographically assigned schools within the context of these policy assumptions and associated concerns. In order to fully know if choice increases equity of educational opportunity, worsens segregation and other kinds of social sorting, and improves schools, then a complete understanding is required of what drives parents’ school enrollment decisions. If many families seek out the academically strongest or most distinctive schools, then there’s reason to believe that schools will compete with each other on these dimensions, and choice could therefore push schools to become more effective or distinctive. If, on the other hand, families tend to go where they think other people like them will be, choice will act as an instrument for social sorting, and schools may rely more on marketing messages about who their students are than on their actual academic programs. Parents’ thought processes could also influence which schools compete with one another. Administrators who are aware of
the choice set that their schools belong to might limit their marketing and program
development only to qualities that set them apart from the other schools in their set.

Expanded public school choice raises related questions about the enrollment
practices of in-district families. In competitive educational marketplaces, do district
schools become the default option for parents who do not or cannot send their children
anywhere else? Does choice siphon off parents who would be likeliest to advocate for
high quality schools, leading to innovation and improvement elsewhere but complacency
in the district schools? Do parents choose homes in districts made up of families from
similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, thus extending the concern about student
sorting to choice through residential selection? Learning more about the enrollment
decisions of in-district families will provide a better understanding of why public school
choice has the effects that it does, and what kinds of interventions might result in
preferred effects.

The following sections will explore what researchers have discovered about the
effects of choice on district schools in terms of expanded access to equity of opportunity,
student sorting, and school improvement. It will be followed by a review of the studies
that document the qualities choosing parents say they want in their children’s schools,
what their actions reveal about their preferences, their sources for information about
schools, and the selection processes they use. Next will be an in-depth examination of
how the race of both students and parents has been a significant factor in the school
choice arena. The literature review will conclude with consideration of suburban
influence on school choice policies, the relationship between choice and property values,
and how choice builds the social capital of parents.
School Choice and Equity of Opportunity

District schools located in competitive educational environments will certainly be impacted by the extent to which expanded public school choice allows students who attend underperforming schools to exit them for more effective ones. If district schools perform well, both in-district and out-of-district families will want to enroll their children. If they are not effective, resident families will seek to leave them. District schools will also be affected by the degree to which well-resourced White parents disproportionately access increased choice and exit racially and socioeconomically diverse schools to self-segregate. If this is the case, student sorting will intensify on the basis of race and class and ability, and stratification will increase among district schools. These effects would then influence other parents’ enrollment decisions.

Evidence on Student Sorting: Inter-district Public School Choice. A study of inter-district choice in the Denver metropolitan region showed that higher income students were much more likely to participate in the program and to transfer to higher-income districts. White students used inter-district choice to transfer from racially diverse districts to ones with a higher proportion of Whites, while in some cases students of color and lower-income students used the program to leave districts with more White and wealthy students to enroll in districts with a greater proportion of students who shared their demographic characteristics (Holme and Johns, 2009). In Durham, North Carolina, advantaged students with college educated parents were most likely to opt out of their assigned schools, especially those with concentrations of disadvantaged students, to attend more effective schools (Bifulco et al., 2009).

Researchers who reviewed five years of open enrollment data for the state of
Colorado learned that Black students had the highest program participation rates in every year and Hispanic students had the lowest. Students who lived in districts with the highest percentages of students who received free- and reduced-price lunch and the lowest percentages of White students were the most likely to use inter-district choice. Students with disabilities, English language learners, and those eligible for free lunch were the least likely to open enroll. (Carlson et al., 2018). Open enrollment in Los Angeles County provided Latino students who left their neighborhood schools access to educational settings that were higher quality and better integrated. At the same time, White students continued to attend highly segregated, White majority schools (Ledwith, 2009).

In Detroit’s well-established school choice program, students were viewed as helping or hindering a school’s market position, with the result that districts opened or closed their borders to protect or enhance their market position, limiting options for those who were disadvantaged. Even when districts faced a decline in the school-age population and a potential loss in state funding, they did not compete to attract students from underperforming districts. Instead, it appeared that districts sought to maintain their status within a local hierarchy by appealing to socioeconomically advantaged and White students (Lubienski, 2005a).

**Evidence on Student Sorting: Charter Schools.** There is evidence that public school competition opens up educational options for many students in large cities, but some charter schools may work to shape their applicant pool. A study of Detroit, Washington, D.C., and post-Katrina New Orleans found that charter schools located in rings around the most disadvantaged areas to limit the access of families who lived there.
They also required certain resource-intensive practices of both parents and students (Lubienski et al., 2009). In New York City, however, a study of charter school location demonstrated a responsiveness to students’ poor academic performance and possibly to family poverty, although not to parental satisfaction or density of school-age children (Saultz et al., 2015).

Charter schools in Washington, D.C. were found not to be creaming the best students from district schools, as some critics had feared might happen, but instead cropping off the most disadvantaged students who were more costly to educate. Study authors did make a distinction between nonmarket-oriented charter schools, some of which educated a proportion of needy students equal to or greater than traditional public schools, and market-oriented charter schools, which underserved students with special needs, those who received free and reduced lunch, and students for whom English was not a first language (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002).

Finally, in almost every state and large city in the U.S., charter schools are more racially isolated than district schools, with White students overrepresented in some places and students of color in others (Frankenberg et al., 2011). One study of Arizona charter schools found that the strongest tendency was the self-isolation of Blacks and Native Americans (Garcia, 2008). Another study in North Carolina revealed that as the level of integration in district school increased, so did the percent of White students in local charter schools (Renzulli and Evans, 2005).

**School Choice and District School Improvement**

Advocates for the expansion of public school choice believe that when schools and districts have to compete for students and the funding that accompanies them, they
have an incentive to consistently improve their educational effectiveness and their responsiveness to families. If research shows that competition does improve district schools, that means even families who do not actively choose their schools or whose children attend the least desirable schools will still benefit from increased public school choice. If competition doesn’t improve district schools, then attention must be paid to remediating the educational inequalities made worse by school choice.

Assessing the impact of competition on the performance of traditional public schools is challenging because the distribution of school choice options is not random, policies are not implemented as controlled experiments, and students who participate in school choice may be categorically different from non-choosers in terms of their ability, past academic performance, socioeconomic background, and their parents’ motivation (Lavery and Carlson, 2014). Despite the challenges, the issue has been well-investigated from several angles.

**Evidence on School Improvement: Inter-district Public School Choice.** An influential paper published at the turn of the century analyzed public school choice through residence selection to gauge its impact on student performance and district expenditures. The author, an economist, used the Tiebout model to do so, which holds that competition across local jurisdictions places pressure on the provision of local public goods so that governments are able to provide them at an optimal level. While there is a significant body of literature on the extent to which the Tiebout model fits reality, its review is beyond the scope of this project. Findings showed that Tiebout choice among public school districts increased school productivity by simultaneously raising student achievement and lowering school spending. The effect of Tiebout choice had little to do
with its effect on household sorting. That is, metropolitan areas with little Tiebout choice had about the same extent of student sorting by race and income group as areas with much more Tiebout choice among districts (Hoxby, 2000).

Students who participated in Colorado’s mandatory open enrollment program exhibited gradual declines in their academic achievement leading up to the time they transferred schools. Afterward, those who stayed in their new districts recouped their losses and even made small gains, while those who returned to their home districts declined even more (Carlson, et al., 2018).

**Evidence on School Improvement: Charter Schools.** One study using a nationally representative data set revealed that the competitive pressure of proximity to a charter school did not impact the math and reading scores of traditional public school students, and had a limited effect on the organizational practices of those schools (Davis, 2013). In California, charter school competition did not make district principals feel compelled to respond and it did not improve the academic performance of district students (Zimmer and Buddin, 2009). School leaders in New Orleans did report experiencing market pressures, but their responses to such pressures varied, depending in part on their perceptions of competition and their status in the market hierarchy (Jabbar 2015). And in Michigan, where school choice options have greatly expanded in the last two decades, districts have dramatically increased expenditures on school marketing but not on academic improvements or innovations (Lubienski, 2005b).

However, there is evidence that some traditional public school district leaders in metropolitan areas were responding in positive ways to competition by cooperating or collaborating with charter schools (Holley et al., 2013). In Massachusetts, increased
charter school attendance raised per pupil spending in district schools and shifted expenditures from support to instruction. There was also a slight positive effect on district students’ academic achievement (Ridley and Terrier, 2018).

Factors That Influence Parents’ School Choices

What Parents Want

It is important to know what qualities public school parents seek when they are considering the educational options for their children, especially when they live in places where they have access to a variety of choices. If parents are evaluating schools based on their academic characteristics, then schools will compete on those grounds. But if parents want schools that enroll students from families with similar demographic characteristics to their own, this will cause student sorting on the basis of race and class and educational background.

A much-cited study using three types of empirical research found that parents are well-informed about school quality, indicated by the fact that they ranked schools the same way as government experts, and they put academic achievement at the top of their list of priorities. Schools of choice tended to out-perform public schools on a wide range of outcomes and for children from all socioeconomic backgrounds, leading the authors to posit that the act of choosing led to children attending better schools (Bast & Walberg, 2004).

Evidence from Massachusetts in the early stages of expanded choice suggested that the motives for parents in choosing public schools outside their home district were largely academic. These parents sought better scholastic opportunities for their children, excellent teachers, and high expectations of student achievement. Additionally, they
wanted to become more involved in the education of their children (‘School Choice in Massachusetts,’ 1994). In Detroit, convenient school location was consistently identified as parents’ leading preference in an examination of the role played by geography in parental choice making, although family dynamics, the school choice market, and differing needs of students were all factors that came into play during the decision making process. Notably, parents did not all have the same information or beliefs about schools (Bell, 2009b).

A study of the city-wide school choice program in New Orleans revealed a similar variance among parents in their self-reported rationales for choosing their children’s schools. One small group of parents identified the importance of a school’s curriculum and afterschool programs; a somewhat larger group emphasized a school’s academic standing, curriculum, and approach to student discipline; and the largest group of respondents showed no overriding set of preferences in their choice making process, although for a small plurality geographic proximity to their home and access to transportation were of some consequence. Members of the latter group, it should also be noted, had lower levels of income and education than the other, smaller groups (Steele, 2013).

Parents in Cleveland, regardless of educational attainment, income, neighborhood, or race, sought a “package deal” of a home in a good neighborhood with good schools, and they used school choice when that deal was unattainable (Rhodes and Warkentien, 2017). In Charlotte-Mecklenberg, parental preference for academic quality increased with family income and student achievement, and a strong preference meant parents were more inclined to leave their neighborhoods in order to attain it (Hastings et al., 2005).
Parents in Oregon were willing to sacrifice their environmental values, expressed as a commitment to walking and biking, to the belief that getting the right education for their child was worth driving for. They voiced frustration that their public school district didn’t provide transportation for students attending schools by choice (Yang et al., 2012). Nationally, households will trade off distance for other school characteristics to a greater degree in all other school types than in the district schools (Butler et al., 2013).

Where Parents Get Their Information and How They Make Their Decisions

In a competitive educational marketplace, it is critical for parents to have access to information about the existence and qualities of available educational options. Ideally, parents would also be able to evaluate their choices and select the best educational settings for their children. If parents get information from racially or socioeconomically biased sources, it could contribute to stratified student bodies. This might lead school administrators to use marketing strategies that intensify this stratification by appealing to students who look like those enrolled. Administrators, if they are cognizant of the choice set that parents put their schools into, might limit their marketing and program development only to qualities that set them apart from other schools in that group (Jabbar, 2015). Finally, if the sources that parents rely on for guidance through the school choice process are not well-informed, that might compromise the educational experiences of their children.

There was early evidence that people with higher socioeconomic status utilized higher quality education networks that also had a high degree of racial segregation, and the policy incentives for parents to search out more information about schools did not change the nature of education information networks. (Schneider, Teske, & Roch, et al.,
Later research showed that parents used their social and professional networks to obtain information about schools, made assumptions about school culture based on the race and class backgrounds of the student body, and sought schools that would confer the highest possible social status on their children (Holme, 2002).

Parents of different social class backgrounds in one Midwestern city used similar approaches and reasoning in the choice making process, but they didn’t consider schools of similar quality. This was due to limitations of income, information, and transportation. Furthermore, customary enrollment patterns, parents’ social networks, and students’ academic histories restricted the school choices that parents considered for their children and reproduced existing educational inequities. Better-resourced families had richer school information networks, while the high academic expectations of middle class parents for their children made them seek out higher-performing schools (Bell, 2009a).

A study of suburban, socioeconomically advantaged White charter school parents in Denver showed that they relied heavily on their social networks for information about the school choice landscape, but they also independently investigated school quality, curriculum, and instruction to see whether the school was a good fit for their child (Altenhofen et al., 2016). In Milwaukee, both low-income public school parents and parents who used publicly-funded vouchers at private schools were aware they had multiple school options but weren’t sure what they were. Most did not search for schools online, and reported that they received a great deal of information from school-generated sources (Stewart & Wolf, 2009).

Two researchers created a web site to record the activity of parents in Washington, D.C. while they searched for information about actual schools in their
district. These active choosers, also referred to as marginal consumers, used a two-stage process to select schools for their children. First was a pre-decision editing phase to generate a list of contenders, followed by an in-depth comparison of those educational options. The authors concluded that the behavior of marginal consumers, by making the best choices for themselves, provided a positive externality to other consumers, even without communicating information directly to less-informed parents. (Buckley & Schneider, 2003).

A study of charter school web sites in a large metropolitan area revealed that they used different discursive texts to signal messages about the types of students the schools sought, thus shaping family preferences and contributing to inequitable market segregation. The study’s authors determined that the descriptions of the schools’ missions and approaches weren’t neutral, but instead were coded on the basis of race and class and parenting style (Wilson and Carlsen, 2016).

Parents’ Decision Making and Race

Race has been an undeniable factor in parents’ school choice decision making processes since at least the mid-twentieth century, when Milton Friedman’s treatise on the role of government in education was published in 1955. That was also the year the U.S. Supreme Court declared public schools must be desegregated “with all deliberate speed.” In Friedman’s proposal that the government fund schools but not administer them, and allow parents to choose their children’s schools, one of his supporting arguments was that it would offer a third alternative to forced segregation and forced desegregation. White Southerners embraced the idea, and in some places, Southerners closed public school districts and disbursed tuition grants to White students to attend
private academies. When that was found to be unconstitutional, they created voluntary choice programs that served only to reinforce the existing racial segregation in education (Wilson, 2019). School choice was used decades later for the opposite purpose: to retain or foster racial diversity in public schools. Integration efforts took the forms of controlled choice programs, magnet schools, vouchers, and regional inter-district choice programs.

It is critically important to understand the role that race has played in parents’ school enrollment decisions since the most recent and historic expansion of public school choice in the 1990s. There is one complicating factor in doing so, however, that has been identified by many researchers: It is difficult for families to evaluate education as a good (Hess, 2002) and so parents may use race and class as proxies for quality (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008). Although the package of educational reforms passed by state legislatures included teacher and school accountability measures, the results of which would be made public and could be used by parents to evaluate school quality, it took some time for these to be put into place.

Research done during the 1990s and early 2000s supported the concern of critics that expanding school choice would exacerbate segregation. One study revealed that the social norms and ethnic identities of Black parents and students constrained the range of school choices that they saw as credible, although families did not act monolithically in their consideration of schooling options. (Wells, 1996). In another study, parents were not likely to choose more effective schools for their children, but preferred ones that were closer to home and in which their child’s race or ethnicity was better represented in the student body (Glazerman, 1998).
White parents in a large urban district in the northeast used a two-stage process to select their children’s schools, first eliminating Black-majority schools and then choosing from White-majority schools even though they were often less safe, had lower test scores, and higher rates of poverty. Black parents did not eliminate any wholesale category of schools, although they did seek to avoid high-poverty schools (Saporito & Lareau, 1999). White charter school parents chose schools with lower test scores but a higher proportion of Whites, even though they said they were motivated by academics (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008). White, Black, and Hispanic parents all reported that it was not important to them for their children to attend schools with a majority of students who shared their race or ethnicity. However, they proceeded to choose charter schools that had a significantly higher percentage of students of their own race or ethnicity than the schools they exited (Weiher and Tedin, 2002).

Parents’ internet searches for schools demonstrated that race was an important criterion, although they wouldn’t say so on surveys due to social acceptability bias or because many people don’t understand the extent to which unconscious beliefs about race shape their decisions. Whites avoided schools with high percentages of students of color, Blacks preferred schools with high percentages of Blacks, and parents of all races bypassed schools with high percentages of low-income students (Schneider and Buckley, 2002). A researcher who reviewed quantitative assessments of the impact of school choice on educational outcomes determined that parents could discern school quality and did send their children to schools that enhanced their academic achievement, but that race and income were factors in which schools were chosen and in who was exercising choice, thereby exacerbating segregation (Goldhaber, 1999). Findings such as those cited here
led one researcher to conclude that school choice policies wouldn’t give less affluent parents access to the same good schools that privileged parents with resources sought out for their children because the schools coveted by the latter group were without low-income students or students of color (Holme, 2002).

Two decades after the expansion of public school choice, there is evidence that race as a factor in parents’ choice making processes may have become a little more nuanced. In New York City, well-resourced White parents said they valued diverse racial and ethnic schools and were bothered by the segregation resulting from school choice policies, but they faced limited options and felt pressure for their children to succeed. Ultimately, these parents chose to protect their privilege and enrolled their children in racially segregated schools. (Roda and Wells, 2013). Another group of parents in a diverse gentrifying New York City neighborhood formed an advocacy group and successfully convinced privileged parents to enroll their children in the local schools rather than charter schools or gifted and talented programs outside of the neighborhood. These parents recognized their privilege and actively sought to diminish it (Roda, 2018).

In Arizona, parents expressed the understanding that public school choice exacerbated socioeconomic and racial inequities, but they struggled between their responsibilities to public institutions and the pressure they felt making individual choices for their children. For them, school choice was a complicated process infused with competing accountabilities (Potterton, 2020).
The Political Economy of School Choice

Segregation and Integration in the Suburbs

School choice policies, crafted in state legislatures, were subject to the ideologies of politicians and the allegiances they felt to their local constituencies. Suburbs used their considerable leverage to ensure that the new policies permitted suburban districts a great deal of discretion around whether or not to accept urban students into their schools, and if they did, how many they would admit (Henig, 2009). A preference for local control, expressed through public school choice plans that protected the physical and financial independence of suburban public schools (Ryan and Heise, 2002) and accompanied by metropolitan fragmentation, served to exclude poor and minority youth from high quality suburban schools (Wilson, 2014).

Parents became increasingly knowledgeable about the viable public school options in their geographic area, in part due to the public assessments of school quality required by federal law. This heightened awareness fostered inter-district competition and shifted educational policy away from addressing inequities to concerns with student outcomes. Suburban and urban district leaders alike felt pressured by the threat of student exit and the progressively louder voices of advantaged parents (Frankenberg and Kotok, 2013). As parents’ demands for greater control over critical decisions regarding their children’s education escalated, educational policymaking power migrated from governments to families and from regulation to markets (Heise, 2017).

However, educational equity scholars recognized the potential for school choice to address the harm caused by racial segregation (Wells & Frankenberg, 2007), and its effectiveness as a politically palatable tool for encouraging socioeconomic integration,
which in turn raises the achievement of low-income students and students of color (Kahlenberg, 2012). Regional collaborations have had some success in giving low-income students and students of color access to educational settings that were better-integrated by race and socioeconomic status, although dependent on suburban good will (Finnigan et al., 2014). And long-standing inter-district integration programs in eight metropolitan areas consistently yielded significant academic, employment, and social benefits for participants (Finnigan & Holme, 2015).

**Choice and Property Values**

David Labaree, a sociologically-oriented historian of education, contends that public education is increasingly seen as a private good to be used for personal advantage, and valued as a commodity rather than for its actual substance (Labaree, 1997). Since assignment to district schools is determined by the location of family residence, one expression of public education as a private commodity is the connection between residential property values and the quality of the local public schools.

Historically in the U.S., there has been tight coupling between a family’s residence and the nearest public school (Henig, 2009), which has also meant a direct relationship between housing and school segregation. One researcher found that, nationwide, the vast majority of racial segregation in schools was explained by patterns of residential segregation (Frankenberg, 2013). The expansion of public school choice in the 1990s has somewhat weakened this link. The percentage of children from all economic groups who were enrolled at their geographically-assigned school declined from 80% in 1993 to 69% in 2016. 19% of children attended their chosen public school.
This group included charter schools, which quadrupled in number between 2000 and 2014, from 1,525 to 6,465 schools (Wang, et al., 2019).

In Connecticut, homebuyers demonstrated a willingness to pay higher home prices in assignment zones where schools were seen as more effective, as evidenced by higher standardized test scores (Dougherty et al., 2009). In Vermont, the greater the number of alternative schooling options that were available within a reasonable commuting distance, the more a home’s value increased. Vouchers exist only in rural areas in the state, and where they do, homes that had access to higher performing schools than the one that was closest sold at higher prices (Cannon et al., 2015). And a study of twelve states that adopted mandatory inter-district school choice programs showed that districts with desirable nearby, out-of-district schooling options experienced relatively large increases in housing values, residential income, and population density (Brunner et al., 2012).

**Evidence on Parent Empowerment**

Policy analysts didn’t just consider the consequences for students of expanded school choice. Some wondered if parents who were offered more public school options for their children would be better citizens and thereby increase the nation’s stock of social capital. Social capital is important to a strong democracy because people trust each other and cooperate more, and have fewer conflicts. Researchers have found that the opportunity to choose their child’s school did advance the capacity of parents to act as responsible, involved citizens. Parents who exercised choice increased their voluntary involvement in their children’s schools, carried out more face-to-face discussions with other parents, and had higher levels of trust in the schools’ teachers (Schneider, Teske, &
Marschall, et al., 1997). In Indiana, parents who intentionally chose their residence for access to the district schools showed high levels of empowerment, involvement, and satisfaction similar to private and charter parents, while district parents who had not intentionally chosen the local public schools were low in these characteristics (Hamlin & Cheng, 2019).

Parents in Austin, Texas who employed residential choice to select schools for their children viewed their children’s achievements more positively than parents who did not, and they reported being more satisfied with teachers, academics, school buildings, and grounds (Falbo et al., 2005). And nationwide, parents who participated in public schools of choice were more involved in their child’s school than their district school counterparts, and by some measures than even their private school counterparts (Buckley, 2007).

Conclusion

The ideological roots of contemporary public school choice can be found in Milton Friedman’s mid-century proposal that the government fund schools but not administer them, and in John Coons’ and Stephen Sugarman’s advocacy for a workable model of educational choice that would authentically support the cultural and ideological diversity of the United States. The roots are also in President Reagan’s characterization of the government as a problem, not a solution. The publication of his national education commission’s report in 1983 catalyzed a reform movement, and two policy analysts reintroduced Friedman’s notion that public schools be regulated by markets. John Chubb and Terry Moe argued that if school leaders were autonomous and parents could choose where their children went to school, public education would be delivered more efficiently.
and effectively.

The 1990s brought sweeping changes to American public school systems as comprehensive education reform was undertaken at both the state and federal levels. An important component of this reform was expanding access to public school choice, primarily through charter schools and inter-district choice programs, and it was supported by conservative and liberal politicians alike. The assumptions that formed the basis for new choice policies were that increased access would foster greater equity of opportunity because students could leave underperforming schools for better ones, and that public schools faced with competition for students would improve their performance resulting in higher overall student achievement. An important concern was that expanded school choice would exacerbate student sorting on the basis of race and class and ability.

A review of the literature has shown that people of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds use inter-district choice to enroll in schools where there are more students who share their demographic characteristics. However, it is disproportionately accessed by higher income students to enroll in higher income districts, and by students to exit districts with more socioeconomically disadvantaged students and fewer White students. This leads districts to protect their position in the marketplace by appealing to families who are White and socioeconomically advantaged. Charter schools work to shape their applicant pools, and market-oriented charter schools in particular underserve disadvantaged student populations. Across the nation, charter schools are more racially isolated than district schools.

Inter-district competition improves school productivity by raising student achievement and lowering school spending. Students who transfer districts ultimately
make academic gains, although those who transfer back to their residential public schools fall further behind. Competition from charter schools has no effect, or a very small one, on student achievement. The impact on school leaders is mixed; some principals do not feel pressure to compete, while others do. The nature of the response of those who do is determined by their perception of their school’s status in the market hierarchy. School districts are spending more in response to competition, but in some cases marketing expenditures grew while in other cases spending on per pupil instruction increased.

When it comes to understanding what parents seek when they investigate educational options, researchers have learned that parents can accurately evaluate school quality, and their motives for choosing schools are largely academic. However, this preference increases with family income and student achievement. Location is a top consideration for many parents. They want good schools close to home, with district-provided transportation.

Researchers have also discovered that the sources parents use to learn about their school choices contribute to educational inequities. Parents rely on their social and professional networks for information, which are racially segregated and socioeconomicly stratified. The decision making processes employed by parents from all backgrounds are similar, but the schools considered differ depending on families’ income, knowledge, and access to transportation. Web sites can be helpful to parents seeking in-depth information about individual schools, but they are not well-utilized by low-income parents and they may be coded to recruit certain types of students, thus contributing to inequitable market segmentation.

Race is a significant factor in parents’ school choice making processes, with
parents of all races demonstrating a preference for schools where their child’s race is
better represented. White parents eliminate Black-majority schools entirely during their
search process, and select schools that have lower test scores, higher levels of poverty,
and are less safe. Parents of all races avoid schools with high percentages of low-income
students. More recently, privileged White parents have expressed discomfort with the
segregation effects of school choice policies, but they ultimately make decisions that
protect their social position.

Suburbs used their political power in state legislatures to ensure that school choice
policies would allow them to restrict the access of inter-district students to suburban
schools, and protect the physical and financial independence of suburban districts.
Increasing parent awareness about school quality has fostered inter-district competition,
pressuring school leaders to listen to the voices of the most advantaged parents and
prevent student exit. Despite these conditions, educational equity scholars recognized
school choice as a politically palatable tool to address segregation’s harms and improve
outcomes for students of color and low-income students alike. Regional inter-district
integration programs have consistently yielded significant benefits to participants.

Expanded public school choice has somewhat weakened the link between a
family’s residence and the nearest public school in the United States. Still, home values
are one reflection of the private commodification of public education. Homebuyers will
pay higher prices for houses that give them access to more effective schools, or to a
greater number of schooling options, both in- and out-of-district. But there is one clear
public benefit of school choice: it builds parents’ social capital. Parents who choose their
children’s schools have higher levels of involvement in those schools, they feel more
empowered, and they express greater satisfaction with their experience. These practices ultimately contribute to a healthy democracy.

While much is known about the parents and students who exit their district schools, and the impact on those left behind, there is much less understanding of the school enrollment decisions of families whose children attend their local public schools. A study that fits into this research gap has significance for both families and leaders of districts located in competitive educational marketplaces, as well as for local and state policymakers. It is important to learn the extent to which district families have been able to exercise educational choice, in particular to identify those who might be denied access to its potential advantages. District leaders will also benefit from knowing whether and why resident families are actively choosing to send their children to the district schools, and how many families there are who would exit the city’s schools but faced obstacles to doing so. Researchers and policymakers will have a more complete understanding of what drives parents’ school enrollment decisions, and therefore, why public school choice has the effects that it does, and what kinds of interventions might result in preferred effects. This study will contribute to the existing body of research by describing the degree of active school choice on the part of in-district families, examining the reasons why families made their choices and also why they may have explored out-of-district options, and identifying obstacles to student exit from district schools.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Introduction

Four general problems can be identified with regard to a lack of understanding about the decision making processes used by resident families who enroll their children in the district schools. First, when a district is located in a competitive educational environment, it is unclear to what extent parents are intentionally choosing homes in order to gain access to their preferred schools. If there is a significant number of parents who exercise school choice through residence selection, then this group should be included in any evaluation of school choice policy and its effects.

The second problem is that families in different demographic groups may have varying levels of awareness of the choices they have, and some families might be missing out on the chance to select an educational setting that would better suit their children. Parents who default to being passive participants in the process are not able to build their social capital. If families don’t have equal access to information, then an unintended consequence of school choice could be that students are sorted into schools by those factors that support or limit families’ access to information.

The third problem is that district leaders do not have a mechanism for knowing why families may have actively chosen their schools, and so cannot align the budget, curricula, programs, or policies with the educational priorities of those allegiant families. And administrators cannot base any efforts to effectively establish the district’s role in a competitive educational marketplace on an understanding of their district’s desirable qualities from the perspective of parents.
The fourth problem is that there might be families in-district who sought out-of-district educational settings but were unable to secure their preferred choices and are potentially dissatisfied with the district’s educational offerings. District leaders do not know if their school communities include such families, and if they do, the nature of their dissatisfaction. Thus, administrators are unaware of possible educational weaknesses in their districts and unable to address them.

These issues were studied in Northampton, Massachusetts, a small district located in a competitive educational environment. There were four elementary schools and two secondary schools, as well as a public vocational school located in the district but not part of it. Northampton was both a top sending district and a top receiving district through the state’s voluntary open enrollment program. Moreover, a number of students attended nearby charter schools and private schools and were homeschooled.

The mixed methods study was guided by four sets of questions:

1. To what extent did families intentionally choose to live in Northampton so that their children could attend the district schools? Are there differences in this group related to parents’ race, socioeconomic background, or education level?

2. At the time of student enrollment, what school characteristics appealed to in-district parents? Were parents aware of other educational options for their children? To what extent did they consider other options, and for what reasons? Was there variation in the consideration of schooling options by families according to their racial, socioeconomic, or
educational backgrounds? Which sources of information did they draw on to explore the options under consideration?

3. To what extent do parents of Northampton public school students report that they would have enrolled their children elsewhere had they been able to? What barriers did they face? Would they still choose to exit the district schools if they could? Why or why not?

4. What results emerge from connecting the qualitative data gathered from interviews with in-district parents about their school enrollment decisions with the quantitative data measured using a survey?

**Rationale for Study Site**

Public school choice options for all families were greatly expanded throughout the United States in the 1990s, a direct outcome of increased policy activity in state legislatures related to comprehensive education reform. By the turn of the millennium, thirty-two states had open enrollment laws allowing students to choose schools within their residential district or in another district; thirty-six states and the District of Columbia authorized the creation of charter schools; several states subsidized private school enrollment with vouchers, scholarships or tax credits; and all fifty states permitted homeschooling (Hurst et al., 2003).

**Massachusetts on Leading Edge of School Choice Reform**

Massachusetts was at the forefront of the national movement to increase educational choice for public school families. In 1991, state legislators and Governor William Weld created a new inter-district program which permitted public school districts to accept students from other districts and receive a publicly funded tuition
payment for those students ("School Choice in Massachusetts," 1994). Two years later, Governor Weld signed the Education Reform Act of 1993, which significantly expanded school choice in the state by making it mandatory for districts to allow students to exit, requiring districts to enroll out-of-district students unless the school committee took an annual public vote against it, and establishing charter schools (Massachusetts Education Reform Act, 1993). The purposes for establishing Massachusetts charter schools were to encourage the development of innovative programs and assessments in public education; to provide parents and students with greater school choice; to offer opportunities for teachers to establish schools with alternative methods of educational instruction and school structure; and to act as models which other schools could imitate (Massachusetts Education Reform Act, 1993). An important feature of the state’s school choice policy is that while elected district officials can opt out of accepting out-of-district students, they cannot opt out of letting resident students go to other districts or to charter schools, and so their districts are not protected from the financial harm associated with that loss.

Today, school choice in the Bay State includes inter-district and intra-district public schools, magnet schools, charter schools, private schools, religious schools, vocational schools, special education schools, and homeschooling. The authors of a comprehensive report on school choice in Massachusetts issued a decade after the Education Reform Act became law noted that two large categories of students could not be included in their tallies: those who engaged in intra-district choice, and those who moved from one district to another for educational reasons. Neither of these data was collected or quantified by the state education agency, and it remains the case fifteen years later (McDermott et al., 2003). Table 3.1 contains the total number of students enrolled in
eight different school categories for both Massachusetts and Northampton but does not include intra-district choice or school choice through residence selection. The Northampton students who attend vocational school are included in the out-of-district public school tally because it is its own district. There were 105 vocational students, or 3% of the total.

**Table 3.1**

*School Attending Children 2017-2018*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Local Public Schools/Academic Regional Schools</th>
<th>Vocational Technical Regional Schools</th>
<th>Collaboratives</th>
<th>Charter Schools</th>
<th>Out-of-District Public Schools</th>
<th>Home-Schooled</th>
<th>In State Private and Parochial Schools</th>
<th>Out-of-State Private and Parochial Schools</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>811,764</td>
<td>26,857</td>
<td>4,153</td>
<td>40,472</td>
<td>23,378</td>
<td>7,414</td>
<td>72,926</td>
<td>1,721</td>
<td>988,685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northampton</td>
<td>2,378</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>167*</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>419</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3,230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>0%*</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%*</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School is considered out-of-district.

*Note.* Adapted from 2017-2018 *School Attending Children*, by Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018 (http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/schoolattendingchildren.aspx). In the public domain.

**Northampton Located in Competitive and Innovative Educational Environment**

Northampton is a small city in western Massachusetts where school choice has had a big impact. As Table 3.1 shows, when Northampton students were compared with state averages, the proportion who attended out-of-district public schools was more than double, the homeschooled share was double, the proportion who attended private schools was almost double, and the charter school percentage was fifty percent bigger. The proportions of Northampton students who attended vocational schools, collaboratives, and out-of-state private and parochial schools were comparable to state averages.

Meanwhile, Northampton was ranked sixth in the state for total net receiving tuition
based on the number of students from other districts choosing to enroll in the city’s schools (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.-a). These numbers were evidence that Northampton was embedded in a competitive educational marketplace, which made it an ideal site for a study of the school enrollment decision making processes used by the city’s public school families.

Northampton had an estimated population of 28,451 in 2019. According to U.S. census data for 2014-2018, the median value of owner-occupied housing units was $321,900. There were 11,163 households, and 54% of residents were homeowners. 94% of the population graduated from high school, and 58% held Bachelor’s degrees. In Massachusetts, the median value of owner-occupied housing units was $366,800, 62% were homeowners, 90% of the population graduated from high school, and 43% held Bachelor’s degrees (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

There were six public schools in the district, which served 2,378 children: four elementary schools, two of which offered pre-K, one middle school for grades 6-8, and one high school. In 2017-2018, 39% of the student body was categorized as high-needs, 27% as economically disadvantaged, 22% as having disabilities, and 4% as English language learners (Massachusetts Department of Education, n.d.-b).

The city and its environs have a history of nurturing educational innovation and access. The Clarke School for the Deaf opened in 1867. It was the first school in the United States to teach children with hearing loss to verbalize speech. The first free kindergarten in the country started in Northampton in 1876. One of the nation’s first vocational schools, Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School, was established in the city in 1906 and remains the state’s only independent vocational high school. Smith
College, a historically women’s college located in Northampton, launched a laboratory elementary school in 1926; today, the Campus School continues to enroll children in kindergarten through grade six. The first charter schools in Massachusetts were permitted to open in 1995, and it was then that the Hilltown Cooperative Charter School became established on the edge of Northampton. The next year, the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter School was opened in a neighboring town; a decade later, the Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School was founded in that same town; and in 2003 and 2013 two more charter schools were opened twenty miles outside of the city in different directions.

**Northampton Students Have Accessed Expanded School Choices**

In 1992-1993, prior to the establishment of state-legislated school choice, twelve percent of Northampton’s school age children did not enroll in the city’s public schools. Eight percent of all children attended local private secular or religious schools, and four percent attended Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School, which is located in Northampton but is its own district. By 2017-2018, the proportion of exiting students had more than doubled, to twenty-six percent. The enrollment trends for this period of time are represented in Figure 3.1.
Figure 3.1

*Where Did They Go? Thirty Years of Educational Choice in Northampton MA*

![Graph showing the percentage of students choosing different types of schools over time.]

*Note.* Adapted from Annual Censuses submitted by the Northampton Public Schools to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education of all Public and Private School Attending Students, 1989-2019.

The number of schools that Northampton students were choosing when they opted out of the district’s public schools had increased significantly, from twenty-one in 1992-1993 to thirty-four in 2017-2018. Expansion of public school choice opportunities coincided with a reduction of the number of private schools enrolling Northampton students during this time period, from twenty-one to sixteen. As indicated in Table 3.2, there were eleven private schools that had consistently attracted about the same number of students from Northampton. However, there was a notable shift in the religious school preference, from those that were Catholic to ones that were Jewish. Two newer destinations for Northampton families were progressive independent schools. And two kindergarten programs ended by the early 2000s, likely due to the fact that the Northampton public schools began to offer full-day kindergarten at all four of its elementary schools.
Table 3.2

Northampton Students’ Changing Preferences for Private Schools 1992-2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>SY93</th>
<th>SY18</th>
<th>1992-1993 only</th>
<th>SY93</th>
<th>2017-2018 only</th>
<th>SY18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bement School</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deerfield Academy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eaglebrook School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hartsbrook School</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hill Institute Kindergarten</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montessori of Northampton</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northfield Mount Hermon</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith College Campus Sch.</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoneleigh Burnham School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williston Northampton Sch.</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from Annual Censuses submitted by the Northampton Public Schools to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education of all Public and Private School Attending Students, 1989-2019.

Once public school choice was sanctioned in 1993, there was an increase from zero to eleven in the number of other districts’ schools attended by Northampton students, and the number of charter schools attended grew from zero to seven. City families sought out a diversity of curricular and instructional approaches from charter schools, including hands-on arts education, character development, social justice and Chinese language immersion. These charter schools with their specific focuses and the number of Northampton students enrolled in each one are found in Table 3.3.

Homeschooling was also a popular option in Northampton, with fifty-nine students choosing it in 2017-2018. The first year the district recorded the number of homeschoolers was 2010-2011, and there were 28 students.
Table 3.3

Area Charter Schools Attended by Northampton Students 2017-2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Charter School</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>SY18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four Rivers Charter School</td>
<td>College prep and character</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilltown Cooperative Charter Public School</td>
<td>Experiential arts</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holyoke Community Charter School</td>
<td>Character development/SABIS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School</td>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School</td>
<td>Dual language</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School</td>
<td>Performing arts</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Springfield Preparatory Charter School</td>
<td>College prep and character</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The existence of so many educational options available to Northampton families, and the fact that a significant proportion of parents pursued them rather than send their children to the district schools, may be important factors to city parents when they are thinking about enrolling their children in school. Often, when parents or prospective parents purchase or rent a home, the reputation of the local public schools is an essential consideration. It is possible that because Northampton is situated in a competitive educational marketplace, the district schools are less relevant during the homebuying or renting process. Or perhaps the schools are initially important, but as parents make connections in the community and learn about other educational choices, they no longer make the default decision to enroll their children in the local public schools. The aim of this study was to bring more understanding to the complexity of this decision making process.

Northampton School Committee Recognized Costs and Benefits of School Choice

School committees are annually compelled to grapple with the issue of inter-district public school choice, due to the requirement of the Education Reform Act that school districts would automatically enroll out-of-district students unless they voted to opt out of the program. Northampton did not accept out-of-district students until May 1997, when the school committee’s yearly vote the issue resulted in a tie. Because a tie
vote failed, the city would for the first time accept incoming school choice students. The ambivalent stance of the committee was a reflection of the contentious discussions that led up to the vote, with some district leaders warning about the costs of school choice and others trumpeting its benefits. At a meeting of the rules and policy subcommittee in March, “Superintendent Willard stated that the principals and school councils have discussed adopting School Choice; and from what he has heard from principals, there is universal opposition to School Choice because of the unknown factors of inheriting students with discipline problems and special education needs and the fear of increasing class size” (Northampton School Committee Rules and Policy Subcommittee, 1997). But at the full school committee meeting in May, board member Paul Waterman stressed that, “Northampton has a good school system and if people want to send their children here, we should give them that opportunity” (Northampton School Committee, 1997 May).

Lisa Minnick, chair of the rules and property subcommittee at the time, expounded on the benefits of school choice in a 2013 interview. “I felt that it was a good thing for families. It was a good thing for students to be able to go to a place where they felt comfortable, where they felt challenged as learners, … and comfortable with their surroundings, and where they could excel at what they do best. And I also felt that it was a good thing for parents to be able to make a choice for their students that didn’t always involve having to cough up the cash for private school tuition if they couldn’t afford that. … [I]n some ways it blurs the line between the haves and have-nots in terms of access to something different” (Personal communication, October 15, 2013).

In the discussion about whether or not to participate in school choice, school committee members were clearly aware of the pressures posed by charter schools. At the
March 1997 meeting of the school committee, “Superintendent Willard pointed out that with a possible 55 students attending charter schools next year at a cost of $5,600 per student, the system stands to lose $308,000, completely wiping out the $225,000 in Education Reform…. Mr. Dostal commented that this information would certainly fire up the School Choice issue” (Northampton School Committee, 1997 March).

Two weeks later, at the March 1997 meeting of the Rules and Property Subcommittee, the urge to respond competitively was expressed by several members. Dr. Fink stated that, “Northampton needs to offer better programs to ensure that we don’t lose students to charter schools,” and Mr. Dostal asserted, “We have an obligation to taxpayers to try to win this game” (Northampton School Committee Rules and Policy Subcommittee, 1997). However, other members questioned such a response. Ms. Lefko argued that “people are not leaving the public schools because they are doing a bad job; it is just that parents want the attractive type of educational experience that charter schools offer” (ibid). Just before the vote against participating in school choice failed in a tie, it was perhaps Mr. Palomo who captured the board’s contentious reality most accurately: “We may disagree with the Education Reform Law, but we have to live with it; and wishing Ed Reform will go away, will not make it so; there is no way to make Charter Schools go away. If life hands you lemons, make lemonade.’ He went on to say that Northampton … should set our own attraction and capitalize on it” (Northampton School Committee, 1997 May). As noted earlier, the district was successful in its quest to appeal to families, ranking sixth in the state for total net tuition from receiving students in 2017-2018 (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.-a).
Expanded School Choice Has Impacted Northampton in Several Ways

The fiscal impact of the overall changes in enrollment patterns in the Northampton schools has been recognized since 1997, when the superintendent first called attention to it. In Massachusetts, districts lose $5,000 of their state funding per pupil for every student who leaves for another public school. However, when a student leaves for a charter school, the district loses that $5,000, plus it is charged the local portion of per-pupil spending, which is then sent to the charter school. The rationale for the different funding formulas is that the state has already heavily invested in the physical infrastructure of districts, whereas charter schools must rent or buy the physical spaces required for instruction. In 2017-2018, the district’s total budget was $33.3 million. The net cost to the city of charter school tuition payments was $2.2 million, representing the transfer out of 202 students. The net benefit from inter-district school choice enrollment was $1.2 million, with a loss of 117 in-district students and a gain of 349 out-of-district students. The overall financial loss of $1 million represented three percent of its total budget.

There were other effects of expanded access to public school choice in the Northampton area. When families leave the district to attend other public schools, that somewhat weakens the tight coupling between homes and schools, and potentially threatens Northampton property values. However, property values in nearby towns may increase as parents realize they can live in more affordable housing elsewhere but still send their children to Northampton schools. The way in which charter school are funded in Massachusetts may also dilute the Tiebout effect. Because the tuition payment is made
to the charter school itself and not to another local government, they are not comparable entities competing to provide a collection of public goods at an optimal level.

Charter school funding has generally been perceived as unfair by city residents who felt that their local taxes should go to local services, including district schools, and not to charter schools whose leaders were not accountable to locally elected officials. The sense of unfairness has been a cause of friction between resident families who sent their children to district schools and those who sent theirs to charter schools. This friction was exacerbated by the impression held by many Northampton parents that district schools were mandated to educate all resident students, including those with special needs which might require costly interventions, while charter schools were not compelled to do so. Finally, the exit of 319 pupils and the entry of 349 means there was some churn among the student bodies of the six district schools, which might have had some impact on everyone’s learning conditions and social environments.

Northampton was an excellent district for a study of the decision making processes used by resident families who sent their children to the city’s public schools. It was located in a competitive educational marketplace where district leaders had grappled with the issue of school choice for more than two decades. Many parents were aware of the choices available to them, as evidenced by the movement of students into and out of the district schools. There was a rich variety of schooling types for Northampton families to choose from, both public and private options as well as homeschooling. Its size was another factor that made the district an appealing study site. With four elementary schools, one middle school and one high school, the researcher could gather data from a representative sample of families who had children enrolled at all six of the schools. An
examination of how the school choice environment may or may not have impacted the decisions of these families to attend district schools will help create a more complete picture of the school choice issue in a state that led the nation in the movement to increase educational choice for public school families.

Data Collection and Analysis

Researchers and policy analysts have thoroughly examined the educational achievement and equity impacts of school choice policies on students who leave the districts where they live, and on the students and schools that are left by those who exit. However, there is an identified gap in research pertaining to the population of families who send their children to the district schools where they reside in competitive educational environments. A study of such families in Northampton, Massachusetts fits into this gap.

The study used a mixed methods explanatory sequential design, in which qualitative data is used to explain quantitative data. The rationale for this approach was that while a quantitative method enables generalization from a small group to the larger population, a qualitative method allows an in-depth exploration of individual experiences (Creswell, 2015). In this study, the two data sets were integrated to provide a more comprehensive view of the problem than either data set alone could provide.

Quantitative Data Collection

The first stage of the study was a quantitative survey of parents who lived in Northampton and had enrolled their children in the district schools. They were asked whether or not they were aware of other educational options besides the Northampton public schools, and if they were, how important the Northampton public schools were to
them when they decided to move to the city. Next, parents were asked to review a number of factors and determine the extent to which each was an important consideration in their decision to enroll their child in the Northampton public schools. These factors include the reputation of the schools, the quality of the teachers and staff, the curriculum, the location, athletics, art and music, safety, racial and ethnic diversity, and academic rigor. Limiting factors were also identified for parents’ review, such as their charter school lottery number not being chosen or an inability to pay for private school, to transport their child to a school outside the district, or to homeschool their child.

A subsequent section of the survey targeted parents who also considered another educational option for their child besides the Northampton public schools. They were asked to review factors they had identified as having a negative opinion about in the first section, and whether or not each was important in their decision to explore other choices. The purpose of these questions was to determine what might have compelled parents to think about alternatives to the district schools.

Finally, all respondents, including those who were not aware they had educational options, were invited to select the resources they utilized when contemplating the enrollment of their children in the Northampton public schools and report how helpful each resource was to them. The list of resources included family, friends, neighbors, parents of their children’s friends, co-workers, various websites, their own educational experience, school visits, and the media. The point of this survey section was to reveal where possible information barriers might have existed if there were obstacles to parents knowing there were a variety of educational choices in the area.
The researcher sought a survey participation rate representing ten percent of in-district households. In 2019-2020, there were approximately 2,428 in-district students attending six schools in Northampton. Assuming an average of two students per household and one respondent per household, there were 1,175 potential participants. A ten percent participation rate would therefore yield 121 completed surveys.

A number of strategies were employed to achieve as high a survey participation rate as possible. Due to the global pandemic, the district required remote learning for all but a very small group of students whose special educational needs required limited in-person instruction. The researcher was therefore unable to be physically present at the schools during family events to encourage parents to participate in the quantitative study and relied instead on district principals to electronically distribute survey invitations. These were provided in both English and Spanish. Some principals included the invitation in a weekly electronic newsletter, some posted it on their website, and some emailed parents directly.

Additional survey distribution methods were employed in order to reach as many families as possible. Survey fliers with a Quick Response code were included with 450 free lunches distributed by the Northampton Public Schools food service department to district families, and 125 food bags provided by Grow Food Northampton to families living in two of the city’s subsidized housing complexes. The same fliers were also made available for two weeks to clients of the Northampton Survival Center making their weekly food pickup. The researcher asked the presidents of the six parent-teacher organizations and the union of district school employees to distribute survey invitations to their membership lists. The researcher also sent emails with survey invitations to
members of the Northampton School Committee, the Northampton City Council, and the
two state legislators who represent Northampton.

**Quantitative Data Analysis**

The second stage of the study was an analysis of the quantitative data that had been collected. There were 384 survey participants, but the responses of those who did not live in Northampton were removed. Responses were also removed if participants did not reach the first question that asked for their opinion about various aspects of the Northampton public schools. That left a data set of 304 survey responses, about two and a half times the anticipated yield. Each participant was assigned a numeric value in Excel and the data set was cleaned. Nominal data were given numeric codes and a codebook was created. The data set was visually inspected to detect trends and then frequency and crosstabulation analyses were conducted using SPSS quantitative software v. 27.

The researcher first studied the data set to understand the demographic characteristics of the respondents, and this revealed several important ways in which the data was skewed related to participants’ age, race, socioeconomic background, and educational level. The majority of participants was older, with 44% aged 40-49 years old, and 33% aged 50 years or older. Just 14% were 30-39, and fewer than 1% were under 30 years old. 9% of respondents preferred not to answer this question or skipped it.

The racial and ethnic demographics of survey respondents approximately reflected those of the city but were not as diverse as the Northampton public schools student body. 82% were White, 4% biracial or mixed race, 2% Hispanic or Latino, 1% Asian American or Pacific Islander, fewer than 1% Black or African American, and none were Native American. 10% of participants preferred not to answer this question or
skipped it. According to 2021 population estimates of the U.S. Census Bureau, 82% of residents were White, 4% two or more races, 9% Hispanic or Latino, 3% Asian or Pacific Islander, 2% Black or African American, and fewer than 1% Native American (United States Census Bureau, n.d.-a). The race and ethnicity characteristics of the Northampton public schools student population in 2020-2021 were 70% White, 7% multi-race, 16% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 3% African American, and fewer than 1% Native American (Massachusetts Department of Education, n.d.-c).

A significant majority, 70%, of respondents had household incomes above the city’s 2015-2019 median of $66,522. More than half, 56%, were well above it, reporting household incomes of $100,000 or more. 9% fell into the $50,000 to $74,999 category, while 6% had household incomes less than $50,000. 15% of survey participants preferred not to answer this question or skipped it. The level of formal education completion among survey respondents was strikingly high: 65% had a graduate degree and 21% had a Bachelor’s degree. 3% had an Associate’s degree or some college experience, 3% had a high school diploma, and less than 1% had some secondary school experience. 9% preferred not to answer this question or skipped it. The general population of Northampton aged 25 years and older is also well-educated, with 94% having graduated high school and 60% having a Bachelor’s or graduate degree.

Crosstabulation tables provide a clear illustration of the relationships between different demographic categories. Table 3.4 shows that survey participants were overwhelmingly wealthy and well-educated, Table 3.5 reveals that the participants were wealthy across racial and ethnic categories, and Table 3.6 displays that they were well-educated across racial and ethnic categories. The skewed distribution of these
demographic factors in the data set and implications for the significance of study findings will be discussed in Chapter 4.

**Table 3.4**

*Crosstabulation of Participants’ Education by Income*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Less than $20,000</th>
<th>$20,000-$34,999</th>
<th>$35,000-$49,999</th>
<th>$50,000-$74,999</th>
<th>$75,000-$99,999</th>
<th>$100,000 or more</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some secondary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s/some college</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>28</strong></td>
<td><strong>44</strong></td>
<td><strong>169</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.5**

*Crosstabulation of Participants’ Race by Income*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Less than $20,000</th>
<th>$20,000-$34,999</th>
<th>$35,000-$49,999</th>
<th>$50,000-$74,999</th>
<th>$75,000-$99,999</th>
<th>$100,000 or more</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biracial or mixed race</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>28</strong></td>
<td><strong>42</strong></td>
<td><strong>169</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey participants were asked to name the first Northampton public school in which they enrolled their oldest child, and this was another way in which the data set was revealed to be skewed. The single largest cohort of parents, 42%, identified Jackson Street School, while the other three elementary schools were identified by much smaller groups: Leeds Elementary School by 16%, Bridge Street School by 14%, and Ryan Road School by 8%. As points of reference, the 2020-2021 K-5 enrollment of Jackson Street School was 328, the PK-5 enrollment of Leeds Elementary was 293, PK-5 enrollment of Bridge Street School was 240, and Ryan Road School enrolled 234 students in K-5. JFK Middle School was the first school named by 9% of respondents, and Northampton High School by 12%. The middle school enrolled 623 students and the high school enrolled 861 students. This information is presented in Table 3.7 below.
There are at least two possible reasons for the especially large data sample from Jackson Street School. The principal reported that she did not send out the survey invitation when she was first asked, but she did after she received a second email two weeks later, a week in advance of the survey window closing (Email communication, December 16, 2020). Because many Jackson Street parents were recorded taking the survey just hours after the reminder email was sent out, it is likely that the principal emailed parents directly with a survey invitation and link, rather including it in an e-newsletter like several other principals reported doing. Parents might therefore have given this request more attention. Another possible factor is that Jackson Street parents might be especially interested in the topic of their child’s enrollment in that school; it is most frequently selected by out-of-district families who apply for inter-district school choice.

**Qualitative Data Collection**

Quantitative study participants were asked at the end of the survey if they were willing to be interviewed by the researcher about their school enrollment decision making process. Of the 304 eligible respondents, 103 volunteered. They were sorted into three
groups: one with parents who identified themselves as Asian American, Black, Hispanic or Latino, biracial, or mixed race; one with parents reporting household incomes of less than $75,000; and the third with parents identifying as White and those reporting household incomes of $75,000 and above. Six parents from each of these three groups were randomly selected for a total of eighteen participants. One member of the parents of color group did not schedule an interview, and the researcher used professional contacts to purposively select a potential replacement who was then successfully recruited.

Qualitative study participants moved to Northampton as early as 1991 and as recently as 2015, with the exception of two participants who grew up in the city. The researcher directed parents to consider their oldest child to enter the Northampton public schools when reflecting on their school enrollment decision making process. The ages of those oldest children at the time of the interviews ranged from six to twenty-three, encompassing about seventeen years of experience with entry into the district schools. An important consideration when thinking about the findings of this study is the grade level at which the children would be starting school. Five were enrolled in preschool, ten in kindergarten, and one each in second, fourth, and seventh grade. Five participants first enrolled their children at Leeds School, four participants first enrolled their children at Jackson Street School, three were first enrolled at Bridge Street School, and one each at Ryan Road School and JFK Middle School. The four participants who enrolled their children in preschool in order to access special education services were not included in these counts because they were assigned by the district to the appropriate program. All of the aforementioned demographic characteristics are displayed in Table 3.8. Additionally,
eleven of the parents had experience with multiple schools in the district and five utilized the opportunity for intra-district school choice.

Table 3.8

Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>1st enrolled</th>
<th>Oldest</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race ethnicity</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$100,000 or more</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$50,000 to $74,999</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceriona</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>$100,000 or more</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>JFK</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$100,000 or more</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisa</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$50,000 to $74,999</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>BSS</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Biracial/mixed race</td>
<td>$75,000 to $99,999</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>JSS</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$35,000 to $49,999</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>4th grade</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>BSS</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>$35,000 to $49,999</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>BSS</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$100,000 or more</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>JSS</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$20,000 to $34,999</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>BSS</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>Biracial/mixed race</td>
<td>$75,000 to $99,999</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Second grade</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>JSS</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$100,000 or more</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>JSS</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$75,000 to $99,999</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariam</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>Biracial/mixed race</td>
<td>$100,000 or more</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>RR</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$100,000 or more</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$50,000 to $74,999</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>BSS</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>$50,000 to $74,999</td>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yasmin</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>JSS</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>Biracial/mixed race</td>
<td>$50,000 to $74,999</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eighteen interviews were conducted over Zoom lasting an average of fifty minutes. Interview subjects were guaranteed confidentiality and assigned pseudonyms so that they felt comfortable speaking freely. Each adult was interviewed once. The interviews were semi-structured and dialogic, or “true conversations in which researcher and participant together develop a more complex understanding of the topic” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 178). Rather than follow a specific protocol or script, the researcher
generated a list of general questions, which were reviewed and annotated before each interview.

The interview began with a “grand tour” question, and then participants were asked to elaborate and provide concrete examples to aid in the establishment of a detailed narrative (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Participants were asked how their child came to be enrolled in the Northampton public schools, whether they considered and could have chosen other educational options, and what their experience was like with the district schools after their child’s entrance. Some questions were expected to arise out of the answers provided by the interview partners, because “asking everyone the same questions makes little sense in qualitative interviewing where the goal is to find out what happened and why, in rich and individualistic terms” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 11).

During the interviews, the researcher was alert to the many selves carried to field work and created while doing it (Reinharz, 1997). Her research-based selves reflected subject expertise and the emotional distance that was a product of intellectual curiosity; her brought selves encompassed former teacher and colleague, parent, taxpayer, and political observer; and her situationally created selves were manifested from each interaction with the interview subjects. Sensitivity was also granted to the relationship between researcher and research subject, particularly to the knowledge differential that may have existed (Ulichney & Schoener, 2000), and careful attention paid to details revealed during interviews that might otherwise be overlooked because of the familiarity of the local and historical contexts (Brice Heath, 2000)
Qualitative Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were checked for accuracy. The transcribed data was reduced to that which was meaningful in relation to the research questions and to the earlier quantitative findings of the study. Then the data was coded using both a content analysis and a thematic analysis. Themes evolved directly from the research questions and were expressed by the participants (Pell Institute, n.d.). One round of coding used the interview questions, and another used the research questions. The third round involved a researcher-created template to harvest data from each interview based on content from the research questions as well as several inductive themes. The researcher also developed a frequency matrix utilizing the survey questions that was then populated with template data. This matrix was used for second-cycle coding. Other analytical tools included reflexive notes taken after each interview, memos written periodically throughout the coding process, and a matrix to provide an overview of participants with their demographic characteristics and essential aspects of their school enrollment decisions.

Integration of the Quantitative and Qualitative Results

The final stage of the study was an integrated analysis to identify the results that emerged from connecting the qualitative data from interviews with in-district parents about the school enrollment decision making process they used for their children with the quantitative data measured using a school choice survey of a larger sample of the same set of study participants.
Limitations

There were several limitations to the study. The quantitative survey was primarily emailed to prospective participants using the list of parent email addresses collected by each school. Parents who did not have email addresses or had not provided their email addresses may not have been reached, although the shift to remote learning during the pandemic diminishes this possibility. When parents did take the survey, they were asked to consider a decision they may have made a long time ago, and their responses might have been affected their memories. Parent responses were self-reported, which posed several potential problems. Accuracy of results was dependent upon the respondents’ capacities for introspection and the extent to which they were willing to be honest with themselves about the reasons for their decisions. Study participants might have differed in their understanding of the questions, their interpretation of the rating scale, and the attention they devoted to each question. Because the survey was taken online, there was no way to ask the researcher for clarification. An additional limitation of the study was the small size of Northampton as a district, which means the sample was also small. Because so little is known about the decision making processes used by parents who enroll their children in the district schools, the study was carried out despite these limitations.

Conclusion

Public school choice has been thoroughly analyzed as a policy tool to improve district schools through competitive pressures, and to promote equity of opportunity by allowing any student to transfer to a better performing school or one that is a better fit. Research has also focused on the stratification effects of school choice, including analysis
of the process by which parents construct their choice sets and make their decisions. Other studies have examined how school choice might increase parents’ social capital and civic capacity, as well as serve to create intentional learning communities. However, there has been much less examination of the population of families who send students to the district schools where they reside and the decision making considerations they gave to their students’ enrollment. It is important to bring these parents into the school choice conversation.

This mixed methods study fit into the existing gap in research and will begin to answer important questions. In one district located in a historically competitive educational marketplace, to what extent did families have access to the number and range of schooling options that are available to them? Were district schools still the default choice for resident families, or did they consider other educational options, and why? Where did parents get their information about schools? Did race, socioeconomic background, and parent education level play a part in these decision inputs or outcomes? What proportion of in-district parents would have enrolled their children elsewhere had they been able to, and why didn’t they? How did interviews with a small sample of parents enhance understanding of the survey findings?

Study findings can guide state policymakers in addressing any identified obstacles to equitable access of school choice options and the advantages they might provide to families. They can also be helpful to district leaders as they seek to advantageously position their schools in the marketplace and effectively meet the educational priorities of their enrolled students. Finally, research findings could compel further investigation of any educational misalignment between district programs and parent priorities.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter begins with an exposition of the quantitative data findings, organized by the research questions. These are the topics: participant residence selection and access to district schools, the school characteristics that appealed to in-district parents at the time of their first child’s enrollment, parents’ awareness and consideration of the educational options, their sources of information during the enrollment process, and barriers to participants’ exit from the district. An explanation of the qualitative findings is next, and it too is organized by the research questions. Two additional categories are included with the qualitative results, and they are ideological support for public schools and buyer’s remorse. The final section is an integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings, again organized by research question.

Quantitative Findings

Residence Selection and Access to District Schools

The first research question sought to quantify the extent to which families intentionally chose to live in Northampton so that their children could attend the district schools. Of the 304 survey participants, sixteen indicated they were not aware of educational options other than the Northampton public schools, and so they were not asked this question. This was a survey design flaw in that these parents still could have intentionally chosen to live in the city in order for their children to be eligible to attend the district schools. Of the remaining 288 survey respondents, 76% said the public schools were very important or important in their decision to live in Northampton, and
24% said the public schools were not important or not a factor in their decision. The question was not skipped by anyone. A significant majority of district parents could therefore be described as actively choosing the district schools in that they reported factoring the district schools into their decision to reside in Northampton and did end up enrolling their children there.

School Characteristics That Appealed to In-District Parents

The purpose of the second research question was to understand what school characteristics were important to Northampton public school parents at the time of their oldest child’s enrollment, whether they were aware of other educational options and had considered them, and if they did, the reasons why. Additionally, it was essential to learn more about the information sources that parents were drawing on during the pre-enrollment time in order to explore the possibility that they had influenced the decision making process.

First, survey participants were asked for their opinion of the Northampton public schools in fourteen areas at the time they enrolled their oldest child. Then, for each characteristic that they reported a positive opinion, respondents were asked how important it was in their decision to enroll their child in the Northampton public schools. Four areas received the most favorable opinion ratings. Academic reputation and teacher quality were both viewed positively by 89% of participants, while school location was given a favorable rating by 87% and acceptance of LGBTQ families by 85%. The same four areas were also identified by participants as being the most important of the fourteen factors in their decision to enroll their child in the Northampton public schools. Teacher quality was the top characteristic named by 83% of respondents as significantly
influencing their decision, followed by academic reputation identified by 78%, school location by 67%, and acceptance of LGBTQ families by 65%. A fifth factor important in participants’ decision making process was student safety, also identified by 65% of respondents. Figure 4.1 illustrates the relationship between parents’ opinions about these five key characteristics and the role played by those opinions in the enrollment decision, along with the other eight qualities that were on the survey.

Figure 4.1

Positive Opinion of School Characteristics as Factors in Parents’ Enrollment Decisions

Parents’ Awareness and Consideration of Educational Options

The majority of survey respondents, 95%, were aware of the educational options that were available to them at the time of their child’s enrollment. Within that group, 58%
of parents gave consideration to those options for their child. These data lend support to the idea that in-district families are actively choosing to enroll their children in the local public schools.

In order to understand the reasons why parents might have considered their educational options, participants were shown the areas they reported having had a negative opinion about for the Northampton public schools. Then, for each of those items, they were asked whether or not their unfavorable perception was important in their decision to consider another schooling option for their child. Racial and ethnic diversity was the area that was viewed most negatively; 30% of parents had an unfavorable opinion of it and 12% reported that it was a reason why they looked at educational options outside the district. Acceptance of LGBTQ families was the second most negative area; but while 14% of parents had an unfavorable perception of it, 0% said it was a factor in their search for schools outside the district. Class sizes had a negative rating from 9% of respondents and 5% reported that it pushed them to consider other schools. Academic rigor was seen unfavorably by 7% of participants, with 6% citing it as a reason for considering options besides the Northampton public schools. Table 4.1 below displays the fourteen characteristics offered on the survey and participants’ positive and negative perceptions of each one.
Sources of Information Used by Parents During School Enrollment Decision Process

All survey participants were asked how helpful each of twelve different sources of information was when they were thinking about enrolling their oldest child in school. Even if parents didn’t know they could have enrolled their child outside the Northampton public schools, they still may have sought information about the overall quality of the schools or the enrollment process itself. Both groups of respondents, those who were aware of their educational options and those who were not, identified friends as the most helpful resource. Neighbors were also helpful to both groups. Beyond that, responses diverged. Participants who knew they had options said parents of their child’s friends and school visits were helpful. The majority of this group did not use family members, websites that rate schools, their own experiences as a student, or Northampton public
school websites to inform their decision-making process. Participants who did not know they had options said websites that rate area schools and their realtor were helpful, and most did not use out-of-district websites or newspaper or radio coverage during the pre-enrollment process.

**Barriers to Exit from the District Schools**

The goal of the third research question was to learn more about the population of parents who may not have wanted to enroll their children in the district schools. The survey question aimed at this potential group asked if five possible obstacles to accessing educational alternatives mattered in respondents’ Northampton public schools enrollment decision: charter school lotteries, private school tuition, transportation to any out-of-district school, inability to homeschool, and the pull of their child’s friends attending a district school. All participants who were aware they had options were asked the question, and 41% reported that they couldn’t or wouldn’t pay private school tuition, 27% said that their child’s friends attending the Northampton public schools was a factor, 22% couldn’t homeschool their child, 15% said they couldn’t drive their child to an out-of-district school, and 9% reported that their child’s lottery number wasn’t chosen.

**Qualitative Findings**

**Residence Selection and Access to District Schools**

Qualitative study participants were not asked directly about the extent to which the district schools factored in their decision to live in Northampton. Instead, the first grand tour question of each interview was, “Tell me the story of how your child came to be enrolled in the Northampton public schools,” and in their lengthy responses to this
question and some follow-up queries, two-thirds of the participants organically discussed their consideration of the public schools when choosing a home in Northampton.

Eight participants explicitly stated that the district schools played a role in their decision to live in the city. For some parents it was just one factor. Laura was a wealthy White woman who said, “we scouted around town looking at the public schools. Part of the reason we moved here was because of the good public schools ….” For others, like Ceriona, a wealthy Black woman, it was the overriding reason and served to narrow down her home search to a specific school assignment zone.

[W]e made a decision as to where we would live, knowing that we were planning to have children. And we … thought about whether or not we wanted to continue living in Northampton as we planned to have a family. And then we decided to stay in Northampton and also try to identify which elementary school we would want our kids to go to and try to find a home in that district.

**Ideological Support for District Schools**

A distinct theme that was not anticipated emerged over the course of the interviews, and this was parents’ ideological support for public schools. A general sense of commitment to public education would not be unexpected. However, the clear and compelling terms used by twelve participants to explain how their philosophical support for public schools was intentionally factored into their school enrollment decision making process was a surprise. They shared what public education meant to them as children and to their parents, their perception of the important role that public schools have in a community and a society, and what they wanted from those learning environments for their own children.
Kimberly was a middle-income, mixed-race woman. She described how her racial identity gave special meaning to the value of a public education, for her own children and for others’.

My father was an educator and felt really strongly about public schools. [H]e was actually a Black man … [who believed] the way that people improve their lives and have opportunities is through education. And the only education that's open to a lot of kids, especially the kids who are the least advantaged, is their public schools and so he felt like and I agree … we owe it to our kids to give them a good grounding and give them opportunities and, you know, it's kind of a part of our social contract. And … it makes everyone's life so much better to have a well-educated population.

Mary, a wealthy White woman, echoed Kimberly’s beliefs about the public schools as a common good, emphasizing the significance of her family having a stake in it.

I think a country should provide a public school education to all of its citizens and ... it would be a little bit hypocritical for me to value that as a personal belief and then send my child off to a private school.

Mariam took that idea even further. She was a wealthy mixed race mother who identified the important relationship between the enrollment of well-resourced families and the meritocratic potential of public schools.

[I]f more families with means were sticking with public schools, public schools would be better. … [E]ducation should be the great equalizer … it's not … because there are other more systemic problems, right, but it could be this force of equalization.
Kimberly, Mary, and Mariam had the resources to exit the district for the many available educational options, but actively chose the district schools instead. In fact, both Kimberly and Mariam expressed feeling pressured by others to choose private schools, reflecting the community tensions that can exist around school enrollment decisions in a competitive choice environment. Elisa gave voice to this unease. A middle-income White woman, she said she could not have afforded private school, but was thinking about a charter school for her child.

How do you make these decisions, because I believe in public schools, I want them to be supported, I believe in libraries, right? And it's like, how do you justify making these alternative choices when knowing that your pulling your kid could create problems for that district?

Jamie was a wealthy White woman who brought into focus the underlying perception fueling local tensions around the school choice issue, that a community’s worth is directly tied to residents’ investment in the district schools, and this is harmed when many families opt out of the district:

We want to live in a community that supports ... good public education ... that people ... move here and choose the public school, even when they have the means to choose something else ... I think a community really is only as good as its public school system, right?

A number of participants recognized the benefits of a public education not just to society but to their own families and children as well. Rachel was a middle-income White parent of a typical needs child. She enrolled her daughter in the district’s integrated preschool for two years before she moved on to kindergarten at the same neighborhood
My value system … is to say yeah, this is what the world looks like. You have a student in your class who’s in a wheelchair. You have several students in your class who are learning English now. You have several students in your class who are like two grade levels above you. You have several students in your class who are going to need to repeat kindergarten. … This is what the world is like. … the best for you is to grow up seeing as much of a slice of humanity as I can provide for you in this very like self-selected suburb that we live in.

School Characteristics That Appealed to In-District Parents

On the quantitative survey, respondents were given a menu of fourteen characteristics and asked to evaluate each one in terms of their decision to enroll their children in the Northampton public schools. Participants were not prompted with characteristic names in the qualitative interviews. Instead, the researcher coded the interview data using the fourteen characteristics that were offered on the survey, and three that emerged from the interview data. The survey characteristics were selected one by one and the researcher carefully read each transcript to determine if the participant had mentioned it explicitly or in a way that was closely aligned to it while answering the three grand tour questions or follow-up queries. The three inductive characteristics captured all remaining qualities discussed by parents during the interviews that could not be logically incorporated with any of the survey qualities. In Table 4.1 below, the characteristics are sorted into three groups based on the number of participants who referenced them, with that number shown in parentheses.
Table 4.1

*Important School Characteristics and Frequency of Participant Mention*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Common Reasons</th>
<th>Somewhat Common Reasons</th>
<th>Less Common Reasons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location/neighborhood (12)</td>
<td>Comfortable/warm/nurturing (8)</td>
<td>Class sizes (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity (12)</td>
<td>Academic reputation (8)</td>
<td>Physical/financial resources (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community (10)</td>
<td>Teacher quality (7)</td>
<td>LGBTQ acceptance (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special education services (6)</td>
<td>Test scores (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School leadership (6)</td>
<td>Art and music (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum (6)</td>
<td>Athletics (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic rigor (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Safety (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Very Common Reasons*

A majority of parents described their preference for a school that was close to home, connected to their neighborhood and their community, with a student population reflective of the city’s diversity. Location/neighborhood and diversity were the two characteristics most frequently identified by study participants, each named by twelve as important in their school enrollment decision making process, followed by community which was named by ten.

**Location/Neighborhood** On the quantitative survey, “location” was the term parents were offered to consider whether it was important to them when they were thinking about school enrollment for their oldest child. In the interviews, “neighborhood” was the term that participants often chose instead, and it came up again and again. “[W]e loved the idea of a neighborhood school, we liked that we could walk him to it,” said Elisa. “It just felt like a nice natural transition from being home to like going into a bigger world ….” Mariam couldn’t walk her children to school, but her location still played a role.
I think really what pulled us was that a lot of the families in our neighborhood go to Leeds Elementary School ... we liked the idea of walking our kids down to the bus stop with the five other families on our blocks who did that.

**Racial and Ethnic Diversity** The district’s student population was more diverse than the city’s population as a whole. Students of color comprised 30% of district schools while the municipality was populated by 18% residents of color. Study participants were about as diverse as the city but not as diverse as the schools. This information is displayed in Table 4.2 below.

**Table 4.2**

*Race and Ethnicity of Northampton Residents, Students, and Survey Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>City of Northampton 2020-21</th>
<th>District schools 2020-21</th>
<th>Survey respondents 2021*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*10% of survey respondents did not answer this question.

Racial and ethnic diversity was specifically mentioned by twelve participants as important in their school enrollment decision making process, and many said they also valued diversity in students’ socioeconomic backgrounds, languages spoken at home, and learning abilities. For Yasmin, cultural diversity was the top consideration when looking at elementary schools in the area. She was mixed race and middle income. “We are immigrants from Morocco, me and my husband, therefore we’re Muslim, so we really
wanted him to grow in an environment where he's going to see that diversity and be exposed to as many cultures as possible ….”

Hazel was a lower-income White parent who noted that her partner was a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst studying policing, community responses to it, and systemic racism. She observed that, Northampton isn't the most racially diverse area but being in a public school is a way for our White kids to just spend more time with kids who have different skin colors and … come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, speak different languages. I mean … at one point, the principal sent out something that like twenty-five different languages are spoken by families at Jackson Street.

Other participants noted the limits to the district’s racial and ethnic diversity and recognized the value in other kinds of diversity, too. “[I] was a little bit disappointed when I saw the racial and ethnic makeup of the public schools here,” said Emily, who was mixed race and middle income. “But then I quickly realized that diversity is more than just race and ethnicity and quite frankly, there's a lot of kids at her school who aren't White, which I was like, oh, this is actually nice.” Ashley grew up in Northampton and attended the public schools, and her mother had a long career as a teacher in the district. She was White and middle income and had an expansive perspective on diversity as experienced by students in the public schools. “I feel like Northampton has a lot more diversity than people think. … every spectrum is covered, including politics, and so you get like the ability, you get … sexual orientation, you get different types of families ….”

There can be variability in how people experience the existence of racial and ethnic diversity, particularly within their individual racial and socioeconomic contexts.
Isabel was a Latina who grew up in Northampton and attended the district schools. She was residing in Springfield when she and her husband chose a private Montessori school for their children. Isabel returned to live in Northampton, again selecting a private Montessori school for her children before later enrolling them in a district school.

As far as race goes, I was a little apprehensive, just because of my own experience growing up in Northampton. I wasn't sure if they would get enough diversity. And if they did, what type of diversity were they getting? … [O]ther Hispanic kids, I was concerned about their parents’ involvement … I feel like Northampton … it’s completely divided with … the races and … certain races feel like they need to fall into a specific mold and a lot of times the kids, those kids fall through the cracks because they feel they need to be a certain way, and that was one of my concerns … the education is for the parents, too. [H]ow much are the parents being educated on the kids’ needs? So I was worried about that being a Hispanic family, a Latino family ….

Cheryl was a wealthy White mother who sent her son to the Smith College Campus School, a choice made by dozens of Northampton families every year. The Campus School is K-6, so when students complete sixth grade, their parents have to decide where to send them next. Some choose a nearby private school that offers grades 7-12, and others opt for the district’s middle school. Cheryl chose the latter.

I don't think I had the term cultural competency in my mind, but that really … is sort of what it was, I mean his need for that. His very first day coming home from JFK, he took … the school bus for the first time and … rather than telling [me] about his day told me about the bus ride. He said, ‘I sat next to this kid who just
moved here from Puerto Rico and he didn't really speak English, but we understood each other and he told me that he was the best boxer in his town of kids his age in Puerto Rico,’ and I was just thinking, you know, even though I hate boxing, that's really cool, and that's not something you would ever get in a private school.

**Community** The idea of community was the third most-cited quality, named by ten participants during their interviews when talking about what mattered to them at the time of their child’s school enrollment. This was not one of the characteristics on the quantitative survey, and it is a somewhat nebulous term. Parents used it to mean both the school as a reflection of the city’s texture and the sense of belonging they wanted from the school itself. Laura and her family moved to Northampton in 2004, and said,

> [W]e wanted to get out of New York City and we knew we wanted a place that had certain characteristics, right? … [W]e wanted a college town, we wanted the diversity, we wanted good educational systems, we wanted good restaurants, and culture …. So in my mind, the Northampton public schools were sort of the microcosm of that, right?

Abby, a wealthy White parent, told how her son’s experience at a Montessori summer preschool program left her concerned about him fitting in. The school’s model encourages children to pursue their own interests, but she saw that he was not initiating interactions with others and no one—including teachers—was reaching out to him. She then explained what she desired from the public school when he entered kindergarten. “[W]e wanted for him to make friends, to like school, to feel comfortable … I wanted him to be part of a community early on.” Community was also a top priority for Ceriona
and her wife, who researched the district schools extensively. “One of the things that mattered … it's the kind of community that exists within the school and it's hard to get that from any type of statistics.”

**Somewhat Common Reasons**

**Special Education Services** There was a cluster of school characteristics that were identified by five to eight parents as factoring into their enrollment decision making process. One of these stood out from all the rest, and that was special education services. Two interesting themes emerged from the six interviews with participants who said that access to special education programs or services was tied to their children’s enrollment in the Northampton public schools. The first was that parents of children with special needs did not feel like they had a feasible alternative to the district schools. This was especially true if the educational needs were moderate or severe, as distinguished from mild.

Typical secular and religious private schools do not offer specialized educational services, and the private schools that do exclusively educate children with special needs are much more expensive than those that don’t. Charter schools may provide special education services to students with mild learning differences but not to those with moderate or severe differences. Homeschooling is generally not an option because of the specialized training needed for an adequate education. Moreover, a school day respite from intense care may be essential for parents who are raising children with special needs.

Sarah was a White middle-income mother who described the change in thinking that she and her husband underwent regarding their son’s educational experience.

We wanted him to go to a private preschool, actually, but it wasn't happening
because he was diagnosed with autism, and the private preschool could not, did not have the capacity to take care of him or his needs at all ... so we shifted from the beautiful idea of the outdoor nature preschool to good old fashioned public preschool just like we went through, with all the supports that he needed ....

The second theme that emerged from this group was that the special education services served to pull families into the district schools, particularly through the integrated preschool. Linda was one of four participants whose child was identified by an outside early childhood expert as requiring intervention. She was a middle-income White woman. “[T]he pediatrician had some concerns about [my oldest son]'s speech delay, that he wasn't talking, and so they connected us with Jackson Street for preschool to be able to be enrolled in that program.” Isabel’s children were older and the possibility of their special needs was just one of the issues that had her attention. “I was starting to be concerned about … learning disabilities and … them being in a little bubble within a bubble of Northampton … I figured [it was] time to transition them into the Northampton public school system.” There, two of her children were evaluated and found eligible to receive special education services.

Even though parents in this group could not access the range of out-of-district educational options available to parents of typical children, several described how they advocated within the district to enroll their child at their preferred school. For some, the assigned program was at their school of choice, and this was expressed as a beneficial corollary to the child’s special needs. The placement of the child with special needs was also used to ask that their typical child be given a spot at the same school, if it was parents’ chosen site. Another approach was to request that their child receive the required
educational services at their preferred school if the program was not already located there. Linda wanted to keep all three of her boys at the same school, so she moved her oldest son from Leeds School back to Jackson Street, where her middle son was receiving preschool services at the time.

And then [my oldest son]'s experience at Jackson Street wasn't as strong as we hoped, in terms of academics. So we moved him back to Leeds. Then we moved [my middle son] to Leeds as well and required Leeds School to create an IEP [Individualized Education Plan] circumstance for him that was similar to the program at Jackson Street ....

Other Somewhat Common Reasons Of the seven other school characteristics in this middle cluster, six had been offered on the quantitative survey. The one inductive quality was comfortable, warm, nurturing, and almost half of the parents talked about it. Mary expressed the idea most clearly. “I wanted to know it would be a safe, nurturing environment ... I think I had in my head my kindergarten-y experience of, you know, PTO and cupcakes ... I needed that warm and fuzzy of kindergarten.” Academic reputation was mentioned by close to half as well, including Jamie. “Now you know we're not the highest ranked schools, but we have a decent reputation here and I think people do ... feel like the public schools are a viable option ....”

Teacher quality was cited by seven parents, and curriculum by six. Sarah captured both of these characteristics in her reflections about her son’s early educational experience. “[W]e were so thrilled that the preschool was very play-based and very child-centered and his preschool teacher was wonderful … she understood autism a lot.”
School leadership was referenced by six parents as an important factor in either choosing or avoiding a particular school. For Yasmin, it pulled her in. “I remember [a co-worker] telling me about Jackson Street and how ... the principal back then was really involved and the kind of atmosphere that was going on.” For Ashley, it pushed her away.

There was a principal at Leeds that I didn't like, that I knew the teachers didn't like, and so I thought of sending her to Bridge Street or something, but then it was switched and [a different principal] moved to Leeds and I said, oh never mind, okay, Leeds is a go.

Academic rigor is an amorphous concept and five participants alluded to it using amorphous terms. Rachel said she wanted the school “to feel like it was a high-quality education” while Laura wanted her son “to be challenged and engaged but also not in a room full of kids who are all super smart.” Safety is another idea that can shift in meaning for parents, and it did for the five who mentioned it. Some paired it with words like “warm” and “nurturing” as in the general environment, while one directly connected it to school shootings. Mariam summed up what could perhaps be true for many parents when deciding to enroll their children in the district schools. “[I]t would maybe be a harder decision if the schools were unsafe.”

Less Common Reasons

Several school characteristics were hardly mentioned at all during the eighteen interviews. Class sizes, regularly identified as a critical input by educators and parents alike, was only referenced by three participants. One said it mattered to her and the other two said they knew class sizes were fine in the district. Perhaps the other participants had the same general sense since large class sizes have not typically been an issue in the
Northampton public schools. Acceptance of LGBTQ families was named by just two participants. This could be attributed to an assumption that, in a city recognized nationally for its sizable LGBTQ population, all schools in the area would be welcoming to LGBTQ families.

Test scores were identified positively by only one parent. Ceriona believed they were a metric “somewhat indicative of the kind of environment at that school, so we did look at those. I mean, I was more curious than anything, just to see is what I’m hearing supported by data? And I think it was.” Many participants were asked a follow-up question about the school characteristics that didn’t matter to them at the time of student enrollment, and it was interesting to note that three said test scores and three said the academics. Emily’s reflection about why she didn’t prioritize the latter was nuanced.

So I do remember talking with other parents who had kids in other districts or at a charter school and they talked about how great the academics were at these other schools. And I was like, cool. Like, I get it sounds really weird to say that out loud, it's not that I don't care about academics, I just kind of trusted that it would be fine wherever we were.

Parents’ Awareness and Consideration of Educational Options

The second grand tour question of the interview asked if parents had considered any other options before they made their enrollment decision. All eighteen participants were aware that there were educational alternatives beyond their zoned district schools, and twelve of them thought about those options prior to their decision. Four parents said they considered private schools, four considered charter schools, and four considered
both charter and private schools. Only two parents mentioned inter-district school choice, one of whom said it might have been a possibility.

There were a variety of reasons given by parents for their decision to explore options, and no single clear theme emerged from them. Ceriona said a lot of her daughter’s friends were going to the Smith College Campus School and she gave that some thought, while Jamie noted that although her son had special needs, not everyone they knew was in public school and so she did look at other schools. Yasmin wanted a backup plan in case her son did not get a seat at Jackson Street School through intra-district choice, and Mariam talked with her Jewish husband about Lander Grinspoon Academy. Elisa was curious about charter schools, Mary wanted to feel like she’d done her homework, and Laura described herself as a savvy consumer. “Yes, it's a public service, but it's something that we're opting into as parents for our kids and how are we making those choices?”

A noteworthy theme that did emerge from the answers to the question was several participants’ strong opposition to charter schools. These parents had a detailed understanding of how charter schools were funded, the limited access to them, and their impact on district schools. John, a lower-income father, said that he detested charter schools.

Because it's, ‘oh … it's a lottery so everybody has the same’—no, it's not just a lottery. Parents have to care enough to get into the lottery to send the kid to the school and then the money goes ‘fwoop’ to the charter school and the public school with the parents who don't have the wherewithal to think about sending a kid to charter school or just can't get the kid to the charter school with the extra
needs and it’s just sucking money off of the public schools, so I would never do that ....

To understand more precisely the nature of parental consideration, the researcher analyzed whether it was done actively or passively. Active exploration of options was defined as using at least one of these methods: research, visiting the school, applying for the charter school lottery, or talking with a school administrator. Eight participants actively explored their options. The other four parents passively explored their choices, defined as thinking about them or discussing them with their partners. The researcher also wanted to determine if there was any relationship between parents who explored their educational options before their child’s enrollment in the public schools, and then later withdrew their child from the district. Six families withdrew at least one child and enrolled them in a private or charter school, and four of these participants had considered their alternatives before enrollment in the Northampton public schools.

Sources of Information Used by Parents During School Enrollment Decision Process

It is important to understand if the sources of information parents reported using during their school enrollment decision making process was a factor in their choice to consider options beyond the district schools. The researcher compared two groups of parents, those who said they did explore alternatives with those who said they did not, and found little difference between the two in terms of where they got their information. Moreover, there were no discernible information-seeking patterns within the group as a whole. Participants reported using from one to five resources; the mode was four resources, cited by five parents. This is shown in Table 4.3 below.
Table 4.3

*Number of Information Sources Used by Parents Thinking About School Enrollment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of sources used</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>⚫⚫⚫⚫</td>
<td>⚫⚫⚫⚫</td>
<td>⚫⚫⚫</td>
<td>⚫⚫⚫⚫⚫</td>
<td>⚫⚫</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean number of sources used by parents who considered other schooling options was 2.67, and the source most frequently cited was parents of their child’s friends. Fifty percent mentioned it, including Yasmin: “I think it's just from the talk after [preschool] drop-off, you know, people are thinking about schools ... I never visited the school; we made our decision completely by just what we heard from people telling us.” School visits were actually the most frequently cited resource by parents who did not look outside the district. Four out of this group of six referenced it; two gave the visits emphasis and two did not. The mean number of resources used by this subgroup was 3.17. While there was not much difference in the number of information sources used by parents who explored educational alternatives and those who didn’t, it is curious to see that it was actually the non-exploring parents who consulted more sources.

There are several interesting observations that can be made about this data. Predictably, other sources of information that participants found helpful during the enrollment process were their friends, neighbors, and family members, as well as websites. Somewhat surprisingly, however, just one parent cited her realtor. This could be explained by local realtors’ adherence to fair housing laws, or their input being superseded by different types of information. Eight participants mentioned resources that were not included on the quantitative survey and were unanticipated by the researcher. These included teachers, clients, and the letter from the district mailed to all families in the city with children approaching kindergarten age. Abby remembered it this way: “City
Hall, or it must have been the school department, but they get records from City Hall, because they say according to the birth certificate on file you have a five-year-old, [this is] when kindergarten registration is, and so that was helpful.”

Finally, while four parents reported factoring just one source of information into their school enrollment decision, it is important to recognize that three of these were parents of children with special needs who were enrolled in the district’s integrated preschool. This group was identified earlier as potentially having no feasible alternatives to the district schools. However, Sarah explained how valuable it was to have her own helpful information network.

I found a local support group for parents of kids with autism down in Holyoke and that was life changing, absolutely life changing ... and Pathlight is an organization in western Mass. and The Arc of Massachusetts has lots of resources … it's within the autism community of loved ones and actual self-advocates that I’ve gotten all that kind of support.

**Barriers to Exit from the District Schools**

An analysis of in-district parents’ school enrollment decision making processes must include an investigation of the possibility that there were barriers to exit from the district that would have precluded families’ examination of alternatives to the district schools. As a follow-up query to the question about whether they had considered educational options, the researcher asked interview participants if there were any obstacles to enrolling their child elsewhere if they had wanted to. Four parents said that there were. Abby and Rachel were educators in the city’s two public high schools; they reported that they would not have been able to afford private school and were
philosophically opposed to charter schools. Sarah knew she would have a fight on her hands if she asked the district to place her son in a private school for children with autism because its high cost would be their responsibility. She added that one local program would not even be her preference because they use an Applied Behavioral Analysis approach which she opposes. Emily told how she and her husband recently faced potentially losing the lease on their apartment and started to look for other housing options. One neighborhood they liked was in a different school assignment zone. They wanted to keep their daughter at Bridge Street School through intra-district school choice but transportation would have been a barrier because of their reliance on the school bus.

Of the fourteen parents who said they could have exited the district if they wanted to, four indicated that private school tuition might have been or was an obstacle for them. Elisa was one of these. When her oldest son was in kindergarten, he started coming home from school saying that he was stupid and had a bad brain. The teacher was trying to determine if he had a specific learning issue and kept him in from recess to complete his work, but this left him feeling punished. Elisa said he would sometimes melt down after the school day for two and a half hours. His experience, compounded by what she described as a lack of stable leadership at the school, led her to search for alternatives.

The other, the big big one, for us, has always been finance. I think a lot of the barriers to looking for alternatives have a lot to do with just your privilege, right? [My oldest son] had me so heartbroken that I did look at Hartsbrook for a bit and applied for a scholarship and it wasn't enough ....

Two parents reported that charter school acceptance was an issue; both had applied to Hilltown Cooperative Arts Charter School and been waitlisted. “[T]hey were like, sorry,
he is not getting in, I think he was number seven, and they were already full,” said Yasmin, “so … I didn't visit it, I didn't enquire information.”

Five parents in this group of fourteen ended up with at least one of their children leaving the district schools at some point after they enrolled their first child, with three choosing private schools and two opting for charter schools. For both Ceriona and Linda, the exit happened when their children were high school age, and the move was made so they could play sports at prep schools. In Northampton, some youth sports are played competitively through the private Suburban League, which is run by parents and has tryouts. It is different from the inclusive recreational sports programs sponsored by the city. The private league serves unofficially as a feeder to the athletic teams for the most desirable sports at Northampton High School. Linda moved to the city from another state and described feeling pushed out of the district by the city’s sports culture.

[W]e struggled a lot with politics in terms of athletics … those programs were really built by people who were born and raised here and that's not something we’ll ever be, right? So it made it easy for us to sort of look around and see what other options were out there ... and the irony is that, you know, Suburban basketball is not part of the school system but it's very tied in.

Isabel was one of the parents whose daughter went to a charter school, the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter School. During the interview, she reflected on her perception that not everyone could access this opportunity. “What if a family that lived in one of the [housing] projects did want to choose? You know, just for whatever reasons. How are those options going to be available to them to go to a charter school?”
Buyer’s Remorse

Although a number of participants reflected on their experiences within the Northampton public schools while discussing their school enrollment decisions and obstacles to exit from the district, the third grand tour interview question provided an opportunity for a deeper exploration of that topic. They were asked to tell about their experiences since the enrollment of their oldest child and were invited to talk about all of their children. Parents were also asked if they were glad they made the decision they did and if at any point they considered another schooling option for any of their children.

Thirteen parents characterized their experiences approvingly, using terms like “wonderful” and “very happy”; two were generally satisfied; and three were critical of the schools. “I think I have two very well-educated kids who can do whatever they want to do,” said Kimberly, focusing on the end result. Ceriona thought about her daughters’ elementary and middle school years.

One of the things that stands out the most about our experience at Leeds was how welcoming and embracing it was for us as parents there. In middle school I was braced for, ‘What's middle school going to be like?’ And I would say that I was pleasantly surprised that my kids had an overall positive experience there. I think the model that exists seems to work really well.

John was more reserved in his response. “I wouldn't want to say I’m actively glad; I’m perfectly satisfied [with the] decision.” And one of the critical parents was Linda, whose bifurcated assessment was rooted in the differing educational needs of her children. “[My middle son]’s experience has been horrific … [my youngest son]’s experience has been awesome.” All three participants who found fault with the district
schools went on to withdraw at least one of their children, as did one of the two generally satisfied parents.

The single aspect that was praised most frequently was the district’s teachers, by thirteen participants. However, the second most-cited characteristic, by seven parents, was a negative one, and it was underperforming teachers. Cheryl described how her son encountered both. “His very first year in seventh grade at JFK was academically pretty weak, but then eighth grade he had fantastic teachers. He got on the good team of that year, and it was great.” The other positive experiences that parents highlighted were the friends their child made and the rich educational opportunities at the high school. The negative experiences they chronicled were of their children not being challenged academically and being bullied by peers.

An additional theme that emerged from participants’ responses to the final interview question was that four parents mentioned how a child was identified as having special learning needs at some point after their enrollment in the district. When these four parents are added to the six who initially entered the district in order to access special education programs or services, that group represents more than half of the study sample. Hazel’s son was in kindergarten when his teacher recommended him for a special education evaluation, and Hazel said his current teacher was supporting them well through that process. She noted that, “in some of our conversations with other parents around his difficulties in kindergarten some of our friends, whose kids go to private schools, were like, oh, he would do really great at this school, they have like an outdoor curriculum, or it's more following the child.” But she was resistant to the idea of private school because “there's always a possibility that the school can say, ‘We can't deal with
what your child has going on.’ And with the public schools, the 504 being like a legal binding document, the school really has to help every child that's there. I think that was meaningful to us.”

**Integration of Quantitative Findings With Qualitative Findings**

A clear finding from the quantitative study was that the Northampton public schools factored into parents’ decisions to live in this district located in a competitive choice environment. The interviews with a subset of the survey respondents revealed that for some parents, the district schools mattered to them even before they had children. When it was time to enroll their children in school, however, there was a divergence between the quantitative and the qualitative participants in terms of the school characteristics that mattered to each group. Teacher quality and acceptance of LGBTQ families were top characteristics chosen by survey participants, but they barely registered with the interviewees. Racial and ethnic diversity was the top quality for interview participants, while fewer than half of the survey respondents selected it as a characteristic that was important to them. The qualitative study also provided space for the emergence of an important factor not on the survey, and that was participants’ ideological support for public schools. Both groups named school location or neighborhood as a characteristic that mattered to them, and academic reputation was identified as a meaningful attribute as well. Figures 4.3 and 4.4 below illustrate the qualities identified as important in each study.
Parents in Northampton were fully aware of the educational options available to their children, and the majority of study participants said they gave consideration to those...
options. Interestingly, there were no clear themes from either study regarding the reasons why parents explored those alternatives. Charter schools were ruled out by a vocal segment of the interviewees who opposed them on philosophical grounds. In terms of where parents were finding information during the school enrollment process, the survey participants named friends and neighbors as most helpful. There was no identifiable pattern in the information-seeking behavior of the interviewees. However, when the participants in both studies who considered their educational options were separated from those who didn’t, school visits were recognized as valuable resources. Finally, the possibility of barriers to families’ exit from the district must be examined as a possible factor in their school enrollment decision. Parents in both groups singled out the financial cost of private school as the biggest obstacle to leaving, and since this data set was skewed to members of households with incomes above the city’s median, it must be even more of a barrier for families with limited means.

Limitations

The global pandemic required an adjustment to the survey distribution which unquestionably distorted the data collection. The researcher had originally planned to visit the six schools in person during family events, set up a number of laptop computers in a central location, and invite parents to take the survey. These events in Northampton had a history of being well-attended and would have provided access to a rich cross-section of district families. When schooling went remote, however, the survey had to be distributed electronically. This was carried out by the principals in each school, and it happened at a time when families were inundated with an unusual amount of electronic communications from their children’s schools.
The result of this shift in methods was a data set skewed toward parents who reported a much higher household income than the median in Northampton. Additionally, respondents were not as diverse as the district’s student population, and they reported more formal education than the overall population of the city. The discussion of the study findings, therefore, cannot include an assessment of the school enrollment decision making processes of district parents who lived in households that were not well-resourced, parents of color, or those with less formal education.

However, because three groups of qualitative participants were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives, some observations can be made related to how the district school enrollment decision making process was experienced differently by these parents based on their socioeconomic backgrounds and races. There were six participants of color, and all of them identified diversity as an important school characteristic, whereas six of the twelve White participants did. The two other most desired qualities were community and school leadership, and they were both rated higher by the parents of color than by the White parents. Fewer parents of color considered out-of-district options, and far fewer considered charter schools, just 17% compared to 58% of White parents. Parents of color used websites as a source of information at a much higher rate than White parents, with 67% reporting that they did in contrast to 8% of White parents. Notably, more parents of color than White parents said they could have opted out of the district schools if they wanted to, but fewer actually did.

Ten participants reported household incomes of $100,000 or less and were categorized as lower- or middle-income. The school characteristics that mattered much more to this group than to wealthy parents were curriculum, a school that was warm,
nurturing, and comfortable, and school leadership. Fewer parents who were lower- or middle-income considered private school, and just 20% expressed opposition to charter schools compared to 50% of wealthy parents. Transportation, charter acceptance, and private school tuition were all identified as barriers to exit from the district at much higher rates by lower- or middle-income parents than wealthy parents.

Several areas for further research into the school enrollment decisions of in-district parents who live in competitive choice environments like Northampton’s are suggested by these observations. It would be interesting to learn more about the importance of school leadership to both parents of color and lower- and middle-income parents. Researchers could also explore why parents of color may not opt out of district schools when they could and may not consider charter schools, and why parents from lower- or middle-income households might not be opposed to charter schools. And finally, a more comprehensive investigation should be made to determine whether parents of color and lower- and middle-income parents were every bit as intentional about their residence selection and their school enrollment decisions as the quantitative study participants were, why they might be choosing the district schools, and how many would have preferred to exit them for another option but lacked the resources to do so.

**Conclusion**

The results of a quantitative survey of 304 parents who lived in Northampton and sent their children to the district schools revealed the considerable extent to which families chose to live in the city to be able to access the schools, with three-quarters reporting it was a very important or important factor. At the time of their oldest child’s enrollment, study participants found two educational characteristics of the Northampton
public schools to be the most appealing: teacher quality and academic reputation. These were also named as key to parents’ enrollment decisions. The vast majority of survey respondents were aware of their educational options and more than half chose to explore them, strongly suggesting that district enrollment was an active choice for many.

Interviews with eighteen parents who were a subset of the quantitative group uncovered several meaningful themes. Twelve participants expressed their ideological support for public education as a common good in unequivocal and moving terms. When parents reflected on their school enrollment decision making processes, they mentioned two characteristics that mattered to them more often than any others: the neighborhood location of the district schools and the racial and ethnic diversity of the student population. Participants appreciated other types of diversity as well, as well as schools that had a community feel.

A number of other qualities were identified as being important by smaller groups of participants. Access to special education services was one that stood out for compelling reasons. Some parents of children with special needs reported that there were no viable options to the public schools. At the same time, special education served as a draw for families into the district, particularly through the integrated preschool. They were joined by an additional group of parents who said that their children were identified for special education evaluations after enrollment and benefited from eligibility.

In this competitive choice environment, all of the study participants were aware that they had alternative educational options available to them. Twelve parents considered them. A variety of sources were helpful to parents during their school enrollment decision making process, and most used several types whether or not they
were exploring options. Four participants said obstacles would have prevented their exit from the district if they wanted to leave and fourteen said there were no obstacles.

Finally, parents were asked to reflect on their experiences with the Northampton public schools since the time of their first student’s enrollment. Fifteen were very happy or satisfied, and three were not happy and ended up withdrawing at least one of their children from the district.

An integrative analysis of the quantitative data and the qualitative data reinforced the finding that the district schools mattered in participants’ decisions to live in Northampton. At the time of school enrollment, parents knew they had educational options and most gave them consideration. Different qualities were identified by each group as appealing to them during the school enrollment decision making process, but school location or neighborhood was common to both. Friends, neighbors, and the parents of their children’s friends were all helpful resources, and school visits mattered to parents considering their options.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

School choice has been used as a policy tool in the United States since the mid-twentieth century, but it took on a new and lasting prominence as part of the education reform efforts that swept the nation during the 1990s. Legislation that expanded public school choice was based on two policy assumptions: increased access to educational options would promote equity of opportunity for students who could transfer to a better-performing school or one that was a better pedagogical match; and district schools exposed to competition would be more responsive to families and also seek to improve their effectiveness. An important concern expressed by policy critics was that expanding public school choice would exacerbate student sorting on the basis of race, socioeconomic background, and student ability.

There has been a great deal of research investigating the dynamic impact of educational choice on students and families who opt out of their geographically assigned district schools, and on the students and families who are left behind. However, there has been much less analysis of the school enrollment behaviors of families who send their children to the district schools where they live. A complete assessment of public school choice as a policy tool requires an understanding of how and why parents decide to enroll their children in their district schools. This study contributes to the nascent field of scholarship.

Some important questions about the enrollment practices of in-district parents arise from the identified gap in the research. In competitive educational marketplaces, do
district schools become the default option for families who do not or cannot send their children anywhere else? Does choice draw away the parents most likely to advocate for high quality schools, leading to innovation and improvement elsewhere but complacency in the district schools? Do parents choose homes in districts made up of families from similar racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, thus extending the concern about student sorting to choice through residential selection?

Without knowing the answers to these questions, state policymakers and district leaders in competitive educational marketplaces are confronted by several problems. First, parents could be exercising school choice by choosing to live in their preferred districts, but they are left out of school choice policy discussions, developments, and evaluations. They might even see themselves as opponents of choice while potentially contributing to its negative effects. Second, families may have varying levels of knowledge about the existing educational options, and some might miss out on the chance to select a setting that would better suit their children. The school enrollment decision process could also be inadvertently sorting students into schools by those factors that support or limit families’ access to information.

Third, if many families are intentionally choosing their district schools but administrators do not know the reasons why, they cannot align their budgets, curricula, programs, or policies with the educational priorities of those purposeful families. Efforts to strategically position their schools within the local educational marketplace are also hampered by administrators’ lack of understanding about the district’s desirable qualities from the perspective of parents. Finally, there might be families who would have preferred to leave the district but faced obstacles to doing so. District leaders do not know
if their school communities include such families, or why they might be dissatisfied with the educational experience provided by the district. Administrators, therefore, cannot and do not effectively address them.

Northampton, Massachusetts was an ideal site for exploring the school enrollment decision making processes of families who sent their children to the district schools. Located in a competitive educational marketplace, there was an active transfer of students in and out of the district. Several nearby charter schools were the latest examples of a long tradition of educational innovation in the area. Massachusetts was at the forefront of the national movement to expand public school choice, and Northampton’s leaders had been wrestling with its effects on the district for more than two decades.

Discussion and Implications for Policy and Practice

The study findings that have the most meaningful implications for educational policy and practice are that the Northampton public schools were an important factor in participants’ decisions to live in the district, almost all of the parents were aware that they had educational options at the time of their children’s school enrollment, and the majority of parents explored these alternatives during their decision making processes. In this district located in a competitive choice environment, these parents can and should be considered as actively exercising school choice.

Lawmakers debate and create school choice policies. District leaders navigate the application and consequences of those policies. Scholars research and evaluate the effects of public school choice. Evidence from this study suggests that district schools located in competitive choice environments like Northampton, along with the families who enroll in them, should be explicitly considered by these three groups of actors when developing,
implementing, and assessing school choice policies. Not to do so truncates the work in this policy area. Expanding the idea of school choice to one that includes in-district families could also serve to ameliorate community tensions related to choice where they exist. If in-district parents in competitive educational environments are able to shift their perception to understand that they, too, are making an educational choice for their children, they might be less critical of the parents who exit for public charter or inter-district schools. They could even begin to actively participate in local school choice discussions as advocates for district schools.

**Residence Selection and Access to District Schools**

This study provided evidence that the district schools are closely linked to people’s decisions about where to live, and the finding has two significant implications for politicians. The first is that civic leaders in competitive educational environments should elevate the public schools’ prominence in any campaigns seeking to attract residents. Welcoming messages at points of entry to a city, whether they are physical or virtual, could include information about the schools. Their convenient neighborhood locations, teacher quality, and student diversity should be featured because those were identified as important characteristics by many participants. Local chambers of commerce should be briefed annually about the schools’ educational missions, programs, and accomplishments, since a healthy local economy is partly dependent upon people choosing to take up permanent residence in a city or town. The second implication is that policymakers should be alert to the possibility that residence choices sort families and their students in the same ways that school choices can. And if it is found to do that, policy remedies should be provided, such as increasing the provision of low- and middle-
income housing stock in well-resourced districts or mandating district participation in statewide open enrollment programs.

**District Enrollment as Active Choice Not Default Decision**

It is clear from the study findings that the district schools were being actively chosen by families at the time of student enrollment, thereby suggesting that in a competitive educational environment like Northampton’s, choice may not be drawing away the parents who would be most likely to advocate for high quality schools. As further evidence for this idea, participants focused on meaningful academic and social-emotional characteristics of the district schools during the enrollment decision making process. Parents’ decisions to select a district school was, for many of them, firmly rooted in their ideological support for public education as a valuable common good that benefitted society. District leaders should cultivate a connection with parent advocates in the interest of maintaining high-quality, innovative schools that remain an asset to the community. Strong district-parent partnerships would ensure continuous alignment between families and administrators regarding each school’s educational mission and goals, and would serve to inform the development, execution, and evaluation of academic programs.

Because families are treating district schools as part of the educational marketplace, district leaders should devote resources to promoting the local public schools. Websites might be designed to look like those of local charter and private schools, and they should be regularly updated with positive news and helpful information. Additional messaging ought to specifically target families with young children and emphasize the characteristics that were identified as important by study
participants: teacher quality, academic reputation, location, LGBTQ acceptance, and racial and ethnic diversity. District leaders may want to consider offering intra-district choice to families, and if they already do, they might want to give that program prominence and consider offering transportation to any school chosen by parents. Districts typically have a portfolio of schools, which sets them apart from most charter and private schools and gives them a market advantage.

An important cohort of parents in the study chose the district schools for the special education services that were provided to their children. The integrated preschools in particular drew families into the district. An effective strategy district leaders could consider is offering an integrated preschool program at every elementary school. This would affirm the importance to families of the schools’ neighborhood locations and address a nationwide need for more spots in early education programs.

Sources of Information Used by Parents During School Enrollment Decision Process

Parents who are preparing to enroll their first child in school need to learn how that process works. Study participants reported that their friends and neighbors were most helpful to them during this phase. In promotional campaigns undertaken at the district level, leaders should therefore consider how to effectively reach residents’ social circles and neighborhoods. Connections with parent advocates mentioned earlier could certainly be utilized for this purpose. School visits were identified as very helpful by parents who were exploring their options, and so they take on an added significance. School administrators should thoughtfully craft the school visit experience for prospective families, accentuating the characteristics that study participants said they valued. Faculty and staff should also be briefed about the importance of these visits to the district.
Barriers to Exit from the District Schools

Some parents reported that there were barriers to their exit from the district. Private school tuition was the obstacle cited most frequently, by more than a third of respondents. City leaders could explore partnerships with the heads of local private schools and ask them to set aside a certain number of seats in each grade for students from under-resourced resident families. A lottery might then be held to assign those seats. This type of agreement could help to counter any socioeconomic sorting of students caused by private schools. Since private schools have tax-exempt status, they may be open to such an agreement as a payment in lieu of taxes.

Conclusion

Public school choice was an important policy tool in the wave of education reforms that swept the nation in the 1900s, and it continues to attract attention from both supporters and detractors today. A great deal is known about its effects on the students who leave their assigned districts as well as on those who are left behind. However, there is very little research on the school enrollment decision making processes of families who reside in competitive educational environments and send their children to the district schools. This mixed methods study of a small district in Massachusetts where school choice has had a big impact is an effort to begin filling that gap. The Northampton public schools had a dynamic transfer of students in and out of the district, and a net loss of financial resources resulting from student exit to area charter schools. Research revealed that in this local setting, parents were actively choosing their district schools. Study participants were guided during their decision making processes by the following interests: teacher quality, schools’ academic reputations, the racial and ethnic diversity of
the student body, participants’ ideological support for public schools, and the
neighborhood location of the schools that offered a community feel. The findings of this
study should compel policymakers and researchers to include districts located in
competitive educational environments in their work. Ideally, district leaders will
recognize that parents are actively considering their schools as part of the local school
choice marketplace and respond competitively. And they can also appreciate that there
already exists a strong base of support from committed families.
NPS Parents

Thank you so much for taking this short survey. It is intended for parents and guardians who live in Northampton and send (or sent) their children to the Northampton Public Schools. Your answers will be completely anonymous. Do you live in Northampton?

- Yes
- No

If you have more than one child who attends or did attend the Northampton Public Schools, please consider your oldest child when answering all survey questions. How old is your child now?

School enrolled Which was the first public school in Northampton that you enrolled your oldest child in?

- Bridge Street School
- Jackson Street School
- JFK Middle School
- Leeds Elementary School
- Northampton High School
- Ryan Road School
- Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School

At the time you enrolled your oldest child, were you aware that there were other options besides the Northampton Public Schools? For example: public schools in other towns, private schools, or charter schools.

- Yes
- No
When did you move to Northampton?

- I moved here with my parents or I was born here. (1)
- I moved to the area to attend college. (2)
- I moved here as an adult and I did not have children. (3)
- I moved here as an adult and I did have children. (4)
- Other (please explain) (5)

How important were the Northampton Public Schools in your decision to live in Northampton?

- Very important
- Important
- Not very important
- Not a factor in my decision
At the time you enrolled your oldest child, **did you have a positive or negative opinion of the Northampton Public Schools for each item below?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic reputation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher quality</td>
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<tr>
<td>School leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic rigor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Test scores</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class sizes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td>School location</td>
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<tr>
<td>Athletic programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Art and music programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Racial and ethnic diversity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acceptance of LGBTQ families</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education services</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You rated these items as positive for the Northampton Public Schools. **Please say whether or not each item was important in your decision to enroll your child in the Northampton Public Schools.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Important in my decision</th>
<th>Not important in my decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic reputation</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher quality</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School leadership</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic rigor</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Test scores</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class sizes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
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<td>School location</td>
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<td>Athletic programs</td>
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<td>Art and music programs</td>
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<td>Student safety</td>
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<td>Racial and ethnic diversity</td>
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<td>Acceptance of LGBTQ families</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special education services</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Did any of these items matter in your decision to enroll your child in the Northampton Public Schools?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My child's lottery number for a charter school wasn't chosen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn't want to or couldn't pay for private school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I couldn't drive my child to a school outside the district</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I couldn't homeschool my child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child's friends would be attending the Northampton Public Schools</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Did you ever consider another schooling option for your child besides the Northampton Public Schools?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
You rated these items as negative for the Northampton Public Schools. **Please say whether or not each item was important in your decision to consider another schooling option for your child.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Important in my decision</th>
<th>Not important in my decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic reputation</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher quality</td>
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<td>School leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic rigor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Test scores</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class sizes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td>School location</td>
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<tr>
<td>Athletic programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Art and music programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student safety</td>
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<td>Racial and ethnic diversity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acceptance of LGBTQ families</td>
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<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education services</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When you were thinking about enrolling your child in the Northampton Public Schools, you may have used different sources of information. Please say how helpful each source was to you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>Not helpful</th>
<th>Didn't use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members of my family</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My friends</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>My neighbors</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>The parents of my child's friends</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>My co-workers</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>My realtor</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>My own experience as a student</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Websites that review or rank area schools</td>
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<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>NPS websites</td>
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<tr>
<td>Out-of-district school websites</td>
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<tr>
<td>School visit(s)</td>
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<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newspaper or radio coverage</td>
<td>○</td>
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</table>
You're almost done! Please answer a few questions about yourself, to help the researcher know if the people who take the survey are a representative sample of Northampton.

What is your age?

⊙ Under 30 years old
⊙ 30-39 years old
⊙ 40-49 years old
⊙ 50 years or older
⊙ Prefer not to answer

What is your race/ethnicity?

⊙ White or European American
⊙ Hispanic or Latino
⊙ Black or African American
⊙ Native American or American Indian
⊙ Asian American or Pacific Islander
⊙ Biracial or mixed race
⊙ Prefer not to answer
What is the highest level of school you have completed? If you are currently enrolled in school, please choose the highest degree completed.

- Some middle or high school
- High school diploma or equivalent
- Associate's degree or some college
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree
- Prefer not to answer

What is your approximate household income?

- Less than $20,000
- $20,000 to $34,999
- $35,000 to $49,999
- $50,000 to $74,999
- $75,000 to $99,999
- $100,000 or more
- Prefer not to answer

Optional: Would you be willing to have a 30-minute conversation with the researcher about your school choice process? If you agree, your survey responses will no longer be anonymous.

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Wonderful! Please enter your contact information below.

- First and last name ________________________________
- Email address ____________________________________
ARRIVAL/SMALL TALK
Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me about your decision to enroll your child in the Northampton Public Schools! And for signing and submitting your consent form.

INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH AND INTERVIEW
- The purpose of my research is to learn more about the school enrollment decisions of families who live in Northampton.
- I love having conversations with people, but this interview won’t be like that. I want you to talk as much as possible, and I will try to talk as little as possible.
- I will only use the audio recording of this interview, so we can do it with the camera on or off, whichever you prefer. Do you have a preference?
- I’ve got some short background questions before we begin with my research questions.

BEGINNING THE INTERVIEW
- How many adults live in your household?
- Is anyone a stay-at-home parent, or have they been?
- How many children live in your household?
- Where do they currently go to school?
- What is your relationship to them?
- About what year did you move to Northampton?
- What grade was your first child enrolled in the Northampton Public Schools?
- Who would you say was mainly responsible for the school enrollment decision?

Thank you for providing that information. Now I am going to ask my three main questions, which are open-ended, and I want you to tell me everything you can. I may have some follow-up questions for each one.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Grand Tour: Tell me the story of how your first child came to be enrolled in the Northampton Public Schools.
- Why did you want your child to go to the public schools in Northampton?
- What kinds of things were you thinking about that were important to you?
- What kinds of things weren’t that important to you?
- What resources (human, print, digital) do you remember being helpful at this time?
Grand Tour: Before you made the enrollment decision for your child, did you consider any other options, such as a public school in another district, a charter school, a private school, or homeschooling?

- If yes, why did you consider the option(s)? Why did you decide against it? And why did you ultimately choose the Northampton Public Schools?
- If no, why were you so committed to the Northampton Public Schools?
- Would you say that there were any obstacles to enrolling your child somewhere else if you had wanted to?

Grand Tour: Tell me about your experience with the Northampton Public Schools since your child was first enrolled. Are you glad you made the decision that you did? At any point have you considered a different schooling option for anyone?

- If you are satisfied, what are the reasons why?
- If you considered other options, why did you and what were they?
- Would you say that there were any obstacles to enrolling your child somewhere else if you had wanted to?

ENDING THE INTERVIEW

- Were there any topics you were expecting to talk about today that I didn’t ask about?
- Do you have any questions for me?

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Thank you so much, again, for taking the time to talk with me about your decision to enroll your child in the Northampton Public Schools. I appreciate your contribution to my research!
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study
University of Massachusetts Amherst

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher:</th>
<th>Julie Spencer-Robinson</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study Title:</td>
<td>Active Choice or Default Decision? When Families Who Reside in a Competitive School Choice Environment Enroll Children in Their District Schools</td>
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</table>

1. **WHAT IS THIS FORM?**
This is a consent form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in the College of Education. This study is a part of my dissertation research, which is a requirement for graduation. I identify as a White female, and I have been both a teacher and a parent in the Northampton Public Schools. I encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form in DocuSign and you will be given a copy for your records.

2. **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THIS RESEARCH STUDY THAT I SHOULD BE AWARE OF?**
- Your participation is voluntary and consent from you is asked ahead of time.
- The purpose of the research study is to understand the school enrollment decision making processes of parents who live in Northampton, Massachusetts.
- The interview will take 30-60 minutes, and it will be audio recorded.
- There are minimal risks associated with this research study; however, a risk of breach of confidentiality always exists and steps to minimize this risk are outlined below.
- You may not directly benefit from this research; however, your participation may contribute to a better understanding of the school enrollment considerations of parents who live in a competitive educational environment.

3. **WHERE WILL THIS RESEARCH STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?**
The research interviews will take place online, using Zoom. There will be 10-15 participants enrolled.
4. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO AND HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT TAKE?
If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to answer a series of questions about the process that led to enrolling your child in the school that you did and your reflections about that decision. You may skip any question you feel uncomfortable answering. There will be just one interview that will last 30-60 minutes. You may be contacted in the future if it is necessary to clarify any of your answers.

5. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?
Your privacy and confidentiality are important to me. I will only collect your essential personal information and I will a pseudonym instead of your actual name in my findings. During our interview, I will be in a private location. Data will be stored and analyzed on an encrypted password protected drive. All recordings, transcripts, and data that links your survey responses with your contact information will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Signed consent documents will be stored securely and separately from the research data.

6. WILL MY INFORMATION BE USED FOR RESEARCH IN THE FUTURE?
Your information will not be used or distributed for future research studies even if identifiers are removed.

7. WILL I BE GIVEN ANY MONEY OR OTHER COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?
Participants will not receive money or other compensation for being in this research study.

8. WHO CAN I TALK TO IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?
Take as long as you like before you make a decision about participation. I will be happy to answer any questions you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact me at (413) 588-2906, or my faculty sponsor, Professor Kathryn McDermott, at (413) 545-3562. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

9. WHAT HAPPENS IF I SAY YES, BUT I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?
You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

10. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT
When signing this form, I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I have been
informed that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form has been given to me.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant Signature:</th>
<th>Print Name:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
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By signing below, I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

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<th>Signature of Person Obtaining Consent</th>
<th>Print Name:</th>
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REFERENCES


