How Parents Choose the ‘Right Fit’ and Why It Matters for Public Education

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HOW PARENTS CHOOSE THE ‘RIGHT FIT’
AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

by

KRISTEN LYNNE DAVIDSON

BA, Boston University, 1995

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education

2014
This thesis entitled:
How Parents Choose the ‘Right Fit’ and Why It Matters for Public Education
written by Kristen Lynne Davidson
has been approved for the School of Education

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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ABSTRACT

Davidson, Kristen Lynne (PhD, School of Education)
How Parents Choose the ‘Right Fit’ and Why It Matters for Public Education
Thesis directed by Professor Kenneth R. Howe

This dissertation presents the findings from my qualitative study of how 36 parents chose schools in a suburban district where schools have evidenced increased racial or ethnic and social class segregation through a system of open enrollment. Through interviews, focus groups, and observations of school Open House events during the 2011-2012 school year, I investigated how parents reasoned through the school choice process and how their child rearing practices related to these processes and outcomes. I then considered the insights gained about patterns of enrollment associated with race or ethnicity and socioeconomic status and the implications of these findings for public education in a democracy.

I found that individuals varied in their decision-making approaches, but broadly used heuristics to assess school quality that led them towards schools with like-minded communities and reinforced stereotypes of others unlike themselves. In addition, middle-class parents’ intensive parenting styles led to powerful relationships of partnership with teachers, access to insider information, and well-resourced social networks, all of which further drove their choice of schools toward communities of sameness.

Three like-minded groups characterized my participants. First, those “Seeking the Best” sought the best opportunities for academic excellence, with diversity a low priority. Second, those “Preserving the Neighborhood” were most concerned with maintaining a strong neighborhood community that attended the same schools, and lamented a lack of diversity but
did not consider it a high priority. Third, those “Defending Diverse Schools” considered diversity to be a high priority—or essential—to a high quality, well-rounded education.

Because of intricate patterns in which parents chose to send their children to schools with communities they perceived as similar to themselves and justified as the “right fit,” it is clear that without further policy changes, school choice will continue to increase school segregation layered on top of residential segregation. I therefore consider the implications of segregated schools for public education in a democratic society, and conclude that in the face of current school choice policies that advance market-based solutions, policy changes must attend to the democratic aims of education that truly serve the public.
DEDICATION

For Eva Grace and Autumn Hunter:

Being your mother is my life’s greatest blessing.
CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................................... 1
  Background......................................................................................................................................................... 1
  Justification of the Problem.......................................................................................................................... 4
  Research Questions and Study Design ........................................................................................................ 12
  Arrangement of the Dissertation.................................................................................................................. 13
  A Note on Terms............................................................................................................................................... 14

CHAPTER II: EMPIRICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ............................................................................. 16
  The Contexts of Parental Choice .................................................................................................................. 17
  Parental Decision-Making Processes .......................................................................................................... 20
  Democracy and Public School Choice ...................................................................................................... 26
    Private and Public School Choice............................................................................................................ 27
    Integrated Experiences as Essential to Democracy ............................................................................... 29

CHAPTER III: METHODS ....................................................................................................................................... 36
  Role of the Researcher..................................................................................................................................... 36
  Setting and Participants .................................................................................................................................. 37
  Data Collection.............................................................................................................................................. 39
  Data Analysis................................................................................................................................................. 42
  Validity .............................................................................................................................................................. 45

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS, PART 1: CHOOSING COMMUNITIES OF SAMENESS ........................................... 47
  The Social Contexts of Parental Decision-Making .................................................................................... 48
  From Expressed Preferences to Deeper Aspirations.................................................................................. 53
  Parental Decision-Making Processes ....................................................................................................... 60
  Conclusion: Choosing Like-minded Communities .................................................................................... 70

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, PART 2: THREE SOCIAL SPHERES .............................................................................. 72
  Group 1: Seeking the Best ............................................................................................................................ 73
    Maximizing a Narrow Aim of Academic Rigor ....................................................................................... 73
    Aspiring for Academic Excellence ....................................................................................................... 77
    Diversity is Not a Priority ........................................................................................................................ 81
  Group 2: Preserving the Neighborhood ..................................................................................................... 83
Satisficing a Balance of Academics, Extracurriculars, and Neighborhood Community .........................83
Aspiring for Well-Rounded Community Members ..................................................................................89
Lamenting a Lack of Diversity ..............................................................................................................92
GROUP 3: DEFENDING DIVERSE SCHOOLS .........................................................................................95
Satisficing a Balance of Academics and Diverse Experiences ..............................................................95
Aspiring for Well-Roundedness through Diverse Experiences .............................................................101
Diversity is Essential ...........................................................................................................................104
CONCLUSION: THREE SOCIAL SPHERES .............................................................................................107

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS .................................................................................109

ASPIRATIONS AND HEURISTICS FORMED IN COMMUNITIES OF SAMENESS ..................................109
PERSPECTIVES ABOUT OPEN ENROLLMENT AND STRATIFICATION ..............................................113
IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION IN A DEMOCRACY .........................................................116
DIRECTIONS FOR CHANGE ..................................................................................................................122

REFERENCES .........................................................................................................................................130

APPENDIX A: ENROLLMENT PATTERNS ..............................................................................................147
APPENDIX B: PROTOCOLS ....................................................................................................................149
APPENDIX C: CODEBOOK ....................................................................................................................163
APPENDIX D: COUNTS ..........................................................................................................................169
APPENDIX E: MATRIX FOR VERTICAL ANALYSIS ..............................................................................173
TABLES

Table

1. White and FRL Populations at Schools that Comprised Participants’ Enrollment, 2011-12... 37

2. Three Social Spheres: Seeking the Best, Preserving the Neighborhood, and Defending Diverse Schools. ..... .......................................................... 73
FIGURES


2. Quintile medians of percentage of white students in BVSD elementary, middle, and K-8 schools, fall 2000 to fall 2013. ............................................................................................................ 8

3. Percentage of neighborhood students staying in East County schools. .................................. 10

4. Percentage of white students in East County schools. ............................................................ 11

5. Percentage of students on FRL in East County schools. ......................................................... 11

A-1. Enrollment patterns for residents in East Middle School boundaries. .............................. 147

A-2. Enrollment patterns for residents in Central Middle School boundaries. ......................... 147

A-3. Enrollment patterns for residents in East High School boundaries. ................................. 148
Chapter I: Introduction

Background

As a mother and educator, I have struggled with choosing schools for my children. I have valued strong academics since my childhood days of tagging along with my dad to his school district office, and have actively taught my daughters (Eva and Autumn) literacy, numeracy, and problem solving since the days they were born. I also have valued equity and diversity since I first became aware of injustice, and have pursued education as a means to bring about social change.

When I first became aware of the open enrollment policy in our school district, I was pleased that I could choose educational paths for my children in a way previously available only to those who could afford coveted neighborhoods or private schools. A private Waldorf school teacher at the time, it felt good to enroll Eva in the public Waldorf-based focus school with beautiful aesthetics. A few years later, now a public school teacher, we moved closer to a high-performing school that ‘better met my children’s needs’ as I interpreted them through my own values for rigorous academics. We couldn’t afford that neighborhood, however, so we moved to nearby East County and open enrolled without even a glance at the assigned school. By then I had heard negative rumors about the schools there and flight patterns were well known. But some affluent families in our new neighborhood were dedicated supporters, with much talk about new principals and programs. The division between parents who supported the neighborhood schools and those who open enrolled out was quickly apparent. The exacerbation of segregation through school choice was glaring, and I couldn’t ignore the fact that I was implicated in it.

Because I identified with multiple perspectives, I was friendly with parents across divisions—those who open enrolled out to high-performing schools, the tightknit neighborhood
nearby whose assigned school my daughters attended, and those who supported the diverse East County schools. The ways that parents talked about choosing schools fascinated me. After entering the doctoral program and learning more about the inequity of school choice policies, I faced a difficult decision for middle school. By that point, I had even talked with scholars who were highly critical of school choice yet torn when it came to their own kids. I felt that I should enroll Eva in our diverse, low-performing school to be consistent with my ethical compass, but I didn’t want to. I was comforted by the fact that her best friend was attending, so I did.

It was a difficult three years. Eva’s friendship quickly turned. She was bullied, had few friends she could identify with, and witnessed biased disciplinary treatment toward low-income students, especially Latino boys. A couple teachers per year were the highlight of her day. While she gained a better understanding of diverse perspectives than she would have otherwise, there were distinct within-school separations in class schedules, social lives, and discipline patterns by social class and ethnicity. As a PhD student, I didn’t have time to help make meaningful changes at the school, especially given that the handful of moms who were actively involved put in countless hours.

It then came time to choose a high school for Eva and a middle school for Autumn. Eva was clear: she wanted to go to the high-performing school across town, which I enthusiastically supported. And I was clear: Autumn wasn’t going to our neighborhood middle school. She ended up at the high-performing middle school located next to Eva’s high school; I could justify how this made logical sense. But to be honest, I had taught there, I knew and loved the staff, and it felt great to send her there. But the decision-making process tormented me. I felt enormous guilt and was deeply torn about my values for equity and diversity and my choices for strong
academics in a district with starkly unequal schools. While I engaged in this process, I conducted this study of the school choice processes of parents from the three groups I mention above.

My qualitative study is based in the suburban and well-resourced Boulder Valley School District (BVSD). Since the 1993 and 1994 Colorado legislation that introduced charter schools and required all districts to offer inter- and intra-district open enrollment, the district has offered an “option-demand” system of open enrollment (Teske & Schneider, 2001, p. 610). In this system, families are assigned a neighborhood school, but may apply to enroll in another neighborhood school, a charter school, or a ‘focus’ school through a lottery for available spaces.¹

At the time of my data collection in the 2011-2012 academic year, 30% of families living in BVSD successfully open enrolled their children, selecting among five charter schools, nine focus schools, 42 neighborhood schools, and one online school.²

However, not all district schools are chosen equally. Like the systematic patterns of school choice policies that I review in the next chapter, the patterns of choice in BVSD evidence increasing school segregation. Of the approximately 30,000 students enrolled in BVSD (2,300 from out of district), 70% are white, 18% Latino, 6% Asian, 5% multiracial, 1% African American, and less than 1% Native American or Native Hawaiian. However, not including two tiny mountain schools, individual schools range from 30% to 87% white, from 4% to 67% Latino, and from 0% to 19% Asian. Similarly, 19% of district students are enrolled in the Free or Reduced Lunch (FRL) program, but schools range from 3% to 70% of students on FRL.

¹ District ‘focus’ schools offer specific curricular programs, but follow the district calendar, hiring
² Two of these charter schools are designated for students labeled “at-risk,” while the others emphasize either academic rigor or ‘whole child’ education. The former have higher than average Latino/a and FRL populations; the latter have higher than average proportions of white or Asian and non-FRL students. Similarly, one focus school is designated for referred students with special needs, while the others have curricular foci such as bilingual, experiential, Core Knowledge, Montessori, or Waldorf education. The two bilingual schools primarily serve Latino/a and FRL students; the other curricular focus schools primarily serve white, Asian and middle-class students.
(http://bvsd.org/Enrollment/Pages/PupilCount.aspx). Because patterns of white, Asian and middle-class flight from schools with higher than average Latino and FRL populations are most severe in what I call “East County,” where I live, I focused my study on parents in this area.

**Justification of the Problem**

Current school choice policies have predominantly grown out of a market-based rationale that competition will drive school improvement while offering a portfolio of schooling options to best serve children’s needs as perceived by their parents (DeJarnatt, 2008). In addition, it was conjectured that parental choice could offer an avenue to transform the exclusion and segregation that have long characterized affluent families’ residential and private school choice. Extensive empirical research has found, however, that school choice policies have resulted in increased school segregation by race or ethnicity, social class, language, and attributed ability, without an overall change in academic outcomes (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). It is important to consider that residential segregation likewise has increased during this time period, and that neighborhood schools also have been found to counsel parents of children who are English learners or who have special needs toward other neighborhood schools (Fry & Taylor, 2012; Lake & Gross, 2011). Yet layered on top of residential segregation, the particular patterns of school choice that further benefit the already-advantaged result in a net harm not only to the students at the greatest disadvantage, but also to the democratic aims of education for all students (Howe, 1997).

In particular, despite stated preferences for teacher or academic quality, safety, and location, the racial composition of a school is the number one predictor of parents’ actual choices, with parents across races opting for schools with higher proportions of their own race (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Henig, 2008). A wealth of research has documented these ‘stated’ and ‘revealed’ preferences, but far fewer studies have examined the actual processes through
which parents make choices that lead to increased segregation. The qualitative studies that have
done so mirror data from macro-level studies that race, social class, and gender influence the
perspectives of parents (André-Bechely, 2005; Bell, 2004; Brantlinger, 2003; Cooper, 2005;
David, West, & Ribbens, 1994; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Howe & Eisenhart, 2000). Each
study has provided a unique angle, highlighting the ways in which parents (typically mothers)
positioned at an advantage or disadvantage in the system act in ways that maintain advantages or
work to overcome barriers. Based on a study of middle-class parents choosing a diverse, urban
public school, Maia Cucchiara and Erin Horvat (2014) further suggest that the choice process
itself importantly involves parents’ reflections on their own identities and values. Through my
many conversations with local parents (especially mothers), I knew that I could offer new
knowledge about parents’ decision-making processes in a district that evidenced segregating
patterns in line with the preponderance of school choice research.

Coincidentally, my advisor, Ken Howe, and a close colleague, Margaret Eisenhart, had
already conducted a large study on parental choice processes and outcomes in the same district.
At first, I was disappointed to learn that such a similar study had already been completed. As an
evaluation commissioned by the district in the late 1990s, however, their methods were quite
different than mine, while overlapping enough to show the progression of open enrollment
outcomes since their study. Howe and Eisenhart conducted surveys and focus groups with 466
participants, including principals, teachers, and parents representing 43 schools, who were
disproportionately white, highly educated, and female. They also conducted telephone interviews
with a random sample of an additional 240 parents (again disproportionately mothers). In their
2000 report, they presented the system’s outcomes and stakeholder perspectives, with the aim
that the information be used for continued public deliberation.
Similar to findings across school choice studies, Howe and Eisenhart (2000) state, “In general, BVSD parents, teachers, and staff believe their schools should focus primarily on the development of social, citizenship, and academic skills in safe, comfortable environments in which teachers are sensitive to student needs” (p. 8). Most parents did not seek high test scores specifically, but instead gained a sense of parental satisfaction at various schools regarding the curriculum and staff. In addition, parents who had selected bilingual schools indicated an interest in diversity and the needs of disadvantaged students (in addition to academics), while those who had enrolled in neighborhood or other schools of choice more narrowly focused on academics and safety. Those at charter and focus schools expressed higher levels of satisfaction, and parents generally felt that school choice increased the ability to meet the specific needs of kids.

However, many parents also recognized that the policy had increased segregation in the district by race or ethnicity (especially between white and Latino students) and income (Howe & Eisenhart, 2000). While some lamented a loss of community in neighborhoods, parents actively formed communities within schools of choice. Competition among schools for students was either seen as a possible boon to academic achievement overall or as a deterrent to collaboration. District-provided data indicated very high achievement in some schools at the expense of low achievement in others, as well as white and middle-class flight into more affluent, high-performing schools. Howe and Eisenhart offered 12 recommendations to the district, of which four have been implemented and two have been partially addressed.³

One way in which Howe and Eisenhart demonstrated white flight in BVSD was through

³ Implemented: Central open enrollment office; Central office handles all applications; Parents not required to visit schools; All parents given information. Partially addressed: Schools with higher fundraising now give 10% of funds to schools with less fundraising income; Preferences given for English learners and FRL status in non-bilingual focus schools (not charters). Not addressed: Consistent requirements across schools; Transportation; Equitable funding; Public information on fundraising; District-wide collaboration; Long-range plan.
Figure 1, reproduced below (Howe, Eisenhart, & Betebenner, 2001).

To create Figure 1, the authors divided the student populations of all BVSD elementary, middle, and K-8 schools into quintiles by the percentage of white students. Graphing the median percentage of white students in each quintile then showed that the first quintile, i.e. the 20% of schools with the lowest percentages of white students, evidenced a sharp decline in the white student population from the inception of open enrollment in 1994 (with a median of 68%) to the year 2000 (with a median of 44%). In addition, the third, fourth, and fifth quintiles had a consistently higher median percentage of white students than the district average, which approximately followed the second quintile. As Howe et al. state, “This pattern is explained much more by whites open enrolling out of BVSD schools than by minorities open enrolling in, for schools with the sharpest drops in white enrollment also tend to have sharp drops in
enrollment overall” (p. 141).

To investigate the progression of this trend, I recreated this analysis for the academic years beginning in fall 2000 (picking up where Figure 1 left off) through fall 2013. The results, shown in Figure 2 below, show the average percentage of white students in the district steadily decreasing overall, with the quintiles each following this trend. In fact, by 2013, the median percentage of white students in the first (lowest) quintile was half of what it was in 1994. That is, the median proportion of white students in those schools has dropped from roughly two-thirds to roughly one-third over the course of 20 years of open enrollment policy.

Figure 2. Quintile medians of percentage of white students in BVSD elementary, middle, and K-8 schools, fall 2000 to fall 2013.

School segregation thus has persisted in the district despite the implementation of some of Howe and Eisenhart’s (2000) recommendations (described in footnote 3). Five years ago, BVSD enacted preferences for English learners and students on FRL for non-bilingual focus
schools, which was largely unsuccessful. The district also introduced English as a Second Language programs at two high performing, primarily white and affluent neighborhood schools. The representation of Latinos and students on FRL at these two schools has increased, but teachers have complained to me about the need for support to develop new instructional skills.

In the next three figures, I focus on East County schools. Of my 36 participants, 30 resided in the East High School boundaries, 17 in the East Middle School boundaries, and 15 in the Central Middle School boundaries (two of the Central Middle families lived in the boundaries of a different high school). Four participants lived in other schools’ boundaries but enrolled their children in East Charter School. Figure 3 shows the average percentage of neighborhood students remaining in their assigned schools across the district compared to the percentage remaining in (1) the three East Elementary Schools that feed into East Middle (averaged); (2) East Middle School; (3) Central Middle School; and (4) East High School.

Appendix A includes figures that show into which schools the families from these neighborhoods enroll; those who open enroll out primarily switch to whiter, more affluent schools. The average increase in neighborhood families staying in the three East County elementary schools is due to a substantial increase in the retention of families that occurred at East Elementary after the much-publicized hiring of an accomplished white female principal and the introduction of a Talented and Gifted (TAG) focus. The other two elementary schools, despite introducing a Math and Science and an International Baccalaureate (IB) focus with an award-winning Latina principal, continue to experience declining rates of neighborhood students.
Central Middle is a high-performing, primarily white and middle-class school, but began losing students after the fall 2007 announcement that North Middle, with a high Latino and FRL population, would co-locate on their campus (in portable units outside) from January 2009 through June 2010 while a new North Middle building was being constructed. In response to parent complaints, the district gave open enrollment lottery preferences in the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 years to Central Middle School families. There since have been rumors of poor administration and turnover, and the school’s enrollment is just starting to recover.

Because the district does not break down open enrollment data by race/ethnicity, FRL, or other demographic indicators, open enrollment and demographic patterns can only be looked at separately. Figures 4 and 5 show racial/ethnic (by percentage white) and FRL patterns in these schools. The two figures are virtually mirror images of each other; as the proportion of white students decreases, the proportion of students on FRL increases.
Figure 4. Percentage of white students in East County schools.

Figure 5. Percentage of students on FRL in East County schools.
Figures 4 and 5 show that East County schools have followed district trends in racial/ethnic and socioeconomic populations. While census data reports the population of East County as increasing, the percentage of families remaining in the neighborhood schools is generally continuing to decrease, leaving a holding pattern of relatively high racial/ethnic minority and high poverty schools. And there is no reason to believe that these patterns will change without more targeted, well-informed policy changes based in a thorough understanding of how parents make choices that lead to these outcomes. Through my dissertation, I hope to provide a more detailed view of parental choice in the district to that end.

**Research Questions and Study Design**

The purpose of my dissertation is to provide a nuanced view of parental choice processes in order to better understand how parents’ arrive at choices that, in sum, result in increased segregation. During BVSD’s open enrollment period occurring in the 2011-2012 academic year, I investigated two broad questions:

1. How do parents in a system of public school choice reason through the decision of what school to send their children to from the available alternatives? How do parents’ child rearing practices relate to these processes and outcomes?
2. What insights about the patterns of enrollment associated with race or ethnicity and socioeconomic status are gained from an understanding of parents’ choice processes? What are the implications of these findings for public education in a democracy?

Because I was in the process of choosing middle and high schools for my daughters, I was an actively involved participant. Likewise, I was personally aware of what Annette Lareau (2003) calls a “cultural logic of child rearing” (p. 3) that reflected “concerted cultivation” (p. 2) among middle-class parents in the district. I was curious to consider how this intensive parenting
style related to middle-class parents’ seemingly constant talk and anxieties about choosing schools for their children. I discuss the relevance of Lareau’s research on middle- and working-class family lives more in the next chapter.

Through snowball sampling, I included English- and Spanish-speaking parents whose children were currently attending or had attended 10 different elementary schools, eight different middle schools, and seven different high schools in the district. Thirty-eight parents participated in two interviews (a telephone interview before and an in-person interview after the open enrollment period). In addition, 34 of these parents participated in one of five focus groups (during the open enrollment period). During the seven-week open enrollment period, I attended 20 school ‘Open House’ events, collected school- and district-provided artifacts, and reviewed the local newspaper’s ‘School Choice Guide’ and other relevant articles. I later narrowed my analysis to the 36 participants who lived in or sent their children to schools in East County.

Arrangement of the Dissertation

The dissertation proceeds in five additional chapters. Chapter II provides the empirical and conceptual framework for the study by reviewing the literature on (1) the context of parental choice in terms of the commonly shared characteristics of active choosers, including their ‘cultural logic of child rearing’; (2) the choice processes of parents and the major decision-making theories that portray their approaches; and (3) the tendency to live near and go to school with people similar to oneself and the implications for public education in a democratic society. Chapter III outlines the qualitative research methods for the study, including the local context and sample, data collection processes, data analysis strategies, and attention to validity. In Chapter IV, I present findings on participants’ choice processes in the context of their parenting practices, deep-seated aspirations for their children, and decision-making styles. In Chapter V, I
detail three groups of parents who approach choosing schools with different aims and values, whom I characterize as ‘Seeking the Best,’ ‘Preserving the Neighborhood,’ and ‘Defending Diverse Schools.’ Chapter VI concludes with implications for school choice policies that foster integration, rather than segregation, as necessary to advancing public education in a democracy.

A Note on Terms

In any study in the social sciences, decisions have to be made about descriptive terms. Here, I use “parents” and its related forms broadly to convey children’s caregivers. Because segregation in BVSD is primarily between white and Latino/a students, I sometimes use “race or ethnicity” but other times use only “race” to be concise; in both cases I am referring to racial or ethnic identity. On focus group questionnaires, participants identified their racial or ethnic and gender identities in open-ended questions. I assign “white” to participants who self-identified as white, Caucasian, European-American, Jewish, or as native to specific European countries; Latino/a to participants who self-identified as Latino/a, Mexican-American, Chicano/a, Mestizo/a, and native to specific South American countries; and Asian to participants who self-identified as native to specific Asian countries. I determined whether to consider participants to be ‘middle class’ or ‘working class’ through their occupation, housing situation, education level, and other details of the personal history that they shared with me.

Despite my dislike for measuring racial and ethnic diversity in a school by the percentage of white students, I did so here to (1) track the trend since the Howe and Eisenhart (2000) study; and (2) convey the presence or lack of students of color. While white and Asian populations often went hand in hand in the district, working-class immigrants from some Asian countries tended to attend schools with higher proportions of Latino/a students. I also use the percentage of
students in the Free or Reduced Lunch (FRL) program as a crude measure of socioeconomic status; overall white and FRL patterns tend to mirror each other, as seen above.

Finally, the term ‘marketization’ has been used to convey the trend towards market-based principles in public education, with ‘privatization’ used to specify related private sector involvement. The predominant ‘market model’ concept has been used to promote school choice on the claims that competition will improve school quality, and that parents will rationally choose among options to select the school that best meets their preferences. Complementary to this idea is the removal of barriers (i.e., deregulation) to allow parents—who know their children best—the freedom to act in their own interests. Therefore, I use terms related to the ‘market’ and to ‘deregulation’ to refer to the movement that grounds public school choice in order to capture the broader picture that treats parental choice of schooling as a ‘private’ good that favors market-based principles and demands freedom from government intervention at the loss of a thoughtful understanding of what ‘public’ education means and entails in a democracy.
Chapter II: Empirical and Conceptual Framework

A wealth of research has shown that in school choice systems, as compared to residential assignment, (1) academic outcomes on average are neither better nor worse, but to the benefit of the already advantaged and detriment of the disadvantaged (Betts & Tang, 2011; Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, & Rothstein, 2005; Cullen, Jacob, & Levitt, 2006; Gill & Booker, 2008; Goldhaber & Eide, 2002; Herrmann 2009; Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Miron & Urschel, 2012; Teske & Schneider, 2001; Teske, Fitzpatrick, & O'Brien, 2009); (2) families across races choose schools with higher proportions of their own race or ethnicity, which overlaps significantly with social class (Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2009; Carnoy et al., 2005; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010; Garcia, 2008; Gill & Booker, 2008; Mickelson, 2005; Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Saporito, 2003; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Weiher & Tedin, 2002); and (3) parental and student satisfaction ratings are widely improved (Bell, 2004; Bifulco & Bulkley, 2008; Cullen et al., 2006; Teske & Schneider, 2001). Researchers and policymakers are left to determine why parents make choices that result in increasingly segregated schools and how to rectify policies that further harm the opportunities of students already at a disadvantage in the education system.

The aim of this study was to contribute to a better understanding of these issues through a nuanced view of parents’ school decision-making processes. Because sending children to school is part of parenting (whether actively or by default), I found it important to consider the context of parenting practices and how they related to parental perspectives and choices. Therefore, I approached the study informed by literature on (1) the context of parental choice in terms of the characteristics of parents that typically are active choosers and their shared “cultural logic of

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4 Betts and Tang (2011) and Miron and Urschel (2012) are meta-analyses; Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, and Rothstein (2005), Gill and Booker (2008), Lubienski and Weitzel (2010), and Teske and Schneider (2001) are reviews.
child rearing” (Lareau, 2003, p. 3); (2) the choice processes of parents and the major decision-making theories that portray their approaches; and (3) the tendency to live near and go to school with people similar to oneself and the implications for public education in a democracy. This chapter reviews each of these three literatures.

**The Contexts of Parental Choice**

It may be possible to achieve student diversity even as parental preferences for meaningful choices in schooling abound, but diversity will not be achieved without a consideration of the contexts within which parents, teachers, and students make choices and of the subsequent crafting of balanced school choice plans.

- Janelle Scott (2005, p. 8)

Since the current systems of public school choice took root in the early 1990s, it has been well documented that parents from higher income and formal educational backgrounds are more likely to ‘participate’ by actively selecting schools for their children (André-Bechely, 2005; Cowen, 2010; Fuller & Elmore, 1996; Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Hamilton & Guin, 2005; Lacireno-Paquet, 2012; Teske, 2012; Teske & Schneider, 2001; Wells, 1993; Witte & Thorn, 1996), including in Colorado specifically (Holme & Richards, 2009; Howe, Eisenhart, & Betebenner, 2002; Lavery & Carlson, 2014). Advantaged choosers not only have better access to financial resources, school information, and well-resourced social networks, but also are more likely to “see themselves as active consumers of education” (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002, p. 40) who consider educational options for their children. Even in urban settings and means-tested voucher systems, low-income parents who participate tend to be relatively more educated and actively involved in their children’s schooling, worsening the educational experiences and outcomes of the most disadvantaged left behind (DeArmond, Jochim, & Lake, 2014; Howe, 2007).
In particular, it is middle-class mothers who are primarily involved in the educational decision-making, as virtually all school choice studies indicate. A long line of literature has examined gendered middle-class parenting roles in which children’s education begins “in the kitchen” with their mother (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Continued mirrored practices blur the lines between home and school such that middle-class students are at advantage on the academic playing field from the start (Doucet, 2011; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 2003). Sharon Hays (1996) further claims that popular depictions of American motherhood (e.g., as “supermoms”) in the last few decades encourage an ideology of “intensive mothering” that “advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children” (p. x). In Hays’s interviews with 38 mothers, all felt “pressure to live up to the image of a good mother” (p. 95), but there were systematic social class differences in mothers’ standards of what that meant. For example, middle-class participants focused on promoting their children’s self-esteem, offering their children choices, and engaging in negotiation, while working-class participants stressed formal education, following rules, and obedience to authority.

Informed by Hays (1996), Annette Lareau (2003) conducted an ethnographic study of the parenting practices of 12 middle- and working-class families, primarily enacted by mothers. Similar to Hays’s claims, middle-class parents engaged in what Lareau calls “concerted cultivation” (p. 2), in which they actively fostered their children’s growth by enrolling them in extracurricular activities, intervening in their educational experiences, expecting individualized instruction, and including children in decision-making. Working-class parents, on the other hand, allowed their children’s growth to unfold without pressure to excel, exhibited restraint with institutions, and used directives in the household. Lareau notes that while all parents were concerned with their children’s well-being and their parenting practices seemed to come
naturally to them, middle-class children benefitted from concerted cultivation practices that served to advance their academic performance.\(^5\)

At the outset of my study, I was well aware that middle-class parents in the district exemplified concerted cultivation, and I suspected that this ideology would align with the idea and practice of actively choosing schools for their children. Coincidentally expecting the same, Lareau (2014) investigated the residential choice processes of 46 middle- and working-class families in the suburbs of a large city without open enrollment. As she states, “One might expect middle-class parents to vigorously search for data, visit countless schools, interrogate members of their networks about the strengths and weaknesses of various options, and otherwise engage in a sustained process of concerted cultivation in school choice” (pp. 170-171). To her surprise, she found that parents (mostly mothers) did not actively research the schools when choosing a residence, but rather relied on others’ opinions within relatively homogeneous social and geographic circles that Lareau terms “micro-climates” (p. 172). While economic resources surely played a role, both middle- and working-class parents engaged in a similar choice process: “trust what you know and who you know” (p. 171). And because what and who families knew differed by social class, their choice sets were immediately narrowed to areas with people similar to themselves and ultimately they sent their children to schools where they felt comfortable. In this way, “…parents’ social worlds facilitated a … seamless reproduction of inequality” (p. 172).

Courtney Bell (2004) similarly found that despite similar decision-making processes, participants of different races and social classes selected from among different choice sets of urban schools, reflecting parents’ differing social networks as well as their interests in ensuring

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\(^5\) Other research also has shown middle-class parents maintaining a variety of schooling practices that benefit their children (such as tracking and gifted programming) (see, e.g., Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999; Demerath, Lynch, Milner, Peters & M. Davidson, 2010; Wells & Serna, 1996).
that their children had an ample amount of racially similar peers. In fact, substantial research makes clear that parents across all social classes primarily rely on information from their social networks, while the resources and knowledge of those networks differ systematically (Doucet, 2011; Holme, 2002; Lacireno-Paquet, 2012; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012; Teske, 2012). That is, “the grapevine” acts as the site of knowledge production and sharing about schools, but “access to particular grapevines is socially structured and patterned” (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 392).

As David (1993) and others assert, school choice and other contemporary educational reforms presume a middle-class style of ‘active’ parental (often maternal) involvement in their children’s education, as well as the social and cultural capital that characterize middle-class status (André-Bechely, 2005; David, West, & Ribbens, 1994; Doucet, 2011; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Griffith & Smith, 2005). When the movement favoring the deregulation of public education co-opted “parental involvement” to mean “parental choice” (David, p. 62), it was assumed that parents would actively choose schools in line with their preferences, especially for academic quality. But because studies have repeatedly shown systematic differences in the participation of parents by social class, the influence of differentially resourced social networks, and the resulting patterns of increased segregation, parents’ actual decision-making processes have been increasingly called into question and examined (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; DeJarnatt, 2008; Scott, 2005).

**Parental Decision-Making Processes**

We need to study choice behavior and not just have blind faith that parents will behave as rational consumers whose preferences will coincide with quality schools. We must assess how existing choice programs have interacted with and have been affected by the heuristics and biases humans rely on in making choices, and how that decision-making process has affected the usefulness of choice programs in achieving their stated goals of equity and improved school quality.

- Susan DeJarnatt (2008, p. 45)
Troubled by flight from her children’s academically sound, black-majority neighborhood school amidst white, middle-class neighbors’ explanations that “it just wasn’t a good fit” (p. 29), Susan DeJarnatt (2008) reviewed the justification for school choice in the 2000 No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) and contested its corresponding assumptions about how parents choose schools. Specifically, NCLB’s provision for parents to be able to transfer their children out of underperforming schools exemplified a national current toward the deregulation of public education, with corresponding assumptions that parents would rationally choose the highest performing schools for their children, inducing competition and school improvement for all. In parallel fashion, empirical studies have largely analyzed parental choice using a rational choice model common to analyses of consumer behavior in a market. DeJarnatt argues, however, that rational choice models cannot capture the socially situated, complex processes that characterize parents’ actual decision-making about schools.

Rational choice models generally assume that, under constraints, people choose the best course of action consistent with their preferences, which in turn are fairly fixed and stable across contexts (Abell, 1991; McFadden, 2000; Tversky & Kahneman, 1986). In addition to criticisms of the model’s assumptions, the applicability of rational choice to non-market domains has been contested (Bohman, 1992; Lovett, 2006; Sen, 1977). Indeed, rational choice-based assumptions have not been borne out by the evidence on parents’ decision-making processes. Bell (2004) found that parents’ preferences were neither fixed nor stable, as their experiences with schools impacted what they sought in future educational environments for their children. And while parents across races and social classes by and large claim to seek teacher or academic quality, safety, location, and sometimes “school atmosphere” (David, West, & Ribbens, 1994; Goldring
their actual choice processes and outcomes reveal that they prefer a demographic makeup similar to themselves (Fairlie & Resch, 2002; Garcia, 2008; Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2005; Lacireno-Paquet, 2012; Lankford & Wyckoff, 2006; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Saporito, 2003; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Weiher & Tedin, 2002).

Camille Cooper (2005) argues, “Parents’ subjective positionality, as opposed their objective rationality, powerfully influences their school choices” (p. 175). In her study of African-American, working-class mothers and grandmothers choosing among urban schools, Cooper introduced the term “positioned choice” (p. 175) to convey the influence of race, social class, and gender on parents’ perspectives and effective options. For example, her participants’ decision-making included considerations of financial constraints, limited information, and frustration with truly inadequate educational experiences. In a different case, middle-class parents were able to work the system to their advantage in Lois André-Bechely’s (2005) study of a diverse group of parents choosing among urban schools, despite the fact that all felt a “responsibility to ensure the best opportunities for their children” (p. 125). The reality of positioned choice thus offers important information that rational choice models can obscure (Saporito & Lareau, 1999; Wilson, 2010a). Additionally, as Terri Wilson (2010a) argues, because rational choice models stop short of evaluating preferences and their consequences, it is important to consider other models that can examine parental choice as a socially situated process rather than an isolated event.

Some of the tools from behavioral economics allow for deeper understandings to this end (DeJarnatt, 2008; Jabbar, 2011). Foundational to this field, Herbert Simon (1955) claimed that in complex situations, people couldn’t possibly consider all of the available information nor predict
all of the potential consequences, and therefore operate under what is now known as ‘bounded rationality.’ Rather than maximizing utility, individuals have “aspiration levels” (p. 111) of what would be acceptable outcomes. While aspiration levels can vary with experience and difficulty of attainment, they serve as a gauge for how much and what kind of information comprises the search process. Aspiration levels are closely related to “reference points” against which individuals perceive outcomes as gains or losses (Tversky & Kahneman, 1991, p. 1039). Both the current context and past experiences influence particular reference points, which can be defined habitually or deliberately (Kahneman, 2003; Warren, McGraw, & Van Boven, 2011). For example, college attendance might be the default option for students whose parents have postsecondary degrees, while high school completion might be an aspiration level for students whose parents dropped out (Page, Levy Garboua, & Montmarquette, 2007). The information search process concludes when a choice “satisfices” (Simon, 1956, p. 129) (i.e. meets or exceeds) an aspiration level, such as when a parent finds a school to be ‘good enough.’

Informed by Simon, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (1974) showed that people form heuristics that streamline the process of weighing options, such as making judgments based on information that is easy to recall (the “availability” heuristic [p. 1127]) or associating certain characteristics with estimates of quality (the “representativeness” heuristic [p. 1124]). In the context of school choice, parents have been found to make judgments about school quality based on salient anecdotes they have heard in social networks, and to associate a racial minority and/or low-income population with low academic quality (DeJarnatt, 2008; Delale-O’Connor, 2011; Holme, 2002; Lankford & Wyckoff, 2005; Levin, 1999; Maddaus, 1990; Schwartz, 2004). For

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6 The concepts of aspiration levels and reference points have much in common with the literature on ‘adaptive preferences’ that has grown out of Amartya Sen’s ‘capabilities approach’ to justice (See, e.g., Khader, 2011; Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 2010).
example, in Ellen Brantlinger’s (2003) study, it was clear that white, middle-class mothers had formed heuristics about the quality of their suburban schools using social class as a proxy. Sixteen of the 20 mothers would not consider low-income schools, rationalizing the schools’ low academic achievement scores through stereotypes about family structure, parental values for education, substance abuse, motivation, and inherent ability. Mothers assumed their children would be bored or unchallenged in low-income schools and would lose out on the benefits of affluent schools, such as course offerings, teacher quality, motivated peers, and job skill development. As one admitted, “I just want my children to be with children from educated families who are motivated and have values and goals. … I don’t want mixed schools” (p. 51).

Based on the work of Paul Slovic and colleagues (2002), Kahneman (2003) suggests that “affect” (p. 710) be recognized as another common heuristic in addition to ‘availability’ and ‘representativeness.’ As he states, “an automatic affective evaluation—the emotional core of an attitude—is the main determinant of many judgments and behaviors” (p. 710). In addition, in contrast to a rational choice assumption that preferences are stable across contexts and “not affected by variations of irrelevant features of options or outcomes,” there is indisputable evidence that “framing effects” influence individual perceptions and judgments (p. 702). As Tversky and Kahneman (1986) explain, “Framing is controlled by the manner in which the choice problem is presented as well as by norms, habits, and expectancies of the decision maker” (p. 257). The ‘feeling of comfort’ named in so many school choice studies, therefore, can involve a positive affective response to being in a community of people that feel familiar while in the context of school visits that can (and do) market themselves to attract certain types of families (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002; Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011; Lubienski, 2005; 2007; Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009; McGinn & Ben-Porath, 2014). Accordingly,
a feeling of discomfort can signify an unspoken fear of racial difference—from which “none of us is exempt”—even when concerns about children’s well-being are justifiable given the unequal state of schools with respect to resources, educator quality, course offerings, disciplinary actions, and expectations (Lawrence, 2005, p. 1371; Palardy, 2013; Roda & Wells, 2013; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Concepts from rational choice and behavioral economics are not mutually exclusive. Decision-makers use a variety of strategies depending on the context (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992), and exhibit individual differences in decision-making styles. For example, Barry Schwartz and colleagues (2002) found personal tendencies to maximize or satisfice. As the authors state, “Maximizers desire the best possible result; satisficers desire a result that is good enough to meet some criterion” (p. 1184). In order to assess whether they have achieved their desired outcome, maximizers engage more in social comparison, while satisficers need only reference their standard. Also, choices sometimes reflect self-interest, but other times reflect personal commitments, such as to a social group or behavioral norms (Sen, 1977). Given the socially positioned nature of parental choice, decision-making concepts that attend to social dimensions can go further than rational choice models alone in understanding how demographic groups systematically arrive at different judgments about schools.

But discerning how parents make choices that result in sorting their children is futile without understanding why it matters. After all, ideological commitments for and against school choice have not budged in the face of two decades of research showing that choice policies result in increased school segregation (Wilson, 2012). I therefore turn to literature on the consequences of this pattern for public education in a democracy.
Democracy and Public School Choice

It is the office of the school environment to balance the various elements in the social environment, and to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment.

- John Dewey (1916, p. 20)

In *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop (2008) traces the history of residential housing patterns in the U.S., showing that “over the past three decades, [people] have clustered in communities of sameness, among people with similar ways of life, beliefs, and in the end, politics” (p. 5). For those with resources to do so, there is a feeling of comfort in choosing to live among ‘people like us.’ It is no coincidence that this trend has coincided with the advancement of an ideological paradigm that prioritizes personal liberty over egalitarian ideals (Brown, 1990; Howe, 2008; Kantor & Lowe, 2006). Personal choice has been extolled in the discourse justifying the rolling back of policies aimed at integrating schools, with the effect of reversing the progress made in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, current levels of residential and school segregation are higher than they were under *de jure* segregation (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Fry & Taylor, 2012). And Latinos, the most segregated group of all, often experience what Gary Orfield, John Kucsera, and Genevieve Siegel-Hawley (2012) call “double” (p. xvi) and “triple” segregation (p. xv) through the confounding factors of race/ethnicity, poverty, and language.

Insular communities are not only like-minded, therefore, but also similar by race or ethnicity and social class—a result that is predictable with laissez-faire policies (Epple & Romano, 2003). In a specific example, after “race-conscious student assignment policies” ended in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district in 2002, white families chose increasingly segregated residential decisions (Liebowitz & Page, 2014). The polarization that occurs with
geographic isolation–Lareau’s ‘micro-climates’ (2014)–is intensified by lack of dialogue and understanding across differing views (Bishop, 2008).

Milton Friedman (1962/1982) initially argued that enabling personal liberty in choice of schools would allow desegregation “to be gradual as community attitudes changed” (p. 117), just as President Reagan later promoted magnet schools as a means to encourage voluntary integration. Academic quality–not race or social class–would drive choice of schools. But the evidence has clearly shown the opposite. As DeJarnatt (2008, p. 44) states:

Parents may think that they are motivated to select the ‘best’ schools, but their behavior shows that they opt for the most racially comfortable schools or simply for the schools they already happen to know about. … NCLB’s goal is for parents to choose the school with the academic program that results in the highest test scores for all. These two goals are in tension, if not outright conflict.

Indeed, two decades of school choice research has shown little change in the achievement gap amidst widespread movement toward increasingly homogeneous schools. But because of increased parental satisfaction among choosers, it is difficult to address negative consequences by constraining a liberty that many parents have come to expect. Any hope of policy changes gaining traction will require a deeper understanding of why increased segregation matters to children’s education and to the good of the public at large.

*Private and Public Ends of Education*

Whether explicitly or implicitly, education policy design supports a value position about the purposes of education (Knight Abowitz & Karaba, 2010; Moses, 2002; Wilson, 2012). The language and assumptions that comprise policy debates are necessarily based in conceptions of the proper ends of education, often weighing private and public ends with respect to each other
(Labaree, 1997). Historian David Labaree claims that the ‘common school’ movement of the 1800s emphasized the role of public education in fostering “democratic equality” and citizenship (along with economic vitality) through equal access. Surrounding the turn of the century, John Dewey argued that democracy is not just a political system, but a way of life characterized by a true exchange of ideas across lines of difference, such that schools must be democratic in their composition and operation. Two world wars, however, shifted the predominant focus to an educational end of “social efficiency,” or the development of human capital for a strong economy. In the era of Reagan’s *A Nation at Risk* report, this economic emphasis grew to prioritize “social mobility,” i.e., an ability to compete for jobs through educational excellence and individual gain.

While all three of these ends continue to be recognized, current policies reflect a singular emphasis on social mobility, placing parents and students in the role of consumers of education as a private good at the loss of important public aims (DeJarnatt, 2008; Labaree, 1997; Lawrence, 2005; Lipman, 2006). As Wilson (2012) puts it, the aim of educational equality has come to mean, “equal opportunity to choose” (p. 27). But even if there were equal access to choose, such empowerment of parents is superficial as it disempowers them and their children to participate in a democratic public while private organizations gain control over the educational sector (Howe, 2008; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012; Scott, 2013). For instance, Maia Cucchiara, Eve Gold, and Elaine Simon (2011) document the ways in which public participation has diminished through the deregulation of education in Philadelphia, and call for purposefully structured opportunities to participate in district decision-making. Of course, it is important to consider how those participatory venues would be structured if they are to foster democracy (House & Howe, 1999).
It is generally uncontested that a free, adequate education should be available to the public in some form. Even Friedman (1962/1982) recognized that an educated citizenry benefits society and the individuals that comprise it. In this sense, there seems to be an implicit understanding that individual access to education has consequences on others. Dewey (1927/1954) would argue, therefore, that an individual choice of schools is not truly a private transaction; to think this is to confuse private and public with individual and social. For Dewey, a private transaction is one that does not have significant consequences on others’ welfare. When a matter does affect others to the extent that it is “so important as to need control” (p. 15), those who are impacted comprise a public. Especially given the evidence of the negative impacts of school choice on others’ welfare, parental choice of schools “acquires a public capacity” (p 13). Unlike the common “formalist” and “functionalist” conceptions that define education as public in terms of its provision and whatever instrumental social benefit may be in vogue, respectively (Wilson, 2010a, p. 21), Dewey’s distinction offers a means to consider the ethical consequences of education policies. For once a public is formed around shared consequences that need to be addressed, the next logical step is to consider what that public should look like.

Integrated Experiences as Essential to Democracy

Dewey (1927/1954) argues that the ideal form of a public is democratic. Related to but distinct from democracy as a political system, democracy as a social ideal requires communication among individuals as equals. The best understandings of an issue at hand—and of one’s place in it—arise from the free exchange of diverse viewpoints across socially significant lines of difference. But in order to realize such a rich conception of a democratic public, participation must begin locally. Even more, Dewey (1916) claims, schools are public spaces and sites of identity formation that must be democratic in character in order to foster democratic
citizenship as a way of life. Importantly, the development of a democratic identity is not at the expense of pursuing one’s personal interests. As he explains, individual interests and identities are not laying dormant prior to experience, ready to unfold. Rather, they are formed in social experiences, which schools are uniquely situated to provide (Wilson, 2010b). When parents seek the ‘right fit’ for their children, therefore, they are assuming a direction in which their identities will unfold, or choosing that direction for them.

Legal rulings have upheld parents’ rights to raise their children in the direction of their own values, including through their children’s schooling (Wilson, 2012; Yettick, Love, & Anderson, 2008). Moreover, because segregation through individual choice is not unconstitutional, it is commonly believed that its consequences need not be redressed through policy or legal rulings (C. Anderson, 2011). While the courts uphold insular schools through freedom of religion and association, others defend the creation of public spaces along lines of similarity in the name of equity in an imperfect democracy. Specifically, Wilson (2010b) argues that segregated schools tend to be justified—often implicitly—along the lines of Nancy Fraser’s (1990) conception of “counter-publics,” in which affinity groups have empowering spaces where they can engage meaningfully together, since true inclusion in the public sphere is both practically and inherently impossible (Wilson, p. 656). As an example, Wilson cites Chester Finn’s defense of similar cultural communities in charter schools as not exhibiting segregation, which he defines as “something that is forced upon you against your will,” but rather “civil society in action” (p. 643).

Wilson (2010b) counters this line of justification arguing that first, Fraser intended that counter-publics would in turn engage publicly across lines of difference, and second, Fraser misconstrued Jürgen Habermas’s (1994) conception of the public sphere. Habermas’s “ideal
speech situation” (quoted in Wilson, p. 658), Wilson explains, was not meant to be exclusive to a particular (and privileged) form of rational discourse, but was based in the procedural fairness of deliberation such that all voices would be equally included. Further, Wilson argues that public schools are the ideal site for democratic participation, and segregated schools isolate children in ways that importantly deny them opportunities to engage across difference. Echoing Dewey, Benjamin Barber (1997) likewise stresses that schooling should not only prepare students for future participation in a democratic society, but that schools as public spaces should also reflect democratic processes that cultivate both private and public ends of education.

It is easy to dismiss arguments that segregated schools through parental choice “may facilitate those schools’ offering a more uniform education for the remaining students” (Figlio, Hart, & Metzger, 2010, p. 316) and that distinct “preferences” revealed by different racial, income, and other demographic groups can be considered “niche” markets to which the education system should respond (Zeehandelaar & Winkler, 2013, p. 4). Systematic differences in schooling preferences are not, as Dara Zeehandelaar and Amber Winkler contend, like “people’s view of cars” which “the auto industry has figured out” and “the education industry still has a lot to learn” (p. 7). Segregation is importantly associated with dramatically unequal access to quality schools, health care, housing, public services, safety, well-paying jobs, and civic participation (E. Anderson, 2010; Levinson, 2012). And schools with demographic diversity in particular demonstrate richer learning environments, improved academic achievement, graduation, and college enrollment, and friendship formation that serves to diminish status hierarchies, break down stereotypes, and lead to more diverse social lives in adulthood (Frank, Muller, & Mueller, 2013; Frankenburg & Le, 2008; Gottfried, 2014; Palardy, 2013; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Welner, 2006). But because of parents’ own segregated
experiences, they will likely opt for demographically similar communities through their own
misperceptions and reluctance for intergroup contact (Frankenburg & Le, 2008, pp. 1040-1041).

While disempowered groups sometimes choose to segregate themselves through
“distinctive schools of choice” (Wilson, 2010a) designed to create meaningful educational
opportunities for their children, Elizabeth Anderson (2010) argues that this form of self-
segregation is a morally acceptable choice in the face of systematic inequality. Wilson’s study of
immigrant Somali families who created a culturally responsive charter school includes
compelling accounts of increased parental participation and a school-wide value for their
children’s heritage. Similarly, Andrea Dyrness (2011) chronicles the experiences of Latina
immigrant mothers in Oakland who worked together to create a charter school that would offer
their children the educational opportunities and cultural respect that they were being denied in
their neighborhood schools. In cases such as these, “school choice making serves as a form of
sociopolitical and cultural resistance” (Cooper, 2005, p. 185).

It is because of the lack of a democratic public sphere, however, that these ‘counter-
public’ spaces have materialized in schools. As Ken Howe (1997) points out, when a school is
formed around a distinctive community, we must carefully consider what “community or
communities it seeks to foster” (p. 118), especially given the likelihood that the market model
will continue to drive the creation of elite schools. Not only would some forms of community
clearly be unacceptable, but harkening back to Dewey (1927/1954), we must also work toward
the most justifiable form of community life.

Working toward democracy requires not just diverse educational settings, but
thoroughgoing integration as “genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing” (Martin Luther King, Jr.,
quoted in Powell, 2005, p. 297). Liliana Garces and Uma Jayakumar (2014) propose a model of
“dynamic diversity” (p. 116) that recognizes the need for a “critical mass” (p. 116) as not just a number, but a positive educational climate that promotes respectful and authentic intergroup interactions. Similarly, Amy Gutmann (1987) and Elizabeth Anderson (2010) separately argue that for education to be democratic, thoroughgoing within-school integration is needed that in turn requires other educational reforms, such as detracking.

Such systemic reform cannot be left to unfettered parental choice and ‘voluntary integration.’ Even when well meaning, middle-class parents choose urban and/or diverse schools, their cultural logic of parenting and involvement can reproduce within-school inequality and even contribute to flight from the original school community (Martínez & Quartz, 2012; Posey-Maddox, 2014). Olson Beal and Hendry (2012) therefore urge a return to the ‘common school’ vision of public education in order to change policies as well as the attitudes, understandings, and values that drive parents’ actions (p. 1070). As Kathleen Knight Abowitz (2013) points out, a shift to a participatory, inclusive, democratic model of governance, way of life, and schooling requires recognized legitimacy from the public. Ironically, it’s hard to imagine how this could happen but through democratic dialogue itself.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the context of parental choice that assumes a middle-class style of ‘concerted’ parental (often maternal) engagement, the nature of parental choice as a socially positioned process impacted by perceptions and heuristics that lead to increasingly segregated school choices, and the implications for public education in a democracy. It was with these sources of evidence and theoretical views in mind that I set out to examine the actual processes of parental choice. Understanding how parents actually make decisions under current policies can help to predict the outcomes of unregulated parental choice. Thoughtful deliberation
on the consequences of those outcomes, in turn, can serve to guide policymaking that fosters the aims of public education in a democratic society.

As it stands now, parents are caught in the difficult position of how to balance the intimacy of the parent-child relationship with the public good (Lawrence, 2005). And when policy results in extremes of highly- and under-resourced schools, parents who otherwise would be equity-minded end up participating in ways that increase inequity (Howe, 1997). For example, Allison Roda and Amy Stuart Wells (2013) found that white parents expressed a desire for more diverse and equal schools for their and others’ children, and felt conflicted about their decisions, but opted for academic quality in an unconstrained and unequal system. (Note that the market model of education is not truly meeting these parents’ preferences.) In fact, a whole literature has weighed parental partiality and equal educational opportunity with respect to school choice (see, e.g., Brighouse & Swift, 2008; G. Cohen, 2000; Swift, 2003).

Relying on parents’ choices, even with common solutions to increase access to choose through targeted and transparent information, transportation, and expanded programs (e.g., Hastings, Van Weelden, & Weinstein, 2007; Teske, 2012), will not address the complex issues discussed here. Because actual decision-making processes are complex, involve misperceptions, operate from different reference points, and so on, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2009) suggest that policy should offer a “choice architecture” (p. 3) that allows for freedom of choice, but “nudges” people to choose against undesirable externalities. Jonah Lehrer (2011, online) responds, however, that strategies that only tempt people to make better decisions but leave much latitude “are ill-equipped to solve thorny societal problems.” I return to consider the implications for the complex issues of parental choice in the concluding chapter, after a
presentation of my study and its findings of parents choosing and reproducing ‘communities of sameness.’
Chapter III: Methods

This chapter details the qualitative methodological approach used in my study, including the role of the researcher, the research setting, participants and sampling strategies, data collection and analysis techniques, and considerations regarding validity. For the overall study design, I used Maxwell's (2005) “interactive” model (p. 3), which connects the central research questions to an explicitly defined purpose, conceptual framework, method, and tests for validity, and engages in a continually reflexive process as the study proceeds. Informed by Erickson (1986) and Miles and Huberman (1994), I also used several stages of coding, matrices, and researcher memos as methods of data analysis.

Role of the Researcher

Especially because of my role as a mother choosing schools during the study, I began the study with a “researcher identity memo” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 39) that reflected on my positioning as partly described in the initial pages of the dissertation. David, Davies, Edwards, Reay, and Standing (1996) discuss the importance of actively reflecting on the ways in which their dual roles as mothers and academics necessarily influence the choices they make as researchers while at the same time their participants' perspectives are likewise constrained by their own contexts. My own researcher identity no doubt influenced the choices that I made for my study design and the choices that I made along the way—the probes I used, the events and statements I found important, the meanings I constructed, and so on.

Therefore, during the study, I summarized my reflections on my own experiences and perspectives in intermittent memos. Memos included reflections on the research process, emerging understandings or potential “frames” (Agar, 1996), and my own decision-making process. These entries were sometimes recorded as voice memos to ensure recollection shortly
after an event, and then expanded upon in written form. In the final chapter, I reflect on what I learned about my own process as a mother, educator, and researcher.

**Setting and Participants**

My study focuses on parents who live in and/or send their children to schools in East County. The 13 schools that comprise my participants’ enrollment patterns include overall movement *toward* East Charter K-12 (highly academic), West Focus Elementary (Core Knowledge), West Charter Middle (highly academic), and Central Focus Middle (kinesthetic), as well as high-performing neighborhood schools South Middle, West Middle, West High, and Central High; and movement *away* from neighborhood schools East Elementary, Central Middle, South High, and most severely, East Middle and East High. Indeed, the west side of the district was more affluent and boasted the highest performing schools, save East Charter K-12, a nationally renowned school located in the lower-income eastern side of the district. Enrollment patterns therefore shifted from eastern schools to East Charter, to western schools, or to a couple of popular schools in the south-central area in between. Table 1 shows the percentages of white and FRL populations of these schools.

**Table 1**

*White and FRL Populations at Schools that Comprised Participants’ Enrollment, 2011-12*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment Towards</th>
<th>East Charter K-12</th>
<th>West Focus Elementary</th>
<th>West Charter Middle</th>
<th>Central Focus Middle</th>
<th>South Middle</th>
<th>West Middle</th>
<th>West High</th>
<th>Central High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRL</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment Away</th>
<th>East Elementary</th>
<th>East Middle</th>
<th>Central Middle</th>
<th>South High</th>
<th>East High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRL</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To invite participation, I emailed 170 English-speaking and 22 Spanish-speaking parents of both genders whom I knew either personally or through a friend, and distributed flyers in both languages. In line with a “snowball or chain” sampling strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28), some parents forwarded the information to others. In recruiting participants, I attempted to sample broadly across the demographic characteristics of district families. However, similar to other school choice research, all but two of the 40 total parents who enrolled in my study were mothers, all but four had middle-class means, and participants overall were more highly educated than the county’s median level of educational attainment. Although my findings cannot be generalized to the district population, they can inform theory, research, and policy design (Eisenhart, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Schofield, 2002).

Although I speak Spanish, because all of the Latino/a participants spoke both English and Spanish, I conducted the interviews almost entirely in English (save for occasional clarification). After the first telephone interview, one European-American and one Latina female had to drop out of the study due to family illnesses, leaving 38 participants to complete the study. As noted above, I restricted my analysis to the 36 East County participants, of whom:

- 28 (78%) identified as white; 6 (17%) Latino/a; 2 (6%) Asian
- 32 (89%) had middle-class means; 4 (11%) working-class means (all 4 were Latino/a)
- 16 (44%) worked full-time; 11 (31%) part-time, 9 (25%) were stay-at-home moms
- 1 (3%) graduated high school; 12 (33%) Bachelor’s; 21 (58%) Master’s; 2 (6%) PhD
- 3 families had adopted children born in severe poverty; 4 parents were divorced from the children’s other parent
- 17 (47%) had at least one child identified as gifted (53% of middle-class parents; 0% of working-class); 11 (31%) had at least one child with special needs for learning, attention, emotional, and/or physical differences (25% of middle-class; 75% of working-class)
At the time of the study, 11 (31%) had only enrolled in their respective neighborhood schools, 12 (33%) had only enrolled in charter, focus, or private schools; and the remaining 13 (36%) had done a combination of neighborhood schools and open enrollment. However, some families had enrolled in neighborhood schools only because earlier attempts to open enroll were unsuccessful, some actively considered other schools but chose the neighborhood school, and some specifically moved to the neighborhood for the assigned school.

During the study, 21 parents had at least one child that was transitioning to middle or high school the next year. All of these parents participated in some open enrollment activities, ranging from three parents who simply attended the open house or sent their child to a shadowing day at the neighborhood school to parents that visited many schools and were highly anxious about the decision. These parents focused on their current choice processes or on past decisions that had laid the path for their current decision, while the rest reflected on prior decision-making or, in one mother’s case, the anticipation of a choice of middle school to be finalized the following year. As it turned out, 16 of the 21 parents who had a child transitioning to middle or high school at the time of the study submitted an open enrollment application, six of who were doing so for the first time. All but three (81%) got into their school of choice.

**Data Collection**

I first conducted two pilot interviews with non-participants: one with an English-speaking mother and one with a Spanish-speaking mother. In the three weeks before the open enrollment period began, all 40 participants took part in a 30-minute, semi-structured phone interview. Patterns of interview responses informed the semi-structured protocols of subsequent focus groups and in-person interviews (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Leavy, 2007; Smith, 1987). All protocols appear in Appendix B.
During the open enrollment period, 34 of the remaining 38 participants took part in one 90-minute focus group of six to eight parents whose children attended different schools, and who brought a variety of experiences and perspectives. Participants completed short pre- and post-questionnaires at each focus group that included demographic information, a ranking of preferences for their children's schools as well viewpoints on open enrollment policies, and any changes in their perspectives as a result of the dialogue.

Because Open House visits were a standard part of the parental choice process, I observed a total of 20 of these events at eight middle schools and seven high schools in East, Central, South, and West County (three morning “principal chats,” 10 daytime tours, and seven evening sessions). I first noted general site observations, such as the feeling of the school and event, perceptible financial resources of the school, and estimated number and appearance of people attending. I then documented the main points of presentations, such as curricular and extracurricular offerings, school, teacher, and student awards, opportunities for advanced offerings and extra help, features of facilities, and so on. I especially captured parent questions and answers, which often revolved around class size, instructional differentiation for students identified as talented and gifted and/or special needs, advanced mathematics offerings, and chances of getting in. Students' questions were less frequent but were more often centered on whether teachers were nice, whether they would have locker partners, and how much homework they would have. Finally, I listed themes that particularly struck me (such as those here) when I typed up field notes after each event. In my intermittent memos, I made connections from field notes to participant interviews where possible. (For example, some participants complained of the “We're the best!” feeling at some Open Houses, where others were impressed by it.)
Every Open House offered brochures, literature, and sometimes mementos (such as magnets and pens). In fact, parents commonly complained about the amount of money and parent volunteer time spent on these full color presentations. While most parents seemed to glance at the literature offered by schools, few found this information important to their decision-making process. Nonetheless, schools’ attempts to market themselves and keep up with other schools’ swag was increasing noticeably. I collected everything offered at each event, which often included printed materials with a logo and slogan, pictures of happy kids, descriptions of curricula and extracurricular activities, and a special focus on honors or other special programs that the school offered (such as the arts or experiential learning). One middle school even gave out pens that said, “Go With The Best!”

I also collected media information, such as the annual “School Choice Guide” published by the local paper a couple weeks before the open enrollment period began. Many participants referred to this guide, which includes, for each school, a picture and brief description, Open House dates, standardized test scores, size and demographics of the student population (ethnicity, free or reduced lunch, special education, English learners), average student-teacher ratio, and a statistic on parent satisfaction. Again, few parents found this information useful in their decision-making process, with many only looking for Open House dates. I additionally collected other media articles related to open enrollment, which some parents mentioned they had seen. I did not systematically analyze artifacts for content, but did gain a holistic sense of the ways in which schooling options were framed for parents.

After the open enrollment period ended, all 38 participants took part in a 60-minute semi-structured, in-person interview (in their homes, my home, a coffee shop, or a library). This interview inquired into parents’ decision-making processes in more detail, and delved more
deeply into their aspirations and opinions about the value of socioeconomically diverse schools and support for open enrollment policies that might be more equitable. The 16 parents who submitted an open enrollment application additionally participated in a short follow-up phone call after receiving lottery results, which included their emotional reaction to the outcome.

Following each of the four stages of data collection (phone interview, focus groups, Open House visits, and in-person interviews), I wrote a memo to track emerging themes, patterns, and variation (Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Memos varied in length and included brief insights as well as open-ended narrative. Through the memos, I identified potential themes: ‘concerted cultivation’ parenting; parent-teacher relationships of partnership; parental advocacy; conceptions of community; intergenerational influences on differing aspirations for participants’ children; trusted information sources; marginalization of Latino/a families; differing values for diversity; a range of opinions on open enrollment and neighborhood school models; analytic, intuitive, and strategic approaches to decision-making; and parental anxieties. The concepts that emerged as important through these memos informed further reading of literature and questions for subsequent protocols. I examined themes systematically after data collection was complete.

**Data Analysis**

After transcribing the audio-recordings of both sets of interviews and the focus groups, all materials were imported into Dedoose software for coding. For the focus groups, I summarized counts from the pre- and post-questionnaire data and broadly coded the topics of discussion in the transcripts. My general impressions of group dynamics and outcomes were included in the memo written after the focus group stage of data collection. Questionnaire data is discussed in Chapter IV; focus group outcomes are discussed in Chapter VI as they informed potential strategies for policy change. The rest of data analysis applies only to interview data.
I first tagged the set of each participant’s two interviews in Dedoose with “descriptors” so that I could later sort coded data (e.g., those who had a child transitioning the next year). I began with a set of “deductive” codes based on my conceptual framework and familiarity with my data, and added “inductive” codes as themes emerged (Maxwell, 2005, p. 97). I re-coded all interviews a second time to ensure comprehensive deductive and inductive coding. Some less-used and repetitive codes were collapsed or eliminated (e.g., at Open Houses, noticing the “students” themselves and a “kid-centered” focus were two codes that were mentioned by the same parents and so were collapsed into one). The final codebook appears in Appendix C.

Following Maxwell (2005) and Miles and Huberman (1994), I analyzed the coded interviews by reading horizontally across through each category and vertically down through each participant. I first exported a report that indicated the number of times each code was selected for each participant. To read across each code for all participants, I used counts to examine the overall frequency of each code across participants in order to summarize broad trends. For example, all participants mentioned gathering information through social networks, while 32 of 36 (89%) participants attended Open Houses, and only 20 (56%) used the media or Internet to gather information. Appendix D shows a sample of counts for three participants, as well as total counts for the entire sample.

I then looked more deeply at patterns informed by counts in order to understand the relative importance of each code in a participant’s process, to characterize individual participants, and to distinguish any patterns among groups of participants. For example, some participants (such as Diane) mentioned the use of intuition frequently, while others (such as Joanna) often mentioned a weighing of test score data. To do this, I created a matrix that listed the codes used for each participant; a sample with three participants appears in Appendix E. To
read down one participant at a time, I reduced the list of all codes used to only include those that the participant emphasized most (bolded) and frequently (italicized), informed by both the number of excerpts coded and a stated emphasis in the interviews. I then summarized the general perspective of each participant for each category, and read back through his/her interviews to ensure my summary was accurate. Through this process of vertical analysis, I gained a holistic understanding of each participant’s choice processes, viewpoints, and attitudes.

After understanding both trends across the data and the character of each participant, I stepped back to consider bigger themes. I first grouped participants by decision-making styles to look at differences and similarities among participants who tended to be analytic or intuitive, who used strategic moves, and who had maximizing or satisficing goals with regard to finding what they considered to be ‘the best’ school possible or one that was ‘good enough’ with regard to their aspirations. However, decision-making styles seemed to be very personal to the individual, just as participants claimed to make other big life decisions in similar ways.

I then created “decision trees” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to reflect the steps involved in participants’ decision-making. I considered what kind of situation they were in before making the decision, i.e., what was the impetus? I followed with each step leading to the final decision. Appendix F shows the table I created to track these steps. Using this table, I grouped participants who began with a similar impetus and sketched their steps. For most, it was simply “time to look for schools” (even if they were reflecting on a past decision). For some, dissatisfaction and/or teacher or specialist advice prompted a search, although most waited until it was time for their children to transition to the next stage of schooling. Others followed an ‘inside track’ that began with insider information and used insider advantage (e.g., working for the district) to get into their schools of choice. Overall, however, these patterns did not point to central themes.
At the same time, I wrote brief memos to understand how participants thought about four important concepts: “community,” “social-emotional well-being,” “teacher quality,” and “the right fit.” To do this, I created a matrix that included all excerpts coded for each concept, and reading down through the quotes, identified understandings of that concept. For example, “community” was talked about in terms of volunteerism, lasting friendships, and similar parenting practices. This gave me a richer understanding of these commonly mentioned terms.

Finally, a committee member asked if I could identify groups of parents that seemed to go together. Knowing my data very well, I immediately was able to begin grouping parents. A few did not fit as squarely as others, but the great majority fell clearly into one of three camps: those ‘seeking the best’ for their children, those dedicated to ‘preserving the neighborhood,’ and those dedicated to ‘defending diverse schools.’ I looked closely at similarities and differences within and across these groups by each category of codes. While analytic versus intuitive decision-making styles did not differ significantly across groups, I found that the dimensions of participants’ maximizing or satisficing aims with regard to academic rigor, aspirations for their children’s education, and viewpoints on the value of diverse schools were the most telling. I summarized each dimension with representative quotes, leading to the organization of a findings chapter on the three groups (Chapter V). In addition, I used the overall patterns in the data to write a broad findings chapter (Chapter IV). Patterns across the data give an overall picture of choice in the context of the study, while the three groups illustrate unique social spheres in which differing viewpoints and choices take place.

Validity

The most significant threat to the validity of my findings is my own researcher bias as an engaged participant and a fringe member of the parent communities that were represented in the
sample. However, my unique standpoint allows for a capacity to understand across various perspectives. To address researcher bias, I (1) began with a “researcher identity memo” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 39); (2) continually reflected on my own experiences, perspectives, and contributions in interactions with participants; (3) established relationships with participants based in reciprocity (Maxwell, 2005); and (4) considered all perspectives and listened for “rich points” that challenged my own assumptions (Agar, 1996, p. 31). My own decision-making process for my daughters’ schools likewise was a source of considering my own researcher biases, experiences, and perspectives.

The long-term nature of my study, in which I met with participants multiple times, together with the triangulation of a variety of methods, settings, and sources of evidence, allowed for detailed understandings of the processes at hand (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Maxwell, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I engaged in continual member checks by probing and reflecting participants’ views in interviews (Agar, 1996), and checked my developing understandings with parents at the beginning of the second interview. As I developed frames that described patterns and variation across participants, I noted instances of disconfirming evidence (Erickson, 1986). By analyzing the data both horizontally and vertically, as well as using decision tree and grouping methods, I checked my understandings of both patterns and variation from multiple angles. This multi-faceted approach served to warrant my identification of both broad themes and a more pixelated view of participants’ viewpoints and decision-making processes.
Chapter IV: Findings, Part 1: Choosing Communities of Sameness

As previously discussed, the basic premise of current school choice policies is that expanded choice allows parents to obtain information and rationally select a school that best aligns with their preferences, much like a market is broadly assumed to function in the consumer choice of private goods. Some have argued, as I do, that the market model and rational choice method not only misconstrue parents’ actual decision-making processes, but also lack attention to the social contexts in which choice takes place that are importantly associated with social status (Ben-Porath, 2010; DeJarnatt, 2008; Lareau, 2014). In my study, these commonly missed aspects of parental choice offered important insights into the ways in which families “seamlessly” (Lareau, p. 198) sorted themselves into like-minded communities, contributing to increased racial/ethnic and socioeconomic segregation across schools. I present these findings in this chapter.

I begin by describing the social contexts of participants’ decision-making that involved intensive child rearing practices resulting in a powerful partnership with schools and advantaged social networks. I then document participants’ aspirations for their children that justified their choice of a school with a like-minded community—consciously or subconsciously—as the ‘right fit’ for their children. Finally, I describe parents’ decision-making approaches that differed individually but importantly relied on heuristics to judge school quality and fit for their children. I conclude with a brief consideration of how the integrated relationship of these processes resulted in the separation of children into like-minded communities that coincided with race or ethnicity and social class.
The Social Contexts of Parental Decision-Making

As detailed in Chapter I, this study took place in a relatively affluent and highly educated suburban district and focused on the East County locale, where schools had a history of flight. Whether middle- or working-class, all participants were empowered in that they were aware of and acted upon ways to secure educational opportunities for their children. Here I describe the social contexts of these empowered parents’ choice processes in terms of intensive parenting practices that included a high level of active involvement in their children’s schools (such as through volunteering). Just as Lareau (2014) found, “concerted cultivation”-style parenting practices did not necessarily translate to a broad, active search for ‘the best’ school for one’s child. However, these practices were importantly interwoven in parents’ choice processes. Actively involved parents knew one another, became friends, and felt good about sharing similar values with the parents of their children’s friends. Parents likewise discussed the importance of a “feeling of comfort” in their children’s prospective schools where they could form partnerships with teachers and contribute to the school community. And close relationships with educators led to valuable insider information about schools and open enrollment strategies.

The “concerted cultivation” that Lareau (2003, p. 2) describes characterized the 32 middle-class participants’ parenting practices. Children’s education and extracurricular activities were the center of family lives, and often the structure around which mothers—many of whom held advanced degrees—scheduled their professional careers. Conversations among middle-class parents frequently flowed across kids’ schools, teachers, and “activities.” The four working-class Latino/a parents mentioned the financial and logistical strain that precluded participation in extracurriculars, but noted middle-class practices they had intentionally adopted to “empower”
themselves in securing educational opportunities for their children—such as meeting with teachers, advocating when needed, and becoming informed about open enrollment.:

*Angela:* I called for IEP reviews if things weren’t going the way I wanted it to go. So I came in as an empowered parent, where if you weren’t aware of those things you would have been a little bit at a disadvantage. … [so] we need those community/family liaisons in the schools so there’s someone the parent can go to to help them with the system.

*Antonio:* We learned [redshirting for Kindergarten] from the white folks; they taught us that. Now we’re teaching that to other Spanish speakers… We look at what the Joneses are doing so we’re doing the same thing they’re doing. …We’ve already done the part where we protest, march, go to the school board, focus groups, a lot of stuff, and it got us nothing from the school district. We even put people to run and they’d get a lot of votes but we never got a seat. We figured let’s change what we can change and that’s what we’re doing.

Angela and Antonio were leaders in their Latino communities who purposefully empowered themselves by taking up middle-class parents’ practices and sharing these strategies with other Latino families, many of whom were living in poverty. As Antonio suggests, changing their practices to mimic more powerful parents seemed to be more effective than their own grassroots organizing and communication with the district about their needs. Thus, whether practices of concerted cultivation reflected middle-class parents’ “cultural logic of child rearing” or were taken up by working-class parents to empower themselves, all participants were actively involved in the schools (including volunteering in schools or on high level committees), monitored their children’s academic progress and social lives, and were well versed in educational lingo around academic growth scores and instructional methods.

Given participants’ active involvement in their children’s education, it was fitting that 30 of 36 (83%) parents described their relationships with teachers as one of partnership (the remaining six—four of whom were Latino/a—tended to emphasize their role as an advocate). Participants broadly depicted parent-teacher partnership as a collaborative, communicative
endeavor to support the academic and social-emotional growth of children. And because parents were highly attuned to their children, a successful partnership meant that the parent and teacher were on the same page in terms of meeting the child’s individual needs. As Karen stated, “We should have the same goals to see all the students learn and reach their full potential.” In addition to an awareness of their children’s academic needs and “learning styles” in terms of preferences for visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learning, many parents discussed the importance of teachers knowing the “whole child” and attending to children’s social-emotional needs:

*Sara:* Part of their education, part of their well-roundedness as a human being is in the school and part of their well-roundedness is growing them at home. And so if you think about that whole child perspective, as their mother, I’m much more of a partner in their upbringing.

The expectation of teacher as partner in their children’s upbringing characterized the close and powerful relationships that parents had with schools. Not only were mothers frequently volunteering in classrooms and serving on committees, but over three-quarters (77%) of parents met with teachers and/or administrators outside of parent-teacher conferences to discuss their children’s progress.

When “partnering with the teacher [wasn’t] working,” parents would step into the role of advocate:

*Martha:* When partnership isn’t an option because the kid needs an advocate and partnering with the teacher isn’t working, then advocate is number two. But in my mind that means I can be advocating for my kid and partnering with the teacher together at the same time.

*Jamie:* I say advocate but I think what I really mean is partner. Advocate-Partner? … I think it’s mostly a partner because that takes into account that advocate, when needed. Because you are both trying to ensure the child’s success, right?

As Jamie suggests, advocating was a sometimes-necessary part of participants’ understanding of a parent-teacher partnership in fostering children’s growth across fluid home-school lines. This
was especially true for mothers, two-thirds of whom noted the increased demand on them specifically to ensure their children’s educational needs were being met, and acutely so for the 14 parents whose children had special needs. The time and effort mothers spent communicating with educators, re-teaching “at the kitchen counter,” and getting outside tutoring was not nominal, and influenced many mothers’ own professional choices:

Amy: [If my son ends up going to a school that doesn’t meet his needs] that would be a lot more of me helping him at the counter. And that’s happened before in years where he just can’t understand what’s happening in the classroom. It’s like the learning during the day just doesn’t happen and we have to sit at the kitchen counter and do things a little different. And I have to read up on what exactly that math lesson is and then we get out different things in the kitchen and count, or do whatever it takes. In years past it has just been hours at the kitchen counter.

KD: Do you work?

Amy: Part-time. So that’s why I work part-time and not full-time, because there’s no end.

As Amy expresses, being satisfied with their children’s educational experiences mattered greatly to mothers, not only for their children’s well-being, but also because mothers’ own personal and professional lives were implicated. It is important to note, however, that the act of advocating itself reflected participants’ empowered social positions in that parents were comfortable enough with institutions to voice their concerns and even demand necessary accommodations. This was evident to the four working-class, Latino/a participants, who specifically cited advocating as a practice they mimicked “from the white folks” to empower themselves.

Through such close relationships with school personnel, empowered parents gained access to insider information in terms of both what was going on inside schools and how to navigate district policies, including unpublished strategies to work the system. This information in turn was carried through well-resourced social networks:

Melissa: It seems like there’s tricks to the trade ... Several people we know said, “Oh, you only get into East Charter if you had open enrolled two or three years previously.” Even though you knew you wouldn’t get in, you still did it, because
then when you applied in middle school, you automatically got to the top if you answered the question, “Yes, I’ve open enrolled here before.”

As a mother who worked full-time, Melissa relied on tips from friends and neighbors with access to “tricks to the trade.” In fact, two-thirds of parents cited insider information gained through volunteering, with those who took leadership roles on school and district committees elaborating on the extensive information gained in these settings as committee members would share both accomplishments and ongoing challenges at each school:

Amy: The DPC [District Parent Council] reps from the different schools make an impression too. Just on the things that they’re struggling with. The things that come out of the person from [a popular middle school] just wow you. … It’s district dish because you have the superintendent there. You can ask questions. … you kind of get a feel from what the reps say in round robin, the vibe of what’s on parents’ minds and what their struggles are.

While parents such as Amy volunteered in schools and served on committees as part of a cultural logic of child rearing that included intensive involvement in their children’s education, it was impossible to ignore the information gained in these settings—especially given the common use of heuristics to judge schools that were formed through anecdotal data, as discussed below.

Some mothers went so far as to take administrators to lunch during the open enrollment season to discuss school options for their children, or hosted events to promote a school in their homes. In these and more formal settings, such as parent-teacher conferences and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings for students with special needs, educators recommended specific schools for participants’ children—and cautioned against other schools—which caused a great deal of stress for parents who felt the need to follow such expert advice. Other teachers made comments about East County schools that reinforced stereotypes held among students:

Meg: And it’s been rough, and there’s a lot of prejudice against East High School and people are pretty aware of it and kids are pretty aware of it. There’s a teacher at West High that tells the kids that if they don’t behave they might as well go to East High, and there’s that stuff out there and the kids just kind of live with it.
Hearsay through middle-class parents’ social networks thus included anecdotes of not only (middle-class) parental concerns raised in meetings intended for school improvement, but also educator opinions who sometimes repeated stereotypes of schools.

Overall, the social contexts of empowered parents’ decision-making included intensive child rearing practices that facilitated a powerful partnership with educators. These partnerships ensured that teachers were on the same page as parents in advancing their children’s educational growth, backed up by an actively involved parent community that held similar values. Resulting access to insider information that included educators’ perceptions of schools and strategies to improve their chances in the open enrollment lottery traveled through social spheres of like-minded parents that often discussed their children’s schooling experiences. In this way, intensive child rearing practices were part and parcel of parents’ knowledge about schools and expectations of the types of relationships that they would have with educators in their children’s prospective schools. Perspectives such as these are difficult to capture in commonly stated preferences for schooling such as “strong academics” and “high quality teachers” that participants echoed at the outset of my study. In the next section, I dig deeper into parents’ determinations of the ‘right fit’ for their children that resonated with their own values and expectations of the parenting-schooling relationship.

**From Expressed Preferences to Deeper Aspirations**

Similar to other research on suburban school choice, less than half (47%) of parents claimed to be interested in test scores as even one measure of a school’s academic quality, typically stating that average scores did not reflect their individual child’s situation. Parents placed much more emphasis on what they described as ‘finding the right fit’ for their children’s individual needs, which they explained in terms of their advanced academic abilities (50%),
identified special needs (39%), specific social-emotional sensitivities (39%), and “learning styles” (31%). In line with parents’ knowledge of educational trends and lingo, they commonly expressed an interest in “high quality teachers” skilled in “differentiation” and highly individualized instruction that would “meet each student where s/he is.” Parents of children with children identified as gifted and/or with special needs were especially concerned that teachers understood their children’s academic and social-emotional needs. Most Latino/a parents further expressed that high quality teachers by default honored students’ cultural identities:

David: A culturally incompetent staff will not challenge all kids. They’ll discount some. It becomes immediately apparent to children at an early age that a teacher doesn’t care. The message gets reinforced; they mentally drop out by fourth grade.

Indeed, as Martha states, many distinct school characteristics might be “rolled in” to a parent’s named preference for “high quality teachers”:

I’m rolling in with the quality of instruction all the things that have to be there in order for the instruction to be effective, so positive school climate and adult-children relationships and adults that children trust and an environment of academic excellence and character education and all the things that contribute to the teacher’s ability to be effective.

The blend of characteristics that comprised such commonly cited preferences as ‘strong academics’ and ‘high quality teachers,’ then, varied across participants in important ways. Such varying understandings seemed to reflect parents’ expectations of being able to form successful partnerships with educators who understood their children’s individual needs.

Using expressed preferences named in response to the question, “What do you look for in schools?” in the initial phone interview, I created a list of 10 qualities for parents to rank in order of importance. Upon reviewing their rankings in the in-person interview, the great majority of

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7 This list appeared on the focus group pre-questionnaire. The four participants that did not attend a focus group completed the pre-questionnaire prior to the in-person interview. Qualities mentioned in this paragraph are abbreviated; the full wording of each quality can be seen in Appendix B.
parents claimed that this exercise had been very difficult to do as “it’s not really how [they] make decisions.” While the rankings repeated a stated desire for high quality teachers, most parents did not consistently rank preferences that they had previously named nor did they make a choice in line with those preferences, as would be assumed in a rational choice model. Indeed, preferences for a school community that felt familiar, welcoming, and safe often were not named up front, but rather were revealed as participants discussed their information-gathering and decision-making processes in more depth.

When I later asked during the in-person interview, “What is most important to you for your child’s education?,” parents gave a more profound sense of their hopes and desires, providing me with a deeper understanding of their goals for their children’s education that I interpreted as their aspirations. Most parents (75%) aspired for their children to develop a “love of learning” through a “well-rounded education.” For some (like Jennifer), growing into well-rounded adults required a variety of course offerings, the arts, and extracurricular opportunities, while for others (like David), it meant attending schools with a wide diversity of peers.

Jennifer: Academics, and having quality teachers. But I want a good balance of having strong academics, but having time to still be a high schooler, and enjoying being on a sports team or being in a choir, so that you’re well-rounded. …I want them to participate in the school as a whole.

David: We talk about living in a global society, we talk about—our children need to be exposed and understand—you can’t get away from it and put all the poor kids in one school. … What that school looks like demographically should be a factor [in policy]. And should be couched from the perspective that it’s about providing a well-rounded education for the kids to enhance their views of the world.

Half of parents also described aspirations related to their children’s social-emotional growth and well-being. Additionally, 44% of parents aspired for academic excellence such that their children could “reach their full potential.” While not telling the full story, parents’ aspirations for their
children were an important factor in their choice of schools. Similar aspirations therefore characterized one aspect of the like-minded communities that parents chose.

Importantly, parents’ aspirations had intergenerational roots that cannot be separated from a history of inequality and social status. When I followed with, “So your interest in [reflection of what participant named] for your child – where does that come from for you?” almost all immediately responded that their aspirations came from either their upbringing (72%), their own personal educational experiences that served them well or were lacking (67%), or both. Some appreciated their parents’ emphasis on education, some lamented being pushed too hard or not hard enough, and some saw education as a means to a better life than they had. Here I run through several examples of aspirations stemming from childhood experiences in order to make clear the influence of deeply ingrained values on current aims for their own children.

Martha and Deb reflected on the value that their families placed on education, which Deb later expands upon to explain her interest in her children receiving a well-rounded education:

*Martha:* I’m the fifth generation of females in my dad’s family to go to college. I come from a long line of highly educated women and men, but women is sort of unusual. My mom was the first one in her family to go to college and her brothers and sisters all became teachers. My dad is a teacher. So there is a legacy of putting value in education and I couldn’t escape if I tried.

*Deb:* And I should say, my parents stressed education very much. …we were not well off. We were six people living in a 1000 square foot little home. I mean, one bathroom with six of us–four kids–and our parents put us all through parochial school. That was a sacrifice. And it was because… education was important, and you did well because that was what you were expected to do.

*…*

*Deb:* [College] was when I got sparked … It’s not a burden; this is something I choose, because I want to learn more. So I wanted my kids to love learning, to be curious, I want them to be knowledge-seekers, but from a place of curiosity and passion, not a place of ‘This is due on Friday.’
Similar to Deb’s boredom in K-12, Kate and Jamie wished they had been pushed more, and so aimed to ensure that their kids would be challenged, while Heather was pushed too hard and refused to push her kids:

*Kate:* My parents were too lenient with me; I remember in middle school they let me drop out of everything and I ended up hanging with the wrong crowd and I do wish somebody had pushed me to my potential. … I was strong academically but I never really did a whole lot with it, which I feel kinda bad about.

*Jamie:* I was really excited to learn and excited to push myself. Then when I realized that I was at the top, I think I slacked off. Pretty much, “This is so easy. I can do this so easily.”

*KD:* What kind of difference do you think it’ll make for your kids to have been more challenged?

*Jamie:* I think they’ll have more confidence in what they can do and they’ll need to push themselves more to keep up, which means they’ll be more engaged in school versus tuning it out, which is what I did. … I want them to have that option to see if really pushing themselves academically is what makes them happy and if it doesn’t, at least they had the option.

*Heather:* I was pushed very hard as a child to excel academically and in everything that we did. It was never just for fun. My parents pushed us to be very competitive. I’m pretty much completely non-competitive at this stage in my life so I kind of push that on my children. If you’re enjoying it, you’re meeting your commitments and you’re progressing, then that’s great. … how I’ve chosen to mother my kids evolves directly from there.

On the other hand, Diane’s emotionally intense experiences provided the basis for her strong interest in schools supporting her child’s social-emotional well-being:

*Diane:* I’m really hypersensitive to her feeling like she’s stupid. … When I was working with the troubled teens, they all came in feeling that they were losers. I mean there’s no question that they got that message over and over again. … And the whole foundational key to turning them around was helping to them to see that they are actually pretty smart and they can do it. … But my want to help people I think comes from growing up with two alcoholic parents. I’ve been the caretaker and the fixer and compromiser in my family since I was a kid.

Diane goes on to explain that she was bullied in school and that if her child comes home with a bullying experience, “I become unglued.” Barbara, Ann, and Joanna, on the other hand,
emphasized their superior educational experiences and parents’ emphasis on intelligence that grounded their aspirations for academic excellence for their children:

*Barbara:* I just know what my Ivy League education did for me. Every door opened for me because of it, and I realized how easy it was for me once I had that to open doors for me.

*Ann:* [Going to a highly academic high school] was so fulfilling. And socially, because everyone was speaking my language. That’s another difference between, like a gifted child being accommodated, and that social thing of being around kids who also think vowels are fascinating, and … we would all sit around discussing Existentialism when we were dropping acid. Even the messed-up ones of us were really so intellectually driven, and curious, and reading Shakespeare, and Beckett, and Marx, and everything that we could feed our minds with. So, hopefully, my kids will do all that without the acid.

*KD:* What is most important to you in schools for your kids?

*Joanna:* Educational opportunity. To be taught at the level at which you can learn.

*KD:* And where do you think your interest in educational opportunity comes from for you?

*Joanna:* Well I certainly think that that comes from my own upbringing, where intelligence and schooling were very important – there was an expectation that you would go on to college, you know? … We knew what our IQs were in our family, okay? Not information I would ever share with my children, meaning their own IQs. … but if you’re not given an opportunity and you’re not given the ability to push yourself, then when are you going to be given that? Or who’s going to help you with that? I just want–I’m very much interested in having my children work to their potential.

Finally, Maricela emphasized her desire to support her children more than she had felt supported in her childhood, and that education was the means for her children have more opportunities than she had had:

*Maricela:* I want them to see that they have my support, I listen to everything they’re saying, because I didn’t have that opportunity with my parents and I didn’t have the support when I wanted to go to college so I told them that so when they have something in their mind thinking oh I cannot do this, I listen to them because it’s to tell them yes, you can do this. You can do this! I want them to see my full support–that they have a mom back there.
Similarly, Antonio recounted his father telling him one day while working in the fields that he could either do similar backbreaking work, or pursue other jobs by getting an education. Antonio went on to get a Master’s degree, and aspired for his kids to be respected as Latino boys in their schools so they too could pursue higher education.

Only six parents (17%) additionally described characteristics of their particular child that informed their aspirations:

*Melissa:* But then by the time he’s in fifth grade, … you know when he excels and when he doesn’t, and so to me then it kind of became a very different model. … Now I can experience these schools and look at it from the eyes of my son and go, “Does this feel like what he could do well at?” And you go, “Yeah, this one feels like a really good fit.” It doesn’t matter what anyone else’s opinion is; it’s how well they would fit into that school.

Thus, while parents often claimed to be seeking the ‘right fit’ for their child, it often was at least as much about finding the ‘right fit’ for the parents themselves. And the ‘right fit’ for parents was importantly informed by intergenerational experiences and values:

*Angela:* I think that’s what happens—people go back to what they’re familiar with—it’s natural. What feels comfortable, because you’re sending your kids there so you want to feel that you can leave and they’re going to be safe and getting the right messages and having experiences that are going to be positive with them. … We don’t drift too far. I don’t think people do, really. I don’t think people drift too far from what they experienced as a child, if you had a positive environment. You think about the stuff that made you warm and feel good and loved and everything—that’s powerful. And so it does drive you still, even as an adult. Then when it comes to your kids, you want your kids to have that same experience.

My emphasis on the childhood roots of parents’ aspirations is not to say that experiences in their adult lives were not also influential. It may be that the wording of “Where does that come from for you?” triggered a reminiscing about one’s life trajectory as opposed to a question along the lines of “Why is that important to you?” that may have elicited a quite different response. Nonetheless, the claim of intergenerational influences on current aspirations is warranted through...
example after example in which parents sought educational experiences for their children that tended to repeat what they found beneficial or offer new opportunities that they did not have.

This data therefore sheds light on how individuals’ experiences that contribute to the formation of aspirations are carried through generations of families with different social positioning—for example, from reference points of five generations of women in higher education to the potential for one’s children to be first-generation college students. Such deep-seated values were closely related to the type of school climate that felt “welcoming and comfortable,” which likewise strongly influenced parents’ choices of similar school communities through shared aims and commonly formed heuristics used to judge schools.

**Parental Decision-Making Processes**

Most often, school decision-making occurred in anticipation of children beginning elementary, middle, or high school—it was simply ‘time to look for schools’—although for some, dissatisfaction with their children’s schooling experiences and/or teacher or specialist recommendations prompted a search. Just as it largely fell on mothers to put time and effort into volunteering and monitoring their children’s academic and social lives, 28 of the 34 moms (82%) were primarily involved in choosing schools. Being the primary decision-maker ranged from doing all of the research and choosing, to framing the options in a way that superficially included the other parent, to doing the “leg work” of narrowing options and then jointly visiting schools and deciding with the other parent. Fully shared decision-making between parents occurred most often with mothers who worked full-time, yet unlike fathers, no mother was less than 50% ‘in charge’ of educational decisions. In line with other school choice research, half of mothers reported feeling stress and anxiety over the responsibility of making the right decision:

*Maricela:* Since I’m the only one choosing, I told everything to my husband, what do you think? And he says whatever you think is fine. So I feel the risk of not
knowing and making the right choice. … I was thinking, am I doing the right thing? Am I making the right choice? … [But] to see the happiness in her face, it helps me to calm myself and feel this is the right choice.

_Diane:_ So then I thought, “Oh, no, is this the right place? Am I making the wrong choice?” And then there were several nights around the holidays where I was up in the middle of the night with a lot of angst about making the wrong choice. “If I [open enroll] her… all of her friends are at Central Middle. There’s no bus. What am I doing? Is this the right thing to do?”

Because mothers’ personal and professional lives were impacted when they perceived that their children’s needs weren’t being met, for some it felt doubly crucial that they make “the right choice.” As Schwartz et al. (2002) point out, “[As] options expand, people may come to believe that any unacceptable result is their fault, because with so many options, they should be able to find a satisfactory one” (p. 1179).

In line with a concerted cultivation parenting style in which children are encouraged to participate in decision-making, 81% of parents also included their secondary school-aged children in the school choice process. It was well understood that fifth- and eighth grade students might miss school several times to attend Open Houses, which catered to both parent and student audiences. High school students often took the lead in choosing their own school, but a few kids entering middle school also drove the decision. Kids who led the decision-making were bound by choosing schools that parents approved, however. And because kids were often most concerned about staying with friends, their choices were a logical progression of parents’ desires.

As many mothers’ lives revolved around their children’s schooling experiences and extracurricular activities, so did the focus of their social networks. Conversations among mothers at extracurricular events, book clubs, ‘Bunco’ game nights, cocktail parties, and school bus stops often turned to their experiences of certain schools and rumors of others. These discussions intensified in anticipation of choosing schools:
Lauren: Schools always come up [at Bunco nights], because that’s what us moms have in common; we talk about our kids, usually. And it was interesting, when we first moved here, this was my introduction to open enrollment, “You have to go to this school.” It was really overwhelming...

Suzanne: With the playgroup stuff, all we did was argue about schools. And Bunco. That would be the big discussion. They would say, “How could you send your child to this school, how could you make an example of your daughter, just to do that?”

As Lauren and Suzanne recount, talk about schools at social gatherings often included emotions and anxiety. Mothers not only shared feelings with each other about bearing the weight of the decision, but also felt judged by others who disagreed with their choices. In fact, many lamented that differences in school choices splintered neighborhood communities.

In addition, anecdotal data from these frequent conversations were key sources of information that parents used to form general understandings about various schools’ quality and “image,” as Evelyn notes:

I think there's just this image out there. So I would say the image for West High is that it has the IB program. I would say the image for Central High is that it’s more diverse. I would say sadly that the image of South High is that it has drug and alcohol problems, and the image for East High is that it’s maybe not as good a school as the others. And then East Charter is … this Christian thing, and it’s really hard to get into, and that it’s a college prep school.

In fact, over half of parents described the perceptions they had developed of the “type” of students and parents at certain schools (58%), general school reputations (53%), and parent and student satisfaction (50%). In this way, in line with an “availability” heuristic described by Tversky and Kahneman (1974, p. 1127), parents relied on recurring or memorable anecdotes—particularly those provided by trusted friends—to form opinions about which schools would be in their choice set to consider and which schools to avoid:

Cindy: I’d have to say this sounds a little lame, but we made the decision mostly by our friends and acquaintances, what they were saying was a lot of it. … I’m influenced by my peers, like the other moms at the soccer games and what they
say about it, and if my friends tell me if its right for my children or not, I feel these voices you hear in the community drive what you decide to do.

**Barbara:** I have two friends who have kids at West Middle. One is really happy but … he’s into the whole dating thing, he’s all girl-crazy, and I’m very happy for [my son] to wait on that stuff. But as he says that’s a big thing there. ... And look at some of the girls they have, they have heavy makeup on. None of the girls I see have that at West Charter. ... Or the clothes, or any of that. .... I’m happy. The other one has a very nerdy son. Very similar to [my son], and … he said, “I want to go because of all of my friends,” and … within two weeks, there’ve been new cliques and he’s been on the outside since. He’s been pretty unhappy, and he’s been wishing he went to West Charter, because he’s like academically, it’s nothing great … So there’s the two data points that I have.

Cindy seemed to recognize that she was relying on information that may or may not have accurately portrayed school quality as she felt pulled in the direction of her own community members’ opinions. Furthermore, anecdotal “data points,” as Barbara called them, often served to associate schools with similar parental values, such as boundaries around when it is appropriate for their children to wear makeup, start dating.

Heather further explained that she considered information about a school in light of how similar or dissimilar the person giving the opinion was to herself, especially in terms of “how they raise their children” and “the values they have as a family”:

**Heather:** Not just any parent could have told me about their experience with the school. It would have to be somebody whose opinion mattered to me or made sense to me. ... And if someone very dissimilar from me had told me things about the school, that might have made me go look because I would think, “Well, that worked for that person. It would be totally wrong for us.”

**KD:** People who are different from you in what ways?

**Heather:** Kind of the way they raise their children. The values they have as a family. Their actions as a family. That kind of thing.

Not only was information about schools sorted to favor the opinions of those who were like-minded, but parents also felt comfortable in school communities that shared similar values. Parents commonly noted that it was important to send their children to school with “people we
can identify with” in terms of similarly “involved” parenting styles. For example, Ann reflected positively on her choice of West Charter as place with people who “just seemed like us”:

And then the people who I knew whose kids were at West Charter, they just seemed like us, where they were really into the family, and they were really into their kids being nice people, and they really cared about the academics—they just seemed to have more sensibilities.

Information gained through social networks, then, was sorted to favor a search for like-minded communities by both gauging the information in terms of parents’ perceived similar values and feeling a sense of belonging in schools with “people like us.”

When asked about nearby lower-achieving schools, some parents said they just “weren’t on [their] radar” as they “hadn’t come up” in social circles. A handful of parents admitted, however, that they associated these schools with lower quality. Evelyn, Jennifer and Jamie frankly stated their concerns that a diverse school environment would negatively impact their children’s educational opportunities and safety:

_Evelyn_: I hate to say this; it’s because it has a high Hispanic population. From talking to [a principal, s/he’ll] say they lose Hispanic students to East High because they feel more comfortable there. So while diversity is great, I probably wasn’t in that frame of mind at the time. Or wasn’t thinking that was where you would send your kid if they wanted to go to college.

_KD_: Do you think you associated in your mind that the high Hispanic population meant probably not as good academics?

_Evelyn_: I hate to say it, but yeah, I did.

_Jennifer_: I would hope that they would have been just fine [if they had gone to the East County schools]. And I would have appreciated that they would have been in a mix with a more diverse group of kids. ... I think they would be a little more street-smart, and not as naïve in the, “I’m sixteen, where’s my car?” They would probably be a more well-rounded person... Hopefully in a safe way. I think that’s a little bit of what scared us, too. It’s a stereotype, you know, gangs, and stuff, and a little rougher school around the edges. But I wish we would have been a little more comfortable with it.

_Jamie_: …one of the reasons I like [the school where I work] is because there’s more diversity. But I also see that they have other issues going on because of that diversity. They’ve got a high proportion of kids that have a lot of trouble learning
and then there’s a high proportion of kids that think that no matter what anybody says, they’re talking about them because they’re a different race. So I don’t know. I mean, I like working in a school where there’s more diversity, even if I don’t necessarily want my kids to go to a school where they’re going to suffer, where they’re not going to get as good of an education. That’s probably hypocritical. I think it’s important for them to be in diversity as long as it doesn’t affect their learning. I know at East High, the groups stand in the hallway and don’t let kids through. A bunch of people have told me that. The Hispanic group just stands in the hallway. So other kids feel kind of intimidated when they’re trying to get to their class or get to their locker. Intimidation makes kids not feel safe and if they’re not feeling safe, then they’re not learning at an optimum level.

While only a handful of parents were so direct about associations they made between diversity and school quality, several parents referred to East County schools as “rougner,” and rumors of safety issues and bullying triggered fear for a number of parents:

Melissa: Several friends I had talked with said that they’d had quite a few issues with bullying. It kind of made me nervous. And, my sixth grader is not a very large child, and so I kind of had a nervousness of I didn’t really want to put him in a situation where he might feel bullied...

Carmen: I was a little afraid of East Middle because… I heard there was bullying going on, especially with boys that were Hispanic, like we are. So that was one of the things that made me feel a little bit concerned.

It was easy to hear the fear some parents’ had about sending their children to East County schools, just as Melissa and Carmen noted that stories they had heard about bullying made them “nervous” or “concerned.” Bullying anecdotes often coincided with rumors of gangs, fighting, alcohol, drugs, and sexual activity. Maricela, also Latina, steered away from East Middle after observing undesirable behavior on a visit to the school:

Maricela: I remember one time a parent told me, just go in the middle of changing classes, you will see how the school is. So I went during the changing classes, and that was eye opening. I said, wow, this is too much, I don’t think I’d like this for my kid. So I decided no.

KD: What was it like?

Maricela: They were fighting, they were cursing everywhere, there were [students] making out in the corner, and I didn’t see any adults around. So I was
thinking, “Where are the teachers here?” That’s why I decided no, this is not a school for my kid.

For the most part, however, parents had never visited the schools in question, yet associated rumors of inferior academic opportunities, undesirable behavior, and violence with higher poverty schools.

Carmen, who grew up in a country where there was a strong divide between those who attended private versus public school, was the most forthright about the relevance of social class to a perception of having similar values:

[At East High] I looked at the kids and ... I felt, “Oh, I feel so relieved that [my son’s] going to East Charter” because when you see the kids, I think in the regular public schools, there are so many issues, social issues, family issues going on and the population's more diverse. At East Charter, it sounds bad, but it kind of narrows the kids who are more likely to go to college, maybe middle-class kids … the kids are more into studying and I feel closer to that. Like, I grew up in a private school and the population was kind of homogenous. ... So I feel more comfortable when my kids have something similar because I think it’s better.

Carmen’s concern with rumors of bullying among Latino boys at East Middle, mentioned above, thus may have been intensified by her preconceptions of schools with diverse populations. As shown through these examples, in addition to heuristics used to judge schools based on ease of recall, some parents relied on judgments formed through a “representativeness” heuristic that led to the avoidance of more diverse, higher poverty schools (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974, p. 1124).

On the other hand, some parents rejected associations of poverty with low quality. For example, Crystal favorably recalled her experiences growing up in diverse schools in California, and Suzanne’s teaching experiences in high-poverty schools led her to believe, “Just because you have low-income students doesn’t mean you have a worse-off school”:

*Crystal:* Everyone talks sad about that whole area, but we went [to East Middle], and we’re walking down the halls, and there’s no graffiti, it looks nice, the kids looked respectable, and we were like, “Oh God, this is 100% better than anything we would have gone to in California, so let’s just go to our home school.”
Suzanne: Most people put [East Elementary] down also because of the neighborhood it was in. I didn’t agree with that.

KD: Because it was in a lower-income area?

Suzanne: Yes. People would talk about, “It doesn’t look like our neighborhood.” I just didn’t agree with that. … The people had started at East Elementary, and they were like “I don’t want my child there,” and they left. They know [my son] is getting on the bus to East, but I think, “I guess I don’t want my child to go to school with your child anyway! Obviously we have different views, and I guess I wouldn’t be friends with you either.”

Just as Suzanne indicated distaste for parents biased against high poverty schools, even parents who rejected stereotypes and enrolled their children in more diverse schools wound up with like-minded parents who did the same.

After narrowing their choice sets of schools through like-minded social networks, educator opinions, and insider information, almost all parents (and often their kids) attended Open House events to confirm the direction in which they were leaning. It was most important that a school felt “welcoming,” “warm,” and even “familiar,” with half of parents claiming that they felt “a sense of fit” at the visit. As Carmen put it, “Feeling welcome and feeling like I can go and feel at home in the school, that's huge.” It was important to feel welcome given parents’ active involvement in the schools and side-by-side work with educators, as Katya explains:

Katya: I think of myself definitely as a partner with the school and if issues arise we just try to work things out and communicate well with the school. And I feel at East Middle we are part of the school community also which is quite important to us. We should always feel welcome at the school. I think we are also one of the members of the school, it’s primarily the kids and then the parents obviously and at East Middle I always feel welcome. I feel welcome in the office, I have access to the teacher as needed, and that’s quite important to us.

A sense of belonging felt at Open Houses thus was an important data point for many parents, guiding them towards school communities that resonated with their own aims and values. An “affect” heuristic (Kahneman, 2003) thus played an important role in decision-making, whether
it served as a guiding factor (for decision-makers that relied heavily on intuition) or a final “gut check” (for decision-makers that relied more on systematically analyzing information).

Just as parents gauged the “school climate” at Open Houses, many also noted the “type of kids” at each school. Often, select students presented their schools at Open Houses, and parents were impressed if they reflected the type of people they wanted their children to become. After mentioning how impressed she was by the students at Central Focus School, Kim explained the importance of “the quality of the kids” with similar “values” and “similar-minded” parents:

I think that the quality of the kids, meaning, I don’t want to say their values, but yeah, just sort of the community, quality of kids and sort of how they are raised, their values I guess, is important … just that you are going to have parents that are similar-minded in terms of what they let their kids do, ‘cause your kids ultimately are going to be spending more time with their friends.

For Kim and others, seeking schools with students who were similar to their own children was directly related to “how they are raised.” As Kate put it, “Being surrounded by kids who have the same values as them [is] what it really comes down to.”

On the whole, then, parents’ decision-making processes involved the use of availability, representativeness, and affect heuristics to judge school quality and ‘fit’ developed through insider information, trusted and like-minded parents in well-resourced social networks, and personal assessments of climate and students at Open House visits. While some parents used published data from online and print sources, overall parents discussed their judgments of the ‘right fit’ much more in terms of their assessment of schools’ reputations and their feelings of comfort with like-minded communities. For example, Melissa, who was trained in assessing valid evidence as an engineer, pointed out that as objective as one might try to be, it was difficult not to be swayed by school features that felt familiar. Thus while parents claimed to strongly dislike the “dog and pony shows” of Open Houses, they admitted to being influenced by them.
Through tangible and intangible elements, schools seemed to be offering parents and students a taste of their particular communities.

Within these broad trends, individuals differed as to their decision-making styles. Some were more analytic and others were more intuitive-oriented, with most using both types of information processing. More importantly, parents differed in their goals for the decision-making process. Just as Schwartz et al. (2002) found, participants evidenced individual tendencies to maximize utility with regard to narrow aims or satisfice in balancing their choice of school with a broader set of aspirations. The 13 parents that I characterized as maximizing utility conducted thorough searches, considered many schools, and explicitly aimed to find “the best” school in line with their narrow preferences for what they considered to be academic excellence:

*Sara:* Well of course you’d choose the best. . . . I think the best way I can describe it is just a passion as a parent, what’s best for your kids. Your kids become—especially being a stay-at-home mom too—that became my focus and my world, was making sure that they had exactly what they needed. And . . . school just became one piece of that. And I think then naturally, I would begin to pour my heart into it [and so I volunteered extensively].

Sara not only sought ‘the best,’ but also assumed that it was simply what one does as a parent. The 23 satisficing parents also could be understood to be doing what they thought was best for their children, but this did not translate to searching out ‘the best’ school. Instead, they conducted a more bounded search with an aim of finding a conveniently located school that offered a “good enough” education for their children:

*Tori:* It didn’t really matter; it wasn’t the right thing but the fine thing. It won’t affect her ability to get into college; she will do well no matter where she goes and Central High will give her whatever she needs.

*Crystal:* We just looked at East Middle, and we thought it was good enough. The teachers were good; we liked what the principal had to say. And we just went there.
Tori, Crystal, and others who satisficed did not care any less about their children’s education; they simply had a different attitude toward the school choice process. Satisficing parents tended to express distaste for getting caught up in the hoopla of having to have ‘the best’ at all costs, as well as concern for the negative social consequences of open enrollment. As detailed in the next chapter, maximizing and satisficing aims characterized one key aspect of like-mindedness across three groups of parents in my study.

**Conclusion: Choosing Like-minded Communities**

Unknowingly, Annette Lareau and I simultaneously were investigating the confluence of parenting practices with parents’ choice of schools. We both were surprised to find that concerted cultivation practices did not carry over to thoroughly researching ‘the best’ schools for their children, while finding strikingly similar patterns of choice processes that seamlessly occurred through social networks. Just as Lareau (2014) found, participants in my study most often gathered school reputations through their social networks, which determined a choice set of schools to consider. Empowered parents engaged in concerted cultivation parenting practices that led to close relationships with educators and active participation as school community members. Most used heuristics formed about school quality to guide their choice process, including a “feeling of comfort” in like-minded communities that they determined as the ‘right fit.’

Even if a cultural logic of concerted cultivation did not translate to the search process in the ways that Lareau (2014) and I might have expected, it comprised an essential part of parental choice processes and outcomes in my study. Not only did parents associate with other parents with similar values regarding child rearing, they based their choice set of schools on the opinions of similarly-minded parents in their social spheres, accessed insider information through powerful partnerships with educators, avoided schools with rumors of undesirable behaviors.
(which sometimes were associated with social class), and, upon visiting Open Houses, felt most comfortable in school communities of like-minded peers with similar parenting styles. In the open enrollment system that I studied, mothers expressed much more stress and anxiety over choosing schools than Lareau’s participants did. As she states, “Parents depend on the economic residential segregation patterns to do the sorting process. Middle-class parents can afford to be nonchalant” (p. 199). In my study, parents (for the most part) did not consciously sort themselves by social class; but overall, choice of school layered on top of residential choice resulted in an additional level of sorting by comfort with community values.

As my participants were focused on secondary school choice, their social spheres were formed largely around their choices of elementary schools. In fact, there was typically a logical progression of choosing subsequent schools with educational philosophies and communities similar to those of their elementary schools. Moreover, within these social spheres, parents held in common aspirations for their children that were connected to their own childhood. Despite the fact that decision-making styles varied individually, choice processes resulted in the creation and maintenance of ‘communities of sameness’ in schools. The next chapter gives a deeper picture of three like-minded groups that comprised East County participants.
Chapter V: Findings, Part 2: Three Social Spheres

As discussed in Chapter IV, empowered parents in all groups described themselves as partners and community members in schools and primarily based their schooling decisions on insider information, experiences and opinions of trusted friends, and feelings of comfort at Open Houses. In this chapter, I uncover the ways in which choice processes played out for three groups of parents in East County who had distinct perspectives, whom I characterized as “Seeking the Best,” “Preserving the Neighborhood,” and “Defending Diverse Schools.” Groups differed in (1) the extent to which their actions aligned with a market model in maximizing utility with regard to a narrow sense of academic rigor as opposed to satisficing by selecting a school that offered “good enough” academics in balance with other considerations; (2) aspirations for their children’s education that informed the types of school communities that felt comfortable; and (3) understandings of both equity issues with open enrollment and the value of diversity in schools.

Table 2 summarizes the participants and characteristics of each group. This chapter proceeds in three sections, detailing one group at a time along the dimensions in which they differed. When a parent from a different group is mentioned within a section, I use bracketed numbers after that participant’s name to signify his/her group identification.
### Group 1: Seeking the Best

**Maximizing a Narrow Aim of Academic Rigor**

The 13 parents ‘Seeking the Best’ mostly were unaware of their zoned schools when they chose their residence, but purposefully moved into a high-performing district and knew that open enrollment was an option. These parents did not feel a strong obligation to support their assigned schools, especially in comparison to doing what they understood to be best for their children’s academic and social-emotional growth. In fact, the idea of choosing schools was an unquestioned assumption. As Sara put it, “It just never crossed my mind that I wouldn’t have a choice in where my kids would go to school.” One-third had gone to private schools themselves, and almost all claimed they would either move or send their children to private schools if they were unsatisfied (five of these parents did the latter at one point; 10 had chosen charter schools).

Much more than the other two groups, these parents engaged in an active research process in which they consulted multiple sources of information and considered up to 12 public...
and private schools. Parents continually discussed finding “the best” school. However, “the best” fit was a personal assessment that was not always measurable with published data:

Lin: I want her to have the best education, go to the best school for her. I think we all want to get the best education for our kids. Central Middle is a good school, but there are other schools around that could be better and we just wanted to look into that and from the parents we were friends with, they all had different opinions about which school is better.

Jennifer: It was the first time being a parent to a kid entering school, and I think our mentality was we wanted the best for our kid. . . . when we moved into East County, we knew the schools weren’t the best, and we had hoped that with all this growth, and moving into this nice neighborhood, that this would improve. And it just didn’t improve by the time we started elementary [so we open enrolled].

As Lin suggested, finding “the best” still largely relied on the opinions of trusted others. Furthermore, “the best” for some was associated with the social status of the school population, as Jennifer explained that “with all this growth” and “this nice neighborhood,” middle-class parents thought that schools would improve to their high academic standards. When the schools had not improved to the academic performance of the district’s charter schools and affluent neighborhood schools, these parents did not see it as their obligation to participate in the improvement of their zoned schools. Rather, their duty was to ensure the best academic education available for their own children:

Ann: I think a really good neighborhood school is a beautiful thing, but it just doesn’t happen often enough. . . . [One of my neighbors] is like, “This is my community, and I’m going to make my community school the best it can be.” And I really admire that, but that’s not me. I want the very best that each of my children can have. And that might be something different for each of my children, but that’s what I want. And I’ll fight for that.

Ann’s statement about searching for “the very best” school was emblematic of this group’s goal of maximizing utility specifically with regard to academic quality. But choosing “the best” school also was understood as part of doing what was best for their children. Carmen and Joanna,
for example, claimed that it was their responsibility as parents to find the best (public or private) schools possible for their children:

_Carmen:_ I was talking to parents and they said, “No no no! We'll go to neighborhood schools because we believe in neighborhood schools.” . . . I was surprised to know that some parents felt that way . . . because everyone looks for the best schools. Even if they're far from your house, you drive and pay a lot of money for it. No one sends kids to public schools in [my native country]. So public school for me was like, “No!”

_Joanna:_ So education is this [intangible but tangible] asset that—you can’t feel it—you’re given results like on a daily basis, or at a parent-teacher conference, but honestly your results, your measurement occurs anytime you test those kids in a global setting, against their peers, in a bigger forum . . . So for me, that type of asset, your damn right I’m going to try the find the best. And . . . if they didn’t get into East Charter, I was going to have to pay for education. And I was prepared to do that. Did I want to do that? Fuck no! Because I pay a lot of taxes, ok? I want something for my money besides the roads and the nasty East County policemen!

In Carmen’s view, “everyone looks for the best schools.” To do otherwise contradicted her deeply held cultural practices related to her social positioning as middle class.

Just as these parents were willing and able to pay for private education, their desire to find “the best” school reflected an understanding of education as a personal asset. Above, Joanna described education as an asset in exchange for the taxes she paid. In addition, she believed schools should be evaluated and funded akin to her own experience in the business world:

_KD:_ Do you remember how you felt when you found out there was open enrollment?

_Joanna:_ I was pleased, because there’s such a diversity of how the schools perform. And unfortunately the system does not shut down poor performing schools. They’re still funded. And I don’t quite understand that. And certainly if I’m paying my tax dollars—you know, I’m a huge proponent of public education—you know I believe my taxes pay for some things, and education would be one–I certainly want to go to the best school that the district can provide. And if that didn’t meet my needs, then I would pay for private.

While Joanna’s view was the most direct, of the three social spheres, the ‘Seeking the Best’ group’s aims and ultimate choices most closely resembled a market model of education. It is
important to recognize that this parental perspective drove the creation and maintenance of elite, affluent public schools in the district (such as the academically rigorous charter schools).

It is also worth noting that several members of this group made strategic moves to increase their chances of getting into their optimal school. For example, Jennifer described thinking about playing the odds, while Rayne purposefully sought information to ensure a positive outcome:

Jennifer: They were really saying, you know, “We’re not sure you’re going to get in,” and, “If you don’t put [us] first, you’re not going to get in,” and so then it was… this big game of “Do I put this first? Or do I put this first and chance it, and if I don’t get in then I have to go to my home school, which I don’t really want to go to.” … And you do, you get wrapped up in it, it’s stressful, it is.

Rayne: I was definitely looking for where we could get in. Where was my best bet?

KD: How did you know they had openings?

Rayne: I called around to all the schools and said, “What are the chances of getting in at third grade?”

Rayne then visited and selected a high-performing school when the principal personally promised her that they would get in. As mentioned in the previous chapter, parents also discovered unpublished ways of increasing their chances to get into schools, such as applying several years in a row to East Charter.

Two parents in the ‘Preserving the Neighborhood’ and ‘Defending Diverse Schools’ groups also made strategic use of insider connections by meeting personally with administrators to discuss their concerns about attending schools with undesirable peers and other issues:

Lauren [3]: I did go to lunch with [my daughter’s elementary school principal], and I said, I have to pick your brain, I need to get your opinion on this. I like East Middle, I like [the principal there], I know a lot of the staff there, and I said, you’ve been [at East Middle], you also now know my daughter, …you know who she’s hanging out with, and I just respect her opinion as a mother and as the head of the school. And she said, “You have reason to be concerned. Those are not the
kind of kids you want her to be hanging out with. … If I were you, you owe it to her to look at other schools, but I will give you the pluses and minuses.”

Lauren had long been a vocal opponent of open enrollment and an advocate of diverse schools, but after deeply considering this advice, open enrolled her daughter to a more affluent, higher performing school. On the other hand, some parents specifically refused to take advantage of strategic moves. While this example refers to choosing teachers, the actions exemplified by Suzanne— a ‘Defending Diverse Schools’ parent—are similar:

Suzanne [3]: [My son] had a teacher who wasn’t a good fit … she had made a few comments afterwards, and I had questioned things. And when [my daughter] got to third grade, I was like, “There’s no way she’s going to have the same teacher.” … And she had her. I remember being upset but trying not to show it. I don’t think that’s good for the kid to realize or hear that. They’ve got to make the best of it. And I remember even the secretary of the school at the time, she’s like, “We can switch [your daughter] out,” and … I’m like, “No, you can’t do that!” Because I was very close with the principal and the secretaries and the PTA, but I was like, “No, it’ll be fine, it’ll be fine.” And when we went in to meet the teacher, she gave me a hug, and she said, “There was no way I couldn’t have [your daughter] for this year,” because this was her last year of teaching. And when [my son] had this teacher, [my daughter] was in first grade, and she invited her to some book-reading thing. You could invite anybody, and most people invited their parents, but [my daughter] invited [my son] and his teacher. She was like, “I could not not have [your daughter] for my last year of teaching.”

Parents across the three groups had insider connections and knowledge that gave them access to strategic moves, but had different perspectives on whether and how to use that information. The ‘Seeking the Best’ group’s viewpoints in securing the best academic experience possible likely made them more inclined to be strategic when it felt necessary, especially given that schools with the strongest academic reputations were well known to have long waiting lists and low odds of getting in through the lottery.

Aspiring for Academic Excellence

David Sikkink and Michael Emerson (2008) claim that highly educated individuals develop “education identities” in the pursuit of academic degrees that in turn create an interest in
securing a “good education” for their children (p. 272). The authors, echoing Labaree (1997), point out that an educational goal of social mobility can translate to a parental concern that anything less than the best academic education might limit their children’s opportunities.

In a similar vein, parents ‘seeking the best’ focused on the ends of education in terms of their individual children. For these parents, the goal of education was to fulfill one’s potential, whether that translated to an ability to compete in the marketplace or a sense of personal fulfillment. Academic excellence in turn was a central feature of schooling that would maximize their children’s opportunities to do so. Although above Ann stated that “the very best … might be something different for each of my children,” it was clear that academic excellence grounded her preferences for all of her children:

Ann: I want a place where the academics are really, really strong, because I think it’s good for your mind, strong academics. . . . If it’s school, that’s what school is, it’s to learn. But I want them to be happy. And I don’t think those things are mutually exclusive, and they haven’t been, so far.

KD: Education is clearly important to you.

Ann: Well, and again, especially because that’s what school is. You go to school to learn. It’s supposed to be about academics, so I want it to be good academically.

Ann’s two youngest children were identified with learning disabilities and her two oldest were identified as highly gifted, but they all attended rigorous schools with substantial home support to achieve academically. This was similar to other parents in this group who claimed to seek the ‘right fit’ for each of their children, but sent them to the same high-performing schools because they loved the school community. While the characteristics of the oldest child often drove the choices for siblings, parents’ comfort in the school community did as well.

This group’s belief that it was their parental responsibility to choose “the best” academic environment related to a felt obligation to ensure that their children’s opportunities were maximized:
Joanna: [If they went to the neighborhood schools] I would feel like they wouldn’t have the opportunities that they should be given, quite frankly. And it’s me as the parent who has to make those opportunities happen for them. . . . They could be happy at East Middle—they wouldn’t know what they were missing—and hopefully because of the family in which they live in, they would work to their potential there. But I believe their potential would be limited. … So it would be more on me, meaning that I would have to force an extra program, or make sure that they got in the TAG [Talented and Gifted] program, additional activities, I would have to supervise their work more, I would have to make sure that they’re appropriately challenged. So it would be more oversight.

For Joanna and others, then, their children’s “potential” was largely understood in terms of their academic potential. Although a few parents in this group had children who they described as “in the middle” with regard to academic ability, their concern was with their children “being challenged at their level” such that their life opportunities would be maximized. Parents across all groups wanted teachers to “meet each child where s/he is,” but this group especially sought teachers who would provide highly individualized instruction.

It was also important to parents that their children seemed happy and fulfilled in school, which included being academically challenged as well as having similar-enough peers so that academically-gifted children wouldn’t be “freaks,” as several parents put it. (Recall Ann’s quote in the previous chapter that it was socially fulfilling to be around other kids who “think vowels are fascinating.”) To this end, parents sought a community of peers who likewise were interested in academic rigor, as Kate notes below.

Kate: I want [my son] to be with other kids who want to be challenged . . . What I worry about in middle school is the kids start to get more goofy and it’s not very cool to be smart. . . . I would just like him to be with the kids who actually think, “Wow, this is actually really interesting and I’m actually getting a lot out of this.”

Kate and others wanted their children to be surrounded by other high achieving peers not only to minimize classroom “distractions,” but also to feel confident that their children would find friends with whom they could identify. Referring to the social-emotional needs of the gifted,
parents had concerns for children who had difficulty making friends and who had histories of being bullied for their quirky personalities. In some cases, test scores were considered an indicator of desirable peer characteristics:

*Martha:* I wasn’t super up on all of the state testing stuff, and her dad’s comment about test scores was as far as he was concerned, the reason to look at the test scores was in her case to make sure there were enough kids scoring at proficient and advanced that she wouldn’t be the only one there that if she did turn out to be gifted and talented—which she did—we wanted to make sure that she wasn’t the only one in the room. . . so he wanted her to go to a school where test scores suggested that she would find a cohort of peers that could challenge her at her level within her peer groups. She wouldn’t be the freak. So he was less concerned about test scores reflecting the excellence of the school so much as reflecting the norms and the expectations that students were meeting for themselves.

Just as Martha looked at test scores to gauge the presence of academically advanced peers, Carmen used demographic data to assess the presence of educated families:

*KD:* Did you look at any information about the school, like test scores?

*Carmen:* No, because I don't believe in test scores. I don't do that. If I didn't know anyone, maybe I would look at the scores. I also looked at the demographics of it, like how many kids were in the free or reduced lunch, because I wanted them to be in schools... where they can find kids who come from families with education. I don't care about the rates, but I care about the level of education of their parents because if it's high, it's more likely that they'll find friends, good friends, because they can relate intellectually. I don't care about the rates, as I said, but rates are currently related with income in Colorado. If I was in Florida, maybe not, but in Colorado, it is where the Spanish speakers mostly come from low-income families. So that was something I took into account.

As other quotes also have shown, Carmen was by far the most forthright in her associations of social class with academic performance, behavior, and safety. However, strong academic performance and similar parental values were closely related to social status, just as the schools considered to be “the best” academically had largely affluent populations.

While Martha, Carmen, and others discerned published data as indicators of similar peers, they also relied on their social networks and insider information to get a sense of the school culture. After all, parents not only sought an academically advanced environment, but
also a community that reflected their values for politeness and avoidance of risky behavior. For example, as quoted in Chapter IV, Ann explained that people she knew at West Charter “just seemed like us” in terms of being into the family, academics, and manners and Barbara expressed that she was happy to be with families whose kids were not into dating, make-up, and revealing clothes.

Parents drew on their own relatively advantaged educational experiences to emphasize the difference that a superior education made in “opening doors” and expanding life choices:

*Ann:* I went to a hellacious junior high school and a phenomenal high school, so both of those experiences really informed my determination. I don’t think there’s anything enriching . . . about being miserable in school. … And it is easier in the world, when you say, “I went to such-and-such a school,” people automatically look at you in a certain way. Automatically, they know something about your IQ, your work ethic, it opens doors. … But I think that if you’re going to go to school, make it the best. Now there are definitely kids, as much as I love West Charter, there are definitely kids who don’t belong there. If you don’t like school, a good school, if academics is just what you get through no matter how interesting they make it, it’s not a good school for you.

Just as Ann contrasts her secondary school experiences, many parents in this group also lamented not having been challenged enough at times. Their aspirations for their own children, then, prioritized academic excellence. As many suggested, seeking academic excellence often involved a consideration for similar peers in terms of both academic performance and behavior.

*Diversity is Not a Priority*

Parents ‘seeking the best’ acknowledged the value of ethnically and socioeconomically diverse schools, especially as preparation for the workplace, but admitted it was a low priority. When asked if she would support a policy that offered preferences in the lottery system for families on free and reduced lunch, Barbara explained that it was more important that students attended schools that matched their academic performance and had appropriate resources:
Barbara: I don't feel like [socioeconomic integration] should be the primary role, because what would happen, and this already happens in West Charter, for example, they look at the test scores, they say they’re really high, it’s great for my kid. Well, that school doesn’t have the resources to deal with kids with learning issues. There is no Special Ed teacher at West Charter. So these kids are coming in now, because the parents see it and try it, and they get in, and their kids are struggling so much. And the school is dealing with kids that are not meant to be at this school. The point was that there was choice, this was for a certain kind of kid, and then people are getting this mentality that, ‘I’m going to pick it, whether it’s the best school for my kid or not, because it’s the best school.’ It’s impacted West Charter tremendously, because they have to deal with all these kids, who have issues and just flounder. It’s hard to balance, because you want to give these kids a chance, but if it’s not the right school for your kid, should you get in just because you have a socioeconomic boost? But you’re reading on a third grade level? You shouldn’t be at West Charter—it would be a nightmare for these kids. It would only demoralize them. It wouldn’t help them to send them to a school that has no resources to bring them up. They’d do better at a school that has resources, that could give them extra reading help and extra math help and things like that. So I don’t think that’s the solution.

For Barbara and others, there was an association of socioeconomic diversity dampening the academic climate, as less advanced kids would feel inferior and staff would be burdened with addressing their needs. Barbara had first-hand experience of similar issues occurring in her kids’ elementary school, which was forced to adopt a policy for socioeconomic preferences that was poorly implemented by the district. Other parents noted that diversity was just not their priority; they were focused on academics:

Karen: [Socioeconomic diversity] doesn't matter to me so much. It’s not a priority for me. It’s just for me it’s not a priority. I don't think it’s a good thing or a bad thing either way. The girls always tell me there are a lot of people with no money at East Charter, but I feel like we're the poor people at East Charter. These houses that these kids go to are unbelievable. They're like four times as big as ours. And not just one kid, a lot of them. … So we're the lower echelon if you ask me, and we work pretty hard. So it comes in different forms I guess.

KD: But you don't feel at all uncomfortable about that?

Karen: No. For a while I thought they didn't bring anyone over because they thought our house was too small, which was really bothering me. But they’ve been bringing kids over so I feel better.
While Karen claimed that socioeconomic diversity “didn’t matter,” she clearly felt the impact of an affluent community at East Charter. With regard to secondary schools, parents across groups commented on the affluence of the communities at East Charter, West Charter, and West High School. Those ‘seeking the best’ all enrolled their children in these schools and generally were not bothered by the predominant affluence as they focused on their similar values for academics (and most were affluent themselves); parents in the other two groups were turned off by “elitist” attitudes at these schools. As discussed below, some working-class, Latino/a parents in the ‘Defending Diverse Schools’ group tried to send their children to East Charter, but left due to their children’s palpable discomfort with socioeconomic differences.

The ‘Seeking the Best’ group aimed to provide educational opportunities for their children that both reflected their deep-seated values for strong academics and allowed their children to “fit in” with other academically advanced kids. Because the academic performance of schools is closely tied to its socioeconomic make-up, this group’s choice of like-minded communities who had similar aims and resources to choose “the best” reinforced the reproduction of socioeconomically elite schools in the district. Combined with a school culture of similar parenting styles and values, only those of a certain ilk “belong there.”

**Group 2: Preserving the Neighborhood**

*Satisficing a Balance of Academics, Extracurriculars, and Neighborhood Community*

The 11 parents in the ‘Preserving the Neighborhood’ group were most like the middle-class participants of Lareau’s (2014) study of residential choice in that for them, choosing a school was largely accomplished through choosing a neighborhood. Six specifically chose their residence for the reputation of the high-achieving elementary school; the rest were happy to hear that their assigned school was highly desirable when the time came to think about it.
Eight of the parents in this group lived in the same neighborhood,\(^8\) in which Deb was a clear leader. She had both older and younger children and was able to offer her experience while associating with moms with younger kids. She believed strongly in being an active, local community member, was highly involved in the schools, hosted neighborhood events (e.g. book club), and acted as a social connector. Just as Deb supported children attending neighborhood schools, her initial choice of residence was based on the assigned schools:

*Deb:* And then it became the whole looking for a house based on schools. Because that’s what you do. When you’re house hunting, and you have children starting in school age, it becomes the number one criteria.

Meg similarly recalled the high-performing schools being a selling point:

*Meg:* How they advertised the neighborhood was that it was [zoned for] Central Elementary and Central Middle and I think that was a big seller for this neighborhood before East Elementary changed principals.

In general, parents in this group thought that, “Unless there was a glaring reason not to go to your traditional school, that’s what [they] did.” They valued the opportunities for their kids (and themselves) to have friends in the immediate neighborhood and ride the school bus together (in addition to the convenience):

*Heather:* If you go to your neighborhood school and that works out for you, then friends are kind of more easily obtainable. You have local friends right there. The same friends you go to school with are there with you, locally, in your neighborhood. … Elementary school is that time when you get the chance to bond with the other parents. That’s where you get your group, right?

*Kim:* I wish we all just attended our neighborhood schools. I do, because again, I think it impacts the neighborhood community when people go to other schools. … The feeling of community in our neighborhoods is greatly lacking in my opinion. … I just want to be in a neighborhood where kids get on the bus.

*Meg:* I just really liked the neighborhood piece of being with the same kids on the bus and going to school [together]. The thing about East Charter is that you have to drive and pick them up so there is a disconnect afterschool.

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\(^8\) One parent from this neighborhood is included in the ‘Seeking the Best’ group.
Not only did these parents value their children’s experiences of riding the bus together and playing in the neighborhood after school, but the bus stop also was a meaningful site of social gathering for parents—especially for some moms who regularly spent upwards of an hour talking at pickup and arrival times. Children’s schooling and extracurricular experiences were a frequent topic of conversation as parents held these things (and a logic of concerted cultivation) in common. Sharing their kids’ experiences occurred seamlessly throughout the year, but talk of schools was especially frequent during open enrollment season:

Meg: People are pretty quick to have prejudices against schools. … I’ve kind of seen it at the bus stop in that suburban kind of way in that rumors get spread quickly about what schools are good and what schools aren’t. Sometimes that can really drive open enrollment over one small incident that can get blown up.

But rumors didn’t arise out of thin air. Not only did other parents’ experiences inform the heuristics that parents formed about schools, but realtors, teachers and specialists also planted seeds that made families who otherwise would attend the neighborhood schools begin to question what was best for their children. Deb mentioned how early on, the realtor had given her a heads up about the high school:

I remember, even the realtor, which is funny, because your realtor is usually your first source of information, was like, okay these schools are good, these aren’t good, and I remember him telling me East High, you definitely don’t want your kid there, but by then, you can open enroll, you can go somewhere else. And I’m thinking, well, a lot can change in 10 years too, because here I am looking at first grade, thinking, that’s down the road.

When it came time, Deb enrolled her children in East High—continuing her commitment to neighborhood schools—and advocated its strengths among her neighborhood community. But after her younger son’s teachers at Central Elementary suggested that she consider other middle schools for him, she open enrolled him into nearby South Middle:
The teachers [were] saying, “He really should be at Central Focus, or South Middle.” It was really teachers planting the seeds of this would be a better school for him and why. And the funny thing was, I had already had two kids go through Central Middle, so I already knew it would be fine. But they were like, “You should really look at South Middle for him.” ... I actually remember them saying it about [my older kids], and then we had gone to look at it, and I just remember hearing, “Oh, they produce the bright kids, and you get more challenge there.” And we were just so turned off by that.

Previously “turned off” by suggestions of the academic superiority of South Middle, Deb ended up loving her son’s experience there, and was able to reflect on how different it was from Central Middle, where she “had to be in there advocating all the time.” Other parents recounted similar experiences of teachers and specialists specifically advising against Central Middle for their children, which created a high level of stress:

**Mia:** I’m going back and forth. The easiest thing would be to have them go to their home school. But, I’m not sure if I’m happy with our home school. So that’s my dilemma. Because I think everyone should go to their neighborhood school. But … I will look at other schools and see. … And I’m not willing to move. … But if I end up liking South … I feel like, well I’m a hypocrite [but] if I do open enroll and they got in, probably I would send them over there. But see if there’s no open enrollment this wouldn’t be a question. I would just send them to Central.

**Diane:** We had [my child’s] fourth-grade teacher saying very clearly that she thought that Central Middle would be a very big mistake for [her]… without me even saying any of the information that I had already heard. So yeah, those things coupled together… I wish it wasn’t that way, because that’s our home school. I wish it was easier—that makes it awfully difficult. … Frankly, the whole open enrollment process has been a major trial and challenge for me. So, I wish that the teachers had said, “Oh yeah, you don’t need to worry about open enrollment–her school is perfect for her!” I feel like they dangle a carrot in front of you and then they pull it away. Well, this is the best place for [my child]–her teachers say so, all the kids I talk to say so, my neighbors say so, the people at South Middle that I know say so, but it’s like, “Oh, sorry, you might not get in. Bummer.”

**Amy:** I think up until our IEP meeting I was thinking Central Middle because that’s where the bus goes and it really wasn't until they looked me in the eye and said, “You need to look at other options.”

In this way, although Central was an affluent and high performing middle school, recurrent anecdotal evidence from other parents and educators led to confusion and anxiety.
But some took concerns about Central Middle with a grain of salt, believing that people get too caught up in the rumors, and as Terri put it (referring to her reading of Barry Schwartz’s *The Paradox of Choice*), “When there are too many choices, it becomes very difficult. In [a good school district] people end up choosing for a minute level when it’s not going to make that much of a difference.” Greta expressed a similar sentiment, while Meg commented on the impact of people’s opinions fluctuating:

*Greta:* I felt that people kind of put too much energy into looking at all these options. I think all the agony of all these options and some people looked at five, six, seven schools. I felt that in [this school district], most schools are kind of on the same level. Maybe a little different here, a little different there and some schools were said to have better teachers, but I always feel like to get along with teachers is part of the deal.

*Meg:* I remember five years ago when I came here and Central Elementary and Central Middle were the best of the best. The only thing that has really changed is people’s opinions. And if you don’t have loyalty to a place, people will act like that, you know, if you’re not committed you can turn your back on them easily. And you know the whole thing where everyone wants to go to South Middle—it’s just like really I don’t know if it’s a good message to kids; you have to stick it out and make it work. It’s a lesson in life. You can’t run from those things.

Overall, although some parents had become concerned whether their neighborhood school was ‘good enough,’ parents in this group emphasized they had no interest in playing the game of finding ‘the best’ academic school. They were aware of their option to participate in open enrollment, but only looked beyond the neighborhood school if there was a “red flag”:

*Heather:* [The test and parental satisfaction scores] seemed to be acceptable. I don’t remember what they were. They didn’t seem to be the lowest; I remember they were not the highest. They seemed to be acceptable. If they had been low, it would have been a red flag. If there is not red flag, I would not take action.

*KD:* So it’s not like you’re out there looking for the best of the best?

*Heather:* She doesn’t have to go to “the best” academic school or … I mean, the best of the best can be extremely competitive and very stressful for kids, right? So I’m not sure I want the best of the best, actually. It seems stressful.
Meg: I didn’t feel like it was a crucial thing to get the best of the best at that point. I felt like it was a good place and a good education. ... [My daughter] was really intelligent and I figured she would get what she needed from stuff.

Tori: For example, [in another state] where I taught junior high for a year, that’s a place where I would find a private school or home school because it’s not a good school system. In a place where there is a good school system like [this one] and I don’t have a problem with any of the schools, we’ll go to our home school unless there’s a compelling reason not to.

Greta: since I never had to take the school bus when I grew up, [because] we lived within walking distance to the schools, I thought, “Well, I really don't wanna drive them.” So I looked into Central Middle and I found it is a decent school and I thought, “Well, okay, Central Middle it is.”

Interestingly, however, the presence of a popular, co-located focus middle school led many parents to play the (low) odds of getting in as their kids could still ride the school bus, yet get an experiential education where, as Tori stated, “A lot of people at Central Focus have similar desires in what they want education wise so it’s a nice connection between parents there.”

In addition, South Middle was highly reputable for academics and a short carpool away. Within this neighborhood-committed group, eight chose either Central Focus or South Middle (two didn’t get in), two enrolled in East Charter, and only Heather—who was the only mother who worked full-time and was not aware of neighborhood talk—chose to keep her child at Central Middle. Once kids open enrolled out for middle school, some got pulled toward high schools with similar philosophies and a continuation of friends rather than return to the neighborhood high school:

Tori: I want to be a positive part of the community of the school and I want that to be a neighborhood school.
KD: But you still chose other schools.
Tori: It surprised me, Central Focus didn’t feel that weird because it was the same school [location], and even though it was a different program there was some overlap. ... It did surprise me because when we moved I thought they would go to East High. When neither of them did I felt a little guilty about that. There’s no reason not to go there other than what happened with my kids’ [particular path].
Like Tori, a few parents expressed guilt over not having chosen the neighborhood school. Evelyn expressed, for example, that she believed strongly in a neighborhood school model “even if [she didn’t] live by it”:

So my cause I've learned is really, crazy as it is, keeping kids at their home school. So even after the girls were at East Charter, I was working on that South High School committee to keep kids at their home school. You know after all these years I've figured out that's kind of what I care about. Even if I don't live by it. … I feel like each community should have a school that they feel comfortable sending their kids to also. So there are two sides of it; not just that you should be going to your community school, but your community school should be a good choice.

This view reflected the predominant perspective of this group. Because parents were influenced by trusted others, they didn’t always “live by” their stated preferences for neighborhood schools, but they wanted their kids to grow up in a close-knit local community and become well-rounded community members.

Aspiring for Well-Rounded Community Members

The ‘Preserving the Neighborhood’ group’s emphasis on neighborhood community and dislike for open enrollment was closely related to their aspirations for their children’s education. Reflecting on their positive memories of growing up with neighborhood friends, they lamented the loss of neighborhood communities. They most wanted their children to receive a well-rounded education that inspired a lifelong love of learning and community involvement. Likewise, a “sense of community” was something they specifically sought in schools. When asked what she meant by wanting her kids’ schools to have a “good community,” Amy explained, “Like after school activities, and a strong PTO, and opportunities to get to know other parents.” Deb further reflected on the academic and social importance of community:

When there’s sense of community, a lot of these things happen. You’re not fighting against the system for you kids, you’re part of a system and it’s working for your kid. That is why the community is such a big thing. …But [my daughter
said], “I did feel more of a community feel at East High.” There aren’t cliques, people don’t put people down. There’s a different feel. So that community thing was big. And when you have that, you’re less likely to fall through the cracks, I think. You don’t have to advocate as much.

In general, parents’ interests in a good school community translated to a supportive environment that would allow their children to develop into well-rounded adults through a combination of academics, extracurricular activities, and positive social experiences:

*Mia:* I want them to be good students but I want them to have a life as well. It’s not all about books and getting A’s—I want them to also experience the social aspect as well as learning and all that. I want them to have opportunities to play sports and for the academics to not be too stressful.

*Heather:* I just want them to find something they enjoy and feel good about. … They don't need get straight As or compete, just be prepared for life and career. … [Any school] is fine as long as they’re safe and progressing academically.

Many in this group were especially concerned about their children’s social-emotional experiences through the middle-school years, who some recalled as “hell.” They hoped that their child would have a safe place to learn and grow without being bullied so that they would “come out with self esteem, have good friends, and love learning”:

*Terri:* [It’s most important to me] for him to have his own feeling of a community in both teachers that he enjoys, kids that he's, you know, good with so he's not totally isolated, the only kid and he didn't know anybody at whatever school, that allows him to get the most out of that educational process. It's still the education and the learning how to learn, I don't think necessarily the content was going to make or break him as a person, but the learning to learn and being enthusiastic about it and feeling he’s in a good environment to do that.

*Kim:* My decision for middle school was kind of based on the social piece more than it was the academic piece. At least what I’ve heard about South Middle is that they handle those social pieces much better than they do at Central Middle. That’s all I’ve heard. There’s a lot more drama, and that’s a piece that’s important to me—the social experience and the interaction and maintaining your confidence through middle school.

As Kim suggests, rumors about bullying and “drama” at Central Middle weighed heavily given the importance of social-emotional well-being.
In discussing the importance of community and well-roundedness, many of these parents reflected on their own positive experiences growing up in strong neighborhoods or on the emphasis that their own parents put on being involved community members:

*Terri:* My parents have both been big community volunteer people and helping others and [creating scholarship funds]. So yes, the whole person and that rounded... And [my partner’s] on a board through community foundation and that kind of stuff, so I think all that, that enthusiasm, I think, lets [my child] do more of that, too. Kind of enthusiasm for life and he can see that we have a pretty good life and he can volunteer and help others or donate money, or whatever, as opposed to being very narrow, straight academic focus or whatever.

*KD:* So you value him being...

*Terri:* A good person! You don't need to be a wealthy person, but well-rounded is good.

Meg, however, grew up in a VW bus traveling across Europe and saw well-roundedness as being open-minded and taking risks. She was critical of neighbors’ concerns with the neighborhood schools and thought “exposure” to diversity at the high school would help her kids to “embrace the new, experiment, have some excitement in their lives”:

*Meg:* [It’s most important] that they have the opportunity to try new things because you never know what is going to be your fit and I don’t want them to ever hate something. … That’s part of why I like East High--you see Hispanics, you see some gangs, you see super smart people and definitely not so smart people. You get to choose where you want to play and what you want to do with it which I think is the real world.... I feel like the goal is to raise good citizens.

*KD:* What does being a good citizen mean to you?

*Meg:* Someone with compassion, someone with respect, and hard work is important. … I want them to be an asset to this world; I want them to be a participant.

Like Deb, Meg was also well liked and influential on her neighbors. There was, after all, much talk about the diverse neighborhood high school, which had a history of negative rumors that contrasted Deb’s and Meg’s positive experiences of their new Engineering and IB programs. And because it wasn’t uber-competitive like affluent West High, kids could play on sports teams, participate in school plays, and so on that supported becoming well-rounded. In the end, parents
tended to split half and half when it came to enrolling their kids at East High; while they “wished [their] kids experienced more diversity,” it wasn’t a top criterion.

*Lamenting a Lack of Diversity*

Many wished their children’s schools were more diverse and recognized inequities in the district, especially with regard to financial differences caused by parental fundraising. As Amy stated, “I went to a very diverse middle school and high school, and I really value that as part of my education. There is a big weakness in that here.” But Amy also grew up with a strong neighborhood community and a solid academic education. When faced with the prospect of an elementary school with an 88% FRL rate and highly publicized flight, she feared the school could not meet her son’s complex special needs and moved to a Central Elementary neighborhood. Amy, who had a Master’s in Philosophy, was thoughtful about inequities in the system and felt guilty about contributing to them through flight:

> I have such mixed feelings because I'm grateful that there are options when you have a kid with special needs. … choice is good, we kind of have that in our consciousness, but yet we've been riddled with guilt when we moved from Central Elementary, because it was a Title One school … Do you stay and make the school better or do you flee? … Some of the Title One schools have created like Jim Crowe, this white flight. And that's wrong. And so, that's my whole confliction with open enrollment. … we're whittling away at some of those neighborhood schools that really need more enrollment, more diversity.

Other parents in this group likewise were troubled by “white” or “middle/upper class” flight from diverse schools. Some detailed choices they made in fear only to later wish they had chosen more diverse experiences for their children:

> *Kim*: We lived in Denver, loved Denver, I would live there still to this day but really what happened was I went to a back to school night, … when my daughter was four, … it wasn’t an enrollment thing it was just for the school community which is what someone told me is good to go to ‘cause you get the flavor of the school. … I visited in the Kindergarten class and there were probably like 10 parents in there. And I’m thinking, “These are the best of the best right here.” … And it freaked me out, … they were just really rough, they were totally rough
looking kids, I have to tell you honestly, if it was with [my younger child] and I had been more of an experienced parent, you know you have this little four-year old precious thing and you think about sending them off into this world. Probably, like with him I would have been much more open-minded. Thinking back on it today, I was probably more freaked out than I should have been. But it was my first kid. So I literally walked home that night and said to [my husband], “We need to move, we need to move, I can’t send [our daughter] to that school.” And so we picked this house specifically for the school and the reputation. So how’s that, that’s pretty strong. … I think it would be a really good environment for my kids now because I don’t think they get enough diversity. … [If I did it again] I would have put them in East Elementary. … I think we—I would have fit there better in terms of some of the things that I believe are important as well.

Like Mia, Kim also regretted that her “kids don't understand what they have—house, food, etc., or feel empathy for people who don't. It’s a social part of school that's lacking.” Yet Kim admitted, “I’m going to be really honest. If there’s some diversity, it’s good. If it’s like my kid is in the minority, it would be a dissuader.”

Similarly, Mia wondered if she should have sent her kids to East Elementary instead of moving into the Central Elementary neighborhood. Sent to the United States with her sister at middle-school age to be adopted into a new, white family, she struggled deeply with finding her identity as a mother and making decisions for her children at the same stage in their lives. She took her cues from other mothers she knew, but struggled with her own children having few kids who “looked like them” in their affluent schools:

*Mia:* [My kids] are getting great education, but I feel like it’s not diverse enough for my kids. … I think socioeconomically I wish it was mixed, because I think Central Elementary is a lot more affluent. And as a mother I didn’t grow up in that environment … we had a mixture of social and economic levels. … my kids are spoiled, I’m trying to teach them that not everyone lives like this, they’re lucky to have a house, clothes … I don't know how to teach them that this is not normal. … They’re getting to be that age where they feel the entitlement. And, I don’t know how to bring them to more down to earth. I struggle as a mother. And it doesn’t help that we are surrounded by friends that are well to do. And they go to their houses and they come back and they are like, “Oh, why can’t we have a bigger house?” And I have to tell them, “This is a big house.” … I know [my husband] and I will take them overseas, and take them to third world countries.
And I think they need to see it, experience it. And maybe they would understand. Because just talking about it and them hearing about it, it doesn’t sink in.

*KD:* Is that part of why you say you wish you looked at East Elementary?

*Mia:* Yes, I think that’s part of it because it seems like East seems to be more diverse and it has a wide range of socioeconomic classes, so. Yeah, I feel like in a lot of ways I’ve kind of failed.

But while some parents struggled with their choices, and almost all expressed concern with equity and diversity, this group prioritized the neighborhood community—even if they chose together to open enroll into other nearby schools—over diverse schooling experiences. For example, Greta (also a first generation immigrant) disliked the heightened stratification created by open enrollment, but admitted that diversity didn’t factor into her choice of schools:

> I feel if you just did neighborhood schools, you'd get a natural diversification ... but if you open enroll to the school of your liking, obviously those parents who make the choice and find out all about the different schools, they kind of tend towards all the schools that have good test scores. So you create this elite culture. I'm thinking about West Charter here. So this is the elite, the academic, intellectual elite, kind of school-wise. ... It feels to me like this elite that barricades itself in that one school … in an island of whatever. … It would be nice to have a little more [diversity], to be honest. But that's not why I choose a school. I want my kids to have different experiences with all that but that's not how I would choose the school, to be honest.

And while Heather claimed that diversity in schools was important because, “Part of life is to get along with people who are different from you,” she had earlier described how she made decisions in line with people who were similar to herself. This common contradiction likely went undetected for parents as they went about their daily lives in like-minded communities.

But some recognized a culture of parents getting overly worked up about open enrollment, and that both the policy and parents needed to be “reigned in”:

*Amy:* I feel like there needs to be some sort of parameter, some sort of caveat, some sort of reigning in of it. And I don't know what the answer is because we like our freedom, we like our choice, and to say otherwise gets you in to hot water sometimes. …
Meg: Do we want our schools to be products and sell themselves or do we want them to be places of education? I see the whims of parents change so quickly that the schools have to keep up on that and wear the latest fashion essentially [instead of] focus on education. I think that we as parents have to dig a little deeper in ourselves and I think it’s getting out of control.

As Meg saw it, the school choice climate was part of a current, distasteful trend that she called a “‘McDonald's Have It My Way’ mentality.” Yet at the same time, the open enrollment system served to detract from the neighborhood school community and more diverse experiences that these parents claimed to want.

**Group 3: Defending Diverse Schools**

*Satisficing a Balance of Academics and Diverse Experiences*

The 12 parents ‘Defending Diverse Schools’ were mostly unaware of their neighborhood schools when they chose their residence, but had ties to the East County area through family or friends. Like the neighborhood group, these parents spoke to the importance of neighborhood communities and lamented their loss due to open enrollment. Most appreciated the option to choose their children’s schools when needed, but thought, as Angela emphatically stated, “Kids should be able to go to their neighborhood school!” David likewise felt that rich opportunities in the arts, experiential learning, STEM, and so on should be available to all kids in strong neighborhood schools:

I think that we have [focus] schools is symptomatic of a system that’s broken. Children should be able to go to their neighborhood school and excel in the arts, in math, in all those areas that we create separate focus schools for. And the fact that we have an expectation that that can’t happen … I think is sad.

Of all participants, David was one of the most resolute neighborhood school supporters, and the most knowledgeable about education policies. Almost all of the other parents in this group also strongly preferred neighborhood schools, and recalled the positive experiences they had growing up in a neighborhood community:
Lauren: My belief is to go to the neighborhood school whenever possible and if that isn’t working out then explore your other options. But … I loved going to school with all the neighborhood kids and we were so close and hung out together and I don’t feel like we have that today, because everybody goes all over the place. I feel like we’ve lost the closeness in the neighborhood because of that.

Cindy: I wish we would all attend our neighborhood schools. .... When I was growing up all the kids in the neighborhood went to the same schools ... You really knew these kids, you go back to your classroom and … even if you hated them, you knew them, they were a part of your life, and that’s how it was, and it built a sense of community, and with open enrollment, there is no community. The kids don’t know the kids two doors down the street because they don’t play at school together, they don’t walk to school together, they don’t like stuff together. It just totally breaks apart the neighborhood community.

Antonio: I liked having a choice to get out of a bad situation but neighborhood schools are important: logistics, neighborhood kids, that’s a key factor they forget—the friendship and bonding kids have from K-12, the same friends, they’re close knit … [With] charters, open enrollment, [you] can’t walk home after school with your buddy and talk. You have a problem, you can’t talk to your buddy about it, there’s a whole level wiped out with open enrollment because you don’t have the neighborhood—the neighborhood is no longer your neighborhood–kids from the neighborhood are no longer your buddies at school. They’ve cut a whole structure of growing up out.

The preference for neighborhood schools was part of this group’s commitment to the diverse neighborhood schools of East County. For some, diversity was essential; for others, it was part of a positive educational experience and not a reason to flee. In addition, parents in this group were highly aware of the negative impact of flight:

Cindy: Number one we want to support our neighborhood schools because we know when parents are active in the schools, they’re good. And we didn’t want to keep fleeing to these other places. ... There was a big flee at the time to get out of East Elementary. They were barely getting anybody there. They classes were so small. Sometimes my kids would have 15 or 16 kids in a classroom—which was nice in a way—but at that time everyone was leaving. I think there was a definite push to, at least in my circle of friends, to try the home school and then there was the administration change over so a lot went on in a short amount of time.
As Cindy alludes, she had like-minded friends in a community who kept their kids together.

Lauren, Katya, and Suzanne similarly joined with like-minded members of their own affluent neighborhood:

Suzanne: It wasn’t [the principal’s] strength: communication and putting on a show and all that. One mom put fliers out [all around town]. I saw a flier at the rec center [that] said, “Is East Elementary your home school? Come meet other parents who attend there.” So I called, and … she had a meeting at her house. …And I was like, wow, here’s a lady who’s passionate about neighborhood schools, and so was I, but I wasn’t going to have a meeting or anything. … When she first moved here, the real estate agent showed her the house, and he said, “These are the schools, but you don’t have to go to that school, you can open enroll … nobody really goes to that school.” And the realtor told her bad things about it. But that mom’s like, “Well, somebody’s got to go to that school.” So she went to the PTA meetings before that year that her daughter was four, because she wanted to see who does go to that school, and … I remember she was a little too preachy about it that night. So she had all the people there, that night, talking about their experiences, and that’s what it was for.

These moms furthermore put a great deal of time and effort into their neighborhood schools, volunteering extensively and, as best they could, working side-by-side with Latino/a parents and students for the benefit of all kids.

As a counterexample to the emphasis on neighborhood schools, however, Maricela—a first generation immigrant who did not have the educational opportunities that she deeply wanted—was less concerned about having a neighborhood community and more focused on securing the best possible academics coupled with support for her children with special needs:

Maricela: In Hispanic culture, we learn, “This is the school you have to be at, this is where you’re going, this is where I’m sending my kids.” Back in [my previous state], my sisters said, “We go to this school, then that one because this is where we live.” So then I had that idea too. Then when I heard about open enrollment, I thought, “Wow, it’s not going to be like that.” So I see open enrollment as an extra open door for me. Because the Hispanic—I was talking to other moms, I say, “What do you think about this school?” “I don’t know about this school.” “Have you heard about this school?” “No, I think one mom told me that that school is really hard.” And that’s it, that’s all the information she gave me. And I thought, “No, I refuse to do the same thing.” So I decide, just go there. It depends on the parent who wants to do something different and wants better things for their kids.
KD: It can be a hard shift in your mind… and it can be overwhelming…

Maricela: Yes, it is overwhelming but I think mostly you want to do new things, so you can deal with it! I deal with it. [laughs]

Although Maricela’s view was similar to the ‘Seeking the Best’ group, I include her here because she ended up feeling the need to switch her daughter from East Charter to the more diverse East High with other students who “looked like her.”

Other parents in this group stated they did not want “the best of the best,” and again like the neighborhood group, were turned off by what they interpreted as elitist attitudes at the highest performing schools:

Laura: I just have different opinions of East Charter. I just feel like they’re really braggy and maybe it’s because my neighbors to go there, a lot of them are like, oh East Charter is the best school in the state and all I hear is the bragging stuff and I really just get kind of tired of that.

Katya: I got to East Charter and listened to the principal there and it’s all about how many scholarships they’ve won and how many go on to college and about the scores they get and the awards they get. And that’s a different culture that I think works for some families and some kids but that’s not a good match with our family culture.

Just as Katya said “that’s not a good match with our family culture,” Angela, who had extensive insider knowledge and deep wisdom as a community leader, pointed out that claims of superiority were highly subjective, at best:

As much as people claim they think there’s a “best” school, they’re all pretty much the same. The content is the same—we have one content standard. It’s just the delivery is different. And so the delivery has a lot to do with what parents are comfortable with for their own family values and what they know about their kids.

Parents in this group shared similar values in wanting a well-rounded education that was “good enough,” rather than a highly academic environment that the ‘Seeking the Best’ group preferred (despite the fact that each of these two groups had the same proportion of parents with kids identified as gifted). Similar to the concerns presented about today’s over-scheduled, over-
pressed youth in the documentary, *The Race to Nowhere*, the middle-class parents in this group did not believe a “highly competitive environment” was what was best for their children:

*Crystal*: We visited as parents, and we said, you know, this school’s good enough, my kid doesn’t need to be involved in that process. … I’m just not sure about being in all this highly competitive environment is good for a kid too. … I don’t want my kids to be overbooked, totally, and where it’s just got to be academic all the way, and you’ve got to think about college now and all that stuff. It’s a little bit early for me to get that rigorous with them.

The Latino/a parents in this group, however, did not have the luxury of purposefully opting against an elite, highly academic education. Instead, they tried to secure a decent education by negotiating barriers that were unheard of in more affluent communities. For example, Antonio and David shared stories of their sons being targeted as troublemakers, misidentified as “gangsters,” and denied fair opportunities to learn:

*David*: I have privileges that some parents don’t. I’m aware, I understand, and I know the questions to ask and I know when my child is not being challenged. Some parents don’t.

*KD*: And you speak up?

*David*: Yeah—my boy—at the beginning of the year the math problems they would give him, it was like OK, two minutes and he’s done. This isn’t right so with all the teachers, I said, “You gotta give him something else, this isn’t working for him. He already knows this.” So he gets additional work. He gets a math packet of homework to do.

*KD*: Have your kids ever been identified as TAG or special needs?

*David*: No. They’ve been identified as gangsters. … [My son] had a miserable experience in high school. Not unlike other Latino kids. His name’s [Latino-sounding]. They classified him as—it was just a bad year for him all the way around. I was on the school board when he dropped out. … The Latino boys get grouped and stereotyped and treated differently.

*Antonio*: [There was a] teacher hitting him in fifth grade—he had to switch to [another school]. … They put a big target on him [but] the principal stood up for him. They did a big investigation and found the teacher was hitting him and three other kids—you’d be surprised how often it happens. …

After his son’s difficult fifth grade experiences, Antonio sent his children to East Charter for a few years and loved the teachers and strong academics there, but switched his two boys back to
East High and East Middle when they were unable to afford to play sports with the school teams and overall did not fit in with the affluent community:

*Antonio:* East Middle was the worst years of his life. … The principal had it out for him—he got suspended just because the principal didn’t like him. They punished [Latino boys] if they moved in their seat. … I asked the principal why he didn’t have a math book, but then he’d get mad at [my son] so I went to the school board and told them, “Why doesn’t my son have a math book?” They next day give him a math book in his class and I receive a bill in the mail for it. I still have it somewhere.

*Antonio’s wife:* The teachers said they have homework every day. Our son never had homework. I asked the teachers again, but he never had it, he didn’t bring anything home.

*Antonio:* He’s on the fence now at East High. He was basically bullied, has overcome that and I think he’s gonna do well.

Antonio later described bringing the math book issue up at a school meeting, where several other Latino/a parents joined him in stating the same concern.

Isabel similarly notes that her sons received much more academic support at traditional schools than what they were able to receive at East Charter, in addition to discomfort given the lack of diversity and inclusiveness:

My experience with charter and non-charter is the amount of support I saw that I first received at East Elementary and how he had the continued support and his brother had the support, it’s been wonderful. It’s not just the academic but the social and emotional component. With the non-charter school it’s … part of the district and I was like, wow you know he’s got therapists and psychologists and speech language therapists… I can say a lot of really wonderful things about the teachers [at East Charter] but for a community that really gets inclusiveness, that would be the last community on planet Earth, even though they would point to their Indies and Koreans [and] say, “We totally get it and we are pushing our kids.” But is it diverse in the socioeconomic sense? No.

Exclusionary experiences are further discussed in the ‘Diversity is Essential’ section below, as they underscore an important issue: it was essential for Latino/a children’s schools to have some ethnic and socioeconomic diversity so that they could feel comfortable and respected in the
school community. But when their diverse neighborhood schools were unsatisfactory (or worse), they effectively had no other options. The better-performing schools belonged to the affluent.

*Aspiring for Well-Roundedness through Diverse Experiences*

Like the ‘Preserving the Neighborhood’ group, the ‘Defending Diverse Schools’ group wanted their children to have well-rounded educational experiences, including opportunities to pursue their unique interests. Katya described her aspirations for a “balanced personality”:

> [What’s most important to me is] that he’s safe, he looks forward to going there, he’s not bullied, he’s not stigmatized, that he’s integrated into the culture, that’s the most important thing. … The second thing is … for us it isn’t all about academics. It’s about a balanced education, some art, some math, some social studies, some PE … just to have a balanced personality. … My parents were quite big on the well-rounded and I believe that too. I really see the value in being a well-rounded person—I think it makes you enjoy life more.

As part of being well-rounded, however, Katya noted the importance of diverse experiences, which differed from the ‘Preserving the Neighborhood’ parents’ stated wishes that there was more diversity, yet did not prioritize it in their search for schools:

> It’s quite important that they have some diversity at the school, that it’s not just a middle class or upper class white school. We do value diversity and also economic range and ethnic range because I think it’s a very important part of education. If you enter the work force, you will work with a large variety of people from different economic backgrounds, different racial backgrounds and different cultural backgrounds, and different socioeconomic backgrounds. And I think it’s good to develop friendships and just feel comfortable in a diverse environment.

Lauren also mentioned the importance of learning to “deal with” diversity for the workplace:

> But I love also for my kids to see diversity. I think it’s real life, and I believe that when they get through East High and East Middle, they’ll know how it is to deal with people of all races … I think that’s the real world, and the younger kids are, and they learn to deal with diversity, whether it’s good or bad, the better off they’ll be down the road because when they are working someday they’re going to be working with people of all different personalities, nationalities, and socioeconomic backgrounds … And that’s one reason I think that turns me off to East Charter is I don’t feel like they get that diversity there and that they kind of learn what I consider a lifelong skill of dealing with that.
Among a few others in this group, Lauren lamented the lack of diverse experiences in her upbringing and rejected prejudiced attitudes from “naïve” family members:

I was from a small town, all white, we had one black person in my high school and that was it. So I don’t know, I just feel like I’ve seen enough prejudice in this world that I feel like I don’t ever want my kids to feel that or to be that way, including their grandparents who have said some awful things in front of them about Mexicans and “those black people” as they call them. I want my kids to realize that they have friends of those—and that’s not how the world is. But in their defense, they live in this little [Midwest] town and they don’t have diversity there, and when you don’t deal with it you become naïve I think.

She and others, then, wanted to ensure their children would have a greater awareness. Other white parents in this group valued their experiences of growing up in more diverse environments and saw it as an important part of being a well-rounded, accepting person:

Crystal: [In California] you’ve got this big mix of people, and that’s just the way the real world is. It’s important that my kids [are] interacting with all these people so it’s not even an issue. ... It was important for me, my friends back in California are from all over the place. And culturally, it’s neat, you’re a lot more open to everything. I think they do notice when someone is prejudiced. They notice that. They don’t get that, you know, why. So that’s a good thing, so I’ve done my job on that side of it. They’re just very accepting of everybody.

Suzanne: When my daughter started kindergarten, they had three or four kids who didn’t speak English, and it was just amazing for her, I think. And she became friends right away with Sofía, and still is to this day. And all I can say is I feel like an idiot, talking to her [Spanish-speaking] mother, because, I mean, who’s the idiot? I mean, it’s me. You just see how much these kids learn or come from or change, good or bad.

KD: So what do you think it brings to your kids’ lives to have experiences where they’re in diverse schools and making friends with kids who don’t speak English?

Suzanne: A more well-rounded picture of what’s around, and how other people live, and that it’s not bad, it might be different, but just because Sofía lives in a much smaller house and shares a room with her brother, it doesn’t mean that her parents don’t love her or take care of her. I think it shows them that kids and families live all different ways, and some may have more of something than others. More acceptance. More difference.

KD: Like they won’t grow up to be like the moms in your Bunco group, with those stereotypes.
Suzanne: Exactly. Yeah, that was one of my thoughts too, “Not only do I not care for you, maybe I don’t want my child with your child, if that’s the way you think.”

The moms’ expressed distaste for the attitudes of the elite schools and people who look down on the East County neighborhood schools reflects back on the overall outcome that even parents who sought diversity ended up in schools with like-minded parents who sought the same.

In addition, the five Latino/a parents in the ‘Defending Diverse Schools’ group explained that it was not only important that their children had peers and teachers who “looked like them,” but also that teachers valued the diverse experiences of all students:

Angela: To be immersed in culture, to have that be part of their life was important to me. More for being part of the family they’re in now and for them to have a strong sense of culture—they are both biracial too—so I wanted them to have that part of it and to understand me and my family, to have a broader experience, understand and accept themselves, be comfortable with their own skin, their place in the world, what they’re entitled to.

Although Maricela had a difficult time finding parents to talk to about schools, other parents claimed that families in their Latino/a communities discussed which schools were most welcoming and respectful of Latino/a kids, and which were not. Some would travel across town for their kids to attend schools with better reputations for educating Latino/a students. Isabel and David additionally discussed more global views for supporting diversity, such that a “well-rounded education” was one that would “enhance their views of the world”:

Isabel: You need to be exposed to different types of people in our lives and have an understanding and compassion. If you’re going to become the potential leaders of the world and you’ve only been exposed to people like you, how do you learn compassion like that? For that you need to interact and enjoy and have friendships with people outside of your group.

As a whole, parents in the ‘Defending Diverse Schools’ group tended to have deeper understandings of the benefits of diverse schools. In addition to preparation for the workplace, parents discussed the value of learning from diverse perspectives, “recognizing a responsibility
to each other,” and for Latino/a students, developing pride in one’s cultural identity. For Latino/a families especially, diversity was not only a high priority, it was essential.

_Diversity is Essential_

As noted above, in seeking quality educational experiences for their children, four of the five Latino/a parents in this group had enrolled their children in either East Charter or Central Focus, only to return to neighborhood schools when socioeconomic differences were a source of palpable discomfort. Antonio, Angela, and Isabel provide illustrative examples:

_Antonio:_ East Charter is a great school, hands down, they learned so much. I wish I would’ve left them there, but … you have kids that don’t grow up with you, they’re not from your neighborhood, it has people with a lot of money. Right off the bat, we don’t have money so we’re not gonna be able to compete with that. That’s the big problem there—not the teachers, not the classes. It’s just the environment.

_Angela:_ It didn’t work for her because there was a difference in income level and she felt a lot of pressure to dress and look a certain way. And she wasn’t that way, she’s just a creative kid, she had her own style, and didn’t care what people said, but it hurt her. She did feel separate, ya know, different. It turned out to be a really bad experience for her.

_KD:_ That’s too bad—it’s supposed to be a school that focuses on community…

_Angela:_ It’s a community if you fit that community. But if you’re outside of that, it was difficult for her.

_Isabel:_ At East Charter … they have such high standards for academics and …if you have two Fs you can’t play on the team …[and] many of the people that tend to not get the system would be the minorities and … they would not be able to participate in sports, they were banned from playing in games … to look outside of the blinders is maybe a little bit hard sometimes. Maybe because of subconscious wishes and maybe it will be hard enough so the people that are bringing our CSAP scores down will drop out. Their parents have open enrolled and with the same dream that all these other people have which is that, “Oh, this school is one of the top 100 in the nation and one of the top schools in Colorado.” Why wouldn’t I want my kid to have the same right to that as anyone else?

In addition, David was “concerned for [his] younger kids that they need to be in a diverse, multicultural environment.” But his sons’ detrimental experiences made him averse to the East County schools, leaving him unsure about what were viable schooling options. Maricela also was
torn about the right choice for her children, choosing East Charter for the academics and then
switching one daughter to East High after years of struggling. Maricela also noticed that her
daughter seemed much more comfortable in a diverse school environment:

*Maricela:* I think she would feel more comfortable seeing more kids that are the
same race, but it doesn’t really matter because they only speak English, so I don’t
know.

*KD:* Do you feel a loss with them not speaking Spanish?

*Maricela:* Sometimes, but because I speak English because of them, not much. I
really don’t mind but at the end of the day, yes, a little bit.

Even some of the white middle-class parents, such as Helen and Nicole in this group and others
in the ‘Preserving the Neighborhood’ group, felt uncomfortable at the highest-performing
schools because the population was so affluent that $100 tickets to fundraising dinners and
McMansion homes created a hierarchy within the school community. What felt comfortable for
the ‘Defending Diverse Schools’ group was a school community that was welcoming to all,
inclusive, and down to earth.

These families found and supported inclusive communities in their neighborhood
schools, but could not help but feel the impact of flight on their schools. David explained, “Open
enrollment has allowed parents to opt out of a local school into a school where there are more
people like them. ... it evolves into a class choice. ... It’s really another means of segregating our
schools, when you look at the numbers.” Although Cindy noted above, “Everyone was leaving,”
she joined trusted friends in supporting the neighborhood schools. She and other white middle-
class moms admitted that they were “nervous with their first-born and [later] realized we were
freaking out about nothing.” And despite Lauren’s commitment to neighborhood schools and
diversity, she felt a great deal of stress in making “the right” decision when her daughter was
hanging out with “the wrong” crowd. As she put it, “You’ll probably never know [if you made
the right decision] because most people … end up liking where they’re at.”
Similarly, as mentioned above, Crystal trusted her friends’ advice and enrolled into the affluent Central Elementary when her family moved to the area from California, but became more critically aware when it was time to choose a middle school:

What I started to see was that, in my opinion, … people are afraid of diversity. Because … Central Elementary is pretty much a white population, and all the people at the Bunco group are pretty much white, and in California I was used to seeing classrooms in which you had very wide diversity, where a white student would be in the minority, actually. So it’s something that I really noticed when you come to the districts over here is that, gosh … there’s no ethnic diversity at all. …. And then I was like, “Okay, what are they afraid of at East Middle?” … Because I had heard all these horror stories, and then I walk into the school and there’s like no graffiti on the walls, and at my high school there was graffiti. It was common. And I’m looking around and I’m going, okay, the kids are all dressed decent, there’s not a lot of hoochie-mama looks going on. … there’s not a lot of sleazy attire, or gangster-type looking kids. And I’m looking at this going, …“They’re worried because there’s Mexican people here, and they’re racist!” …. The people aren’t used to mixing. And they just think it’s a worse school. And I look at it as my kids are getting real-world diversification. They’re being exposed to a lot of different cultures, and a lot of different people, and lifestyles …. I like exposing my kids to real-world situations. Going to our neighborhood school seems to do it for us.

Concerned about schools “divided by class,” Crystal, Suzanne, and others espoused a common view that parental effort would be better spent on improving their neighborhood schools:

Crystal: It divides by class or by wealth, in that maybe all the wealthy people—they’ll go and get the best for their kid, and I don’t blame them, that’s what they want, the best for their kid, who doesn’t? But … when they take their kids out of their neighborhood area and bring them to another school, what they do is they take their concerns for their school and their pro-activeness about making sure the school is doing the best for their kid and they all put it in that one school. And if those parents were going to their neighborhood schools, all those neighborhood schools who might be lacking in certain areas might have more of a parent push to do better. There would be more demanding parents spread out. And all the schools would be elevated a little bit because of the parental pressure.

Suzanne: It made me crazy to think about that people spent all this time creating another school or whatever, and if they just put the energy into the school their kid was going to go to it would have been time better spent. …. My big thing was that you could put your energy and focus into your neighborhood school and help make it what you want it to be if it’s not what you think it should be.
As Helen noted, however, “People put more into the school when they feel like they are part of the [school] community.” Because of this, a transfer of parental effort to a different school would need to involve some feeling of community membership, which in a truly diverse setting, would need to overcome the strong ties of a feeling of belonging with like-mindedness.

Again, Angela summed up parents’ choice processes in the district well:

In our community there tends to be people choosing different schools based on perceptions of what is or is not a good school. There tends to be some superficial decision-making, with some parents making decisions [based] on the community’s perspective of the quality of the school, rather than whether or not that’s the right school for their kid. There’s a need for status, and there’s assumptions being made about schools that have low test scores as being a reflection of the teaching staff when that’s not really true.

Furthermore, Angela noted that high status parents had influence in the direction of each school that was difficult to negotiate fairly:

It’s hard for principals to find their voice when they have a very powerful parental voice that’s maybe dictating a lot at the school. But that voice isn’t really representative of the entire community. And the principal’s in a tough spot to make sure that the school is not overly influenced by just a certain group.

Addressing both the broad patterns of school segregation across the district and within-school inequities is a complex matter. In the next chapter, I consider possible directions for change.

**Conclusion: Three Social Spheres**

My characterization of these three groups of parents is not meant to imply that individuals fell exclusively into one camp or that one set of perspectives was more respectable than another. I myself have at times resonated with and made choices in line with each of these groups. Yet the different experiences and social positioning of these broadly defined groups highlight the ways in which parents separate themselves, and in turn their children, into ‘communities of sameness.’ In fact, parents were so accustomed to associating with like-minded others, that for many, their participation in this study was motivated by the unique opportunity to
attend focus groups of parents with diverse experiences and perspectives. At every focus group, parents who I’ve since characterized as ‘Defending Diverse Schools’ brought up their concerns about a lack of equity in the open enrollment system. Participants reflected on post-questionnaires that they benefited from hearing new perspectives, and two-thirds of participants—especially those from the ‘Seeking the Best’ and ‘Preserving Neighborhood Schools’ groups—indicated an expanded understanding of equity issues. While a mere beginning, these outcomes suggest a possibility that diverse community dialogues could be constructive toward better-informed parental perspectives and policymaking.
Chapter VI: Conclusion and Implications

Aspirations and Heuristics Formed in Communities of Sameness

The findings from my study support the literature on patterns of increased segregation in school choice systems that occur through the influence of social networks—often defined by social status—on parents’ selection of schools (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bell, 2004; Doucet, 2011; Holme, 2002; Lacireno-Paquet, 2012; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012; Teske, 2012). As has been found elsewhere, some middle-class parents associated schools with high proportions of Latino and low-income families as lower quality and feared such schools would limit their children’s educational opportunities and encourage undesirable behaviors (Brantlinger, 2003; DeJarnatt, 2008; Delale-O’Connor, 2011; Holme, 2002; Lankford & Wyckoff, 2005; Levin, 1999; Maddaus, 1990; Schwartz, 2005), while others strongly supported diverse schools (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Martínez & Quartz, 2012; Posey-Maddox, 2014). Likewise, a “feeling of comfort” was a frequently mentioned indicator that signaled sameness along important dimensions (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Holme, 2002; Lareau, 2014, p. 193; McGinn & Ben-Porath, 2014).

In addition, my findings offer new knowledge with respect to the questions that motivated my study:

1. How do parents in a system of public school choice reason through the decision of what school to send their children to from the available alternatives? How does a “cultural logic of child rearing” relate to these processes and outcomes?
2. What insights about the patterns of enrollment associated with race or ethnicity and socioeconomic status are gained from an understanding of parents’ choice processes? What are the implications of these findings for public education in a democracy?
In terms of how parents “reason through” their choice of schools, some researchers have argued that an analytic process of deciding in line with one’s preferences does not characterize the school choice process, and suggest that perhaps a “mother’s intuition” plays a bigger role (David et al., 1994). However, a new finding I bring to the literature is that individuals varied in their decision-making styles. Some were quite analytic in weighing both tangible and intangible information, others were primarily intuitive in relying on gut feelings, but most used both approaches to varying extents. Furthermore, important differences existed between parents who maximized utility in terms of seeking ‘the best’ school possible for the narrow goal of academic excellence and those that were content to satisfice by finding a school that was ‘good enough’ with respect to their academic aspiration levels in balance with other desirable considerations, such as a strong neighborhood community and diverse educational experiences. Maximizing utility in this narrow sense most closely aligned with the assumptions of a market model of school choice in which parents rationally ‘seek the best’ available alternative. These parents chose elite, highly academic schools with affluent populations. Those who satisficed were split. Parents who wished to ‘preserve the neighborhood’ were satisfied with schools that were local and offered a decent, well-rounded education in terms of academics and extracurricular involvement. Parents who found themselves ‘defending diverse schools’ valued—or needed–some diversity as part of a good educational experience for their children. Importantly, diversity was an essential characteristic of working-class Latino families’ schools, which left them confined to choosing among relatively under-resourced schools suffering from flight.

In addition to these varying decision-making styles and aims, my study offers a new perspective by highlighting how the use of heuristics played a key role in assessing information. Anecdotes and opinions offered by trusted friends within social spheres were a primary source of
information; parents often repeated what they had heard in these settings when describing their impressions of schools. Some middle-class parents were straightforward in admitting that they associated qualities like a low-income population with low academic quality, as well as with undesirable behaviors such as drugs, sexual activity, and gangs. Affect, moreover, played a large role as a feeling of comfort mattered to all types of decision-makers. For the most part, parents were leaning towards certain schools before attending Open Houses and used them as a “gut check.” Many parents mentioned the importance of feeling welcome at the school, and were comforted by the presence of students and parents that seemed similar to them. The use of heuristics thus was one way in which social status was woven throughout the decision-making process.

Social status also was inherent in the choice process through the relationships that parents had with schools, which were tied to their ‘cultural logic of child rearing.’ While Lareau (2014) also considered a logic of ‘concerted cultivation’ in her study of residential choice, my study is the first to examine this aspect in a system of school choice, and to show the intricate ways that middle-class parenting practices were interwoven in parental choice processes. As part of intensive parenting practices, empowered parents were highly involved in the schools and accessed valuable insider information about schools, teachers, and instructional methods. Close relationships with teachers led to acute understandings of their children’s educational needs and, often, teacher advice about schools for their children. Because mothers spent substantial time supporting their children’s learning, their own lives were impacted when they perceived that their children’s needs weren’t being adequately met in school. Parents primarily saw themselves as partners with teachers and actively involved community members, such that it was clearly important to parents to feel a sense of belonging in the school culture.
What is more, it was important to parents that other parents at the school shared similar values. Whether parents shared similar perspectives with regard to aspirations, acceptable behavior, and/or a value for diversity, the clustering of parents in ‘communities of sameness’ was the most consistent strand that characterized parental choice processes. And because values and aspiration levels for their children stemmed from their own childhood or educational experiences, the layers of clustering within social spheres, neighborhoods, and schools served to reproduce intergenerational differences that are entwined in a history of inequality.

The process through which parents in this study made choices that result in increasingly segregated schools therefore involved interwoven aspects of aspiration levels stemming from reference points that often differ by social status, heuristics formed about school quality within social networks of similarity, feelings of comfort in communities with consonant child rearing values that in turn have intergenerational roots, and relationships of partnerships with educators that produce valuable insider information. Common solutions to improving the opportunities of the most disadvantaged in school choice systems, such as providing transportation, expanding information and needed services, and offering preferences in the lottery, while of course necessary for the most basic level of access, address only a formal opportunity to participate. The assumption is that equal access would allow families who now remain in under-resourced schools to enroll in ‘the best’ schools of academic excellence, such that schools would become more demographically diverse while maintaining parental autonomy. But my findings show that even without common barriers to access, parents would differ with regard to their aspirations that are deep seated in intergenerational values. And parents’ life experiences informed an intuitive sense of comfort among like-minded others that was in turn central to their choices. I return to
offer more robust policy recommendations after a consideration of parents’ expressed perspectives about the open enrollment system. c

**Perspectives About Open Enrollment and Stratification**

Although 34 of the 36 participants had participated in open enrollment to some extent—in terms of either searching for schools or open enrolling out of the neighborhood school—only 11 (31%) parents were expressly in favor of the policy. Another 10 (28%) liked the idea of having a choice but were concerned by the negative consequences named above. Nine (25%) disliked the policy and would prefer a neighborhood school system but were participating or had participated in the past, and six (17%) were strong neighborhood school advocates. Many parents thus felt compelled to participate but would rather not have to. In fact, one-third of parents described open enrollment as an added responsibility or burden that was overwhelming:

*Jennifer [1]:* I was like “Oh gosh, now I have all these options.” It was overwhelming. And stressful, because it was like, you just think, “Okay, my kids will just get up, get on the bus and go to school.” And now it was this huge game, this huge dog and pony show, and all the schools were tooting their horns, and I was like, “Oh my gosh, this is just kindergarten.” …that first year of preschool the moms start talking about it, and they’re like, okay, where are you going to go, and you realize that oh my gosh, this is huge. This is really a big decision.

Jennifer’s opinion echoed the sentiments of parents discussed in Chapters IV and V who reflected on their anxiety and confusion.

Just over half of parents (56%) were aware that socioeconomic stratification in the district had increased since open enrollment gained traction, with 28% confident it had not and 17% unsure:

*Carmen [1]:* That's why I feel sad, but I have to do it. It's a moral dilemma. It would be ideal if the schools all had very good teachers, but unfortunately, the schools with better funding are the ones with better teachers and that shouldn't be the case. It should be equal and I don't know how that could be controlled.
However, 86% of parents thought socioeconomic diversity within schools was important so that kids have “exposure” to differences (69%), develop an understanding of diverse perspectives (50%), and/or are better prepared for the workplace (17%). Some also complained of the sense of entitlement that kids developed at schools with little socioeconomic diversity.

Similar to Brantlinger's (2003) findings, however, almost half (47%) of parents responded that they would not support preferences in the open enrollment system for low-income families in an effort to promote socioeconomic balance in each school, as this type of systematic advantage seemed “unfair” to some and served to dilute a “critical mass” of Latino/a students within schools for others:

*Jamie [1]*: I like having choices based on the fact that my kids are higher achievers. They're better students than maybe some other students, so I wouldn't want to restrict their opportunities. See, it's like the individual versus what's better for society. ... if I didn't have kids in school, I would think, “Oh, that's a great plan!” But ... if we had not gotten in because they were holding that space for somebody on a free or reduced lunch, I don't know. ... It would have been frustrating. But I could see how it would be more fair to do that.

*Martha [1]*: Even though [implementing preferences] seems unfair, people with means have more choices. ... it’s not about being fair, it’s about doing what’s right. And it’s a hard thing to say, “I’m going go let go of my personal desire or interest, because it’s the right thing to do.”

Jamie’s and Martha’s statements reflect the tensions of decision-making pointed out by Sen (1977), in that individuals sometimes weigh their personal interests against other considerations, such as what might be more fair and just. But Jamie admits that when it comes to her own children, she would prioritize their individual interests. Her understanding of “what’s better for the individual versus society” reflects a common division between children’s individual needs and a broader public issue ‘out there.’

Parents did want school choice to be fairer, however. Most interpreted this as increased access to choice, with 30 of 36 (83%) parents supporting policy changes such as providing
transportation, offering English as a Second Language services in all schools, and making
information more available and accessible. Those that didn’t support these types of measures, in
addition to some that did, expressed that they would rather the district focus policy changes on
supporting and improving neighborhood schools.

In addition to concerns about segregation, Latino/a participants emphasized issues such
as the district attracting and retaining teachers color, the achievement gap, the stereotyping of
Latino/a students, and the disproportionate dropout rate. Indeed, an analysis of district data for
2004-2013 shows that dropout rates overall were decreasing, but the proportion of Latinos—
especially male Latinos—among students who had dropped out was steadily and substantially
increasing. In addition, the achievement gap (calculated as the percent proficient and advanced
among “Not-FRL Eligible” students minus the percent proficient and advanced among “FRL
Eligible” students for reading, writing and math) was decreasing so slightly that a trend line
analysis showed that a continuation of the past 10 years’ rate of progress would take 43 to 63
more years to eliminate the gap in each content area. Results for the white-Latino achievement
gap were similar.9 As Antonio [3] argued:

People would say we need to bring those [affluent] kids here and I’d say, you
don’t. You need to teach the kids that are here now. Take care of them, make sure
they do good. ... People love to talk about diversity but kids are segregated within
schools [so that] kids do not have equal opportunities to learn. … They take care
of the TAG kids and everyone else is SOL.

While Antonio did not see increasing diversity across schools as a priority, other Latino/a
participants did express the importance of curbing flight and increasing the availability of high

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9 To calculate dropout rates, I used district-level data by gender and race/ethnicity for academic years
ending 2004-2013, accessed from the Colorado Department of Education:
http://www.cde.state.co.us/edereval/rvrioreyedropoutdata. To calculate achievement gap statistics, I
used district- and school-level data by FRL eligibility and by ethnicity for academic years ending 2004-
2013, accessed from the Colorado Department of Education:
http://www.cde.state.co.us/assessment/CoAssess-DataAndResults#disaggregated.
quality, diverse schools. Yet any efforts to integrate schools clearly need to include the various perspectives of the most disadvantaged—whose voices have long been marginalized—and address a web of programs that benefit the most advantaged.

Although five of the six Latino/a participants liked the idea of school choice, none of them felt that Latinos had a respected voice in district policy. Three of these parents, who were well-recognized community leaders, reflected on their past participation in organized movements to effect changes such as bilingual schooling. Their current activism, however, generally involved participation in what felt like superficial district offerings of Spanish-speaking parent forums, with few opportunities for cross-cultural venues:

_ Antonio [3]:_ Anglos need to hear Hispanic concerns and find common ground. … They’ve pushed Love and Logic, the PEN network—we’re involved, we don’t want to do what you’re trying to shove down our throat. … We go to a lot of meetings and what really upsets me is they put all the Spanish speakers together and listen to our problems but they don’t do anything about it. One year they did something really good … we did a [cross-cultural] study [and] it was eye opening to a lot of Anglo parents that [our issues were] even happening. It was the first time they had ever heard it.

As Antonio suggested, similar to Olson Beal and Hendry’s (2012) point, dialogue across perspectives is essential not only to the formation of policy that effectively benefits those at a disadvantage, but also to the expanded understandings of parents participating in the system. Further, it is critical that policy changes be made with clarity on the aims of public education that they promote.

**Implications for Public Education in a Democracy**

If the market-based rationale for school choice is that schools will compete to best meet parents’ preferences, and parents’ preferences are for communities of sameness, then school choice policy is effectively supporting the creation of increasingly homogeneous schools. Even if preferences could be modeled on academic quality, the heuristics involved in decision-making
include a use of demographic characteristics as a proxy for quality and favor the reproduction of like-minded communities in schools. In this way, a public policy of deregulated public education fosters increased school segregation and is effectively a de jure enabler of school segregation.

As noted in Chapter II, the courts and public sentiment have upheld parents’ rights to raise and educate their children in the direction of their values, even if so doing results in segregated experiences. And some charter schools have offered disempowered communities important opportunities to realize better academic and social experiences for their children. But school communities are increasingly defined by the haves and the have-nots. And the influence of intergenerational experiences on adults’ choices that were clear in this study suggests that children’s homogeneous school experiences will encourage the continued reproduction of communities of sameness that overlap importantly with race and social class. The sense of comfort that parents felt in school communities that reflected their own values further shows the need for integrated experiences as a means to better understand the experiences and perspectives of others who are unlike themselves, get along with a wide diversity of peers, and feel comfortable in diverse communities.

The importance of integrated schooling has been widely and thoughtfully debated. Some have justifiably argued that policies aimed at integration are typically implemented in ways that benefit the already-advantaged, including the maintenance of within-school segregation through academic performance-based programming, the absence of teachers of color, the lack of respect for students’ cultural heritage, and so on (Bell, 2005). Latino/a parents in my study echoed these issues in their experiences. Yet, as I stated in Chapter II, strong evidence shows that schools with demographic diversity demonstrate richer learning environments, improved academic achievement, graduation, and college enrollment, and friendship formation that serves to
diminish status hierarchies, break down stereotypes, and lead to more diverse social lives in adulthood (Frank, Muller, & Mueller, 2013; Frankenburg & Le, 2008; Gottfried, 2014; Palardy, 2013; Welner, 2006). Again, as Gutmann (1987) and Powell (2005) emphasize, true integration must be thoroughgoing through both across-school and within-school measures.

Anderson (2010) argues that segregation in fact causes inequality through unequal access to quality social services, health care, education, and material goods as well as the intensification of personal biases among differing social groups who have little contact with each other. Democracy, which rests on civic equality, therefore requires the integration of public spaces of meaningful interaction, such as schools. Through deregulated school choice in particular, Meira Levinson (1999) claims—and my findings support—that parents are able to opt for schooling environments that reflect their own values and reproduce like-minded communities. Levinson’s concern about segregation stems from a different emphasis than Anderson in that she prioritizes the development of individual autonomy in a liberal society, which in turn requires diverse experiences in order to have meaningful choices among beliefs and life paths. Because parental choice increases segregated experiences, then, Levinson claims that for both parents and future generations, parental choice contradicts the liberty it purports to advance. The only reasonable solution, she finds, would be “controlled choice” plans that help to prevent increased school segregation resulting from free-reign parental choice (p. 155).

Sigal Ben-Porath (2010) agrees with Levinson (1999) on the need for regulations on school choice policies to curb negative consequences such as segregated schooling. Like Anderson (2010), however, Ben-Porath views the primary aim of public policy in a democratic society as not one of advancing autonomy, but rather “civic equality” in that all people are accorded equal status in various dimensions of public life. Importantly, the means to promoting
equality is not expanding individual choice through deregulation, but rather focusing on the conditions that best provide individuals with effective opportunities to make meaningful choices. Ben-Porath lays out such conditions in a “landscape of choice” characterized by what she calls “structured paternalism,” or regulations that limit and frame options in a way that encourages individuals to make choices that better advance—or at least do not further derail—civic equality.

For Ben-Porath (2010), DeJarnatt (2008), Thaler and Sunstein (2009) and others, the contributions of behavioral economics to understanding the actual ways that people think and act lead to the conclusion that choices should be framed to encourage people to do what is better for them (and others) than they otherwise might, given errors of quick judgments and the influence of social status on individual experiences that inform aspirations and biases. Whether Ben-Porath’s “structured paternalism,” Thaler and Sunstein’s “libertarian paternalism,” or Levinson’s (1999) “controlled choice,” the argument is that such imposed limitations on choice are “good for you” (Ben-Porath, p. 18) in both private and public arenas. As Howe (1997) points out, our freedoms are limited in a variety of ways in order to live together in a social world; the question is always to what extent and for what purpose.

In terms of school choice, then, these and other authors suggest that the answer to the negative consequences of its deregulation is purposeful regulation. These arguments typically proceed to propose specific changes to this end, including offering public transportation, increasing and improving information such as through a central counseling center, ensuring the provision of Special Education and English as a Second Language programs at all schools, and even ensuring that the demographics of school populations are balanced through a structured lottery system. As I’ve stated earlier, at a minimum, policy changes that increase access to school
choice are necessary to provide even a “bare opportunity” (Howe, 1997, p. 18, citing Dennett, 1984) to participate.

But my findings show that such measures would only scratch the surface of multiple layers of educational inequality and the complex social practices that reproduce them. First, these measures alone reinforce the paradigm in which the aim of educational equality has come to mean, “equal opportunity to choose,” as Wilson (2012, p. 27) puts it. My findings suggest that even with equal access to choice, parents would continue to choose like-minded communities. Furthermore, even with the most controlled choice plans that ensure school populations are socioeconomically proportionate to the district population, within-school segregation and unequal educational opportunities can (and often do) continue through tracking, gifted programming, and lack of friendship formation across social groups (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012). The ways in which middle-class parents in my study shared in parenting practices that advanced their children’s interests, such as forming powerful partnerships with teachers, advocating for their children, and sharing insider information in well-resourced social networks, suggests that these practices would continue to advantage their children without changes in other conditions and in parental perspectives. Importantly, equal access to choice would not directly address the conditions that Latino/a parents in my study stated were of most concern to Latino communities in East County, including the achievement gap, the dropout rate, the stereotyping of Latino boys, the need for more teachers of color, and the lower proportions of high quality teachers in the district’s most demographically diverse schools. In this way, a balanced choice plan that ensured socioeconomic diversity as well as equal opportunity to choose might only offer access to schooling options that continue to be defined by advantaged
parents who exercise power through the type of parenting practices revealed in my study. The need for Latino communities’ participation in defining policy changes cannot be overstated.

In critiquing the negative consequences of current systems of school choice, Anderson, Levinson, Ben-Porath, and Howe are rightly concerned with advancing equality and democracy. Importantly, Howe (1997) further interrogates how education policy regulations should be determined. Drawing on ideals of participatory democracy that incorporate distribution, recognition, and inclusion, he argues that steps toward policy change must be democratic in themselves. That is, defensible perspectives from all relevant stakeholders must be included in defining educational outcomes “worth wanting” (p. 18) and determining the policy features to equitably advance those aims. At the same time, Howe warns against focusing on the proper limitations of choice plans under a framework scripted by market model advocates, at the loss of focusing on the democratic aims of education (p. 120): “Instead of asking, How much do we need to control choice?, we should ask instead, “How can we best foster democracy?”

Howe’s (1997) emphasis on participatory, democratic dialogue hearkens to Dewey’s (1927/1954) distinction between private and public. Recall that for Dewey, a public comes into being when there are shared consequences that are systematic and important enough to be addressed. Ideally, the public takes on a democratic form in communicating and understanding its concerns. In turn, the public needs a representative that can fairly address its defined needs. In other words, policy changes should be responsive to the democratically negotiated needs of a public. In this sense, the public purposes of education can be thought of as serving the shared interests of its constituents. And the need for regulation—i.e. governance—is key to the public character of education. As Dewey puts it, with democratic public policy, “[T]he public itself … establishes certain dikes and channels so that actions are confined within prescribed limits, and
insofar have moderately predictable consequences” (p. 53). Dewey’s “dikes and channels” can be seen as a type of “choice architecture” that Ben-Porath (2010) and others endorse, but importantly attend to the democratic development of policy measures. This characterization directly contradicts a market model that misconstrues schooling as a “private” choice and prioritizes individual interests and competition. As I found in BVSD, the predominant, design of school choice policies with minimal regulations allows the reproduction of distinct, like-minded social spheres instead of fostering the development of a diverse, democratic public sphere.

**Directions for Change**

I didn’t want to find what I found. Having participated in school choice myself, and being sympathetic to the perspectives of the various parents in this study that were all trying to do what was best for their children as they understood it, I hoped to offer more promise for school choice policy than I can claim. In fact, I would have to place myself in the ‘Seeking the Best’ group due to my priority for strong academics. As stated in the opening to the dissertation, my internal conflict comes from my high value for diverse experiences and a more just educational system at the same time as systematic inequality leads to schools with differences in teacher quality for my own children. As Howe (1997) states, “In such a system, parents of children in the public schools who otherwise would be committed to eliminating educational equality [are] faced with the option of either making their children into martyrs by sending them to inferior schools or scrambling to insure that their children [won’t] be losers in the zero-sum game” (p. 127). In BVSD, the choices aren’t this drastic, but the idea is the same when parents feel compelled to participate in open enrollment. I don’t morally excuse myself from the consequences of my choices, but I offer this dissertation as a step toward meaningful change.
Parental support for increased access to participation in open enrollment was very strong in my study (almost unquestionably “the right thing to do” given that the policy exists), but most parents preferred that the district focus its efforts on improving neighborhood schools for all students. Only half of parents claimed they would support the implementation of preferences in the lottery to promote a better demographic balance across school populations, and attempts to enact preferences for students on FRL in some focus schools in the past decade have been poorly and unsuccessfully implemented. At the same time, only half of parents were aware that schools have become increasingly segregated in the district through open enrollment participation, while parents from longstanding Latino communities in East County were not only acutely aware of white and middle-class flight, but also shared experiences and concerns that were unheard of for advantaged students. It seems crucial, then, that policy changes begin with inclusive, well-designed dialogues not only to be procedurally democratic in defining aims, problems and solutions, but also to develop understanding, contradict misperceptions, and broaden perspectives among parents and educators that inform their continued participation in public education.

It seems most feasible, as Dewey (1927/1954) suggests, to begin locally. I will first invite several leaders of Latino communities in the district to participate in a dialogue in which I share my findings and allow for a joint determination of the most necessary steps toward more equal educational opportunities. I will ask two of these leaders who work for the district to join me in meeting with the superintendent, deputy superintendent, and relevant others to review my findings and the results of the dialogue of Latino community leaders. One recommendation I will bring to the table, with the agreement of Latino community leaders, is for the district to offer well-facilitated, diverse community dialogues among parents. (This would involve outreach and
accommodations that would encourage the best possible representation of relevant and distinct viewpoints.) While differences in power play a role in dialogues made up of people with differences in social positioning (Davidson & Moses, 2012), the results of the focus groups in my study indicated the potential for dialogue to increase awareness among parents who otherwise formed their perspectives in distinct social spheres of like-mindedness. In addition, policy changes would be more likely to gain traction with better-developed understandings across difference than with top-down mandates that often provoke reactions among parents with the most power.

In dialogue with Latino community leaders, district administration, and diverse groups of parents, I would bring several suggestions to the table that are supported by my findings and the broader evidence on school choice outcomes:

1. *Develop a strategic plan to improve open enrollment outcomes with regard to demographic diversity in schools.* Howe and Eisenhart (2000) recommended a long-term plan in their open enrollment policy evaluation for the district that has yet to be developed. As a necessary first step, the district must track demographic data with open enrollment participation, and this information should be open to the public. An honest representation of the patterns of choice in the district would serve to inform meaningful policy changes backed up by clear evidence of the need for such changes.

2. *Continue to support community liaisons.* It is crucial that funding for community liaisons for Title 1 schools continue, along with the possibility of extending their reach. These liaisons provide an important connection between Latino/a families and their schools and are consistent with the idea of *promotores,* or community leaders, that are common to Mexican-American culture.
3. **Create partnerships among schools for parental fundraising.** Differences in the socioeconomic make-up of schools clearly translates to stark differences in the means of parents to fundraise for their schools in ways that directly impact learning opportunities, such as for technology, literacy support, and so on. The 10% transfer of fundraising donations from schools with higher levels of fundraising to those with lower levels, prompted by Howe and Eisenhart’s (2000) recommendation of a 15% transfer, is an important measure. However, this still leaves drastic differences between schools that raise, e.g. $100,000 (West Charter Middle), and those that raise, e.g., $15,000 (East Middle). “Sister schools” in the district historically have translated to one school simply giving resources like winter coats to other schools, whether or not that is what they wanted or needed. Partnerships among schools for fundraising would need to be thoughtfully developed, such as joining together for a popular fundraising “Fun Run” or other events, where students from the two communities can meaningfully interact. Funds raised would be split between the schools.

4. **Recruit and retain high quality educators in demographically diverse schools, especially educators of color.** In response to Latino/a parents’ concerns in my study as well as the broader evidence on the underrepresentation of high quality educators in high poverty schools and the underrepresentation of educators of color writ large (Palardy, 2013), it is important that the district develop measures to effectively recruit and retain highly qualified educators to serve students from a variety of communities of East County. A diverse group of identified high quality educators (administrators and teachers) in the district should be consulted on the means to best achieve this.
5. *Promote collaborative learning within and across schools.* Collaborative learning among students that vary in their academic performance has been shown to increase understandings, broaden perspectives, and encourage friendship formation (Palardy, 2013). In addition to promoting collaborative learning within schools, technology could be used to encourage such learning and friendship formation across schools, perhaps focused on the schools partnered for fundraising.

6. *Take steps to advance thoroughgoing integration within schools.* As I’ve stated elsewhere and others have argued (Anderson, 2010; Gutmann, 1987; Powell, 2005), integrated schools require thoroughgoing integration that involves such measures as detracking, collaborative learning, and a “critical mass” defined by cross-cultural respect (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014). This aim requires educator training in supportive and productive learning environments for diverse groups of students.

7. *Consider the development of a model school.* Given the difficulty of implementing comprehensive changes that would allow for thoroughgoing educational experiences, the current plan to build a new school in East County might offer the opportunity to develop a model, democratic school. Ideally, the aims and structure of the school would be determined through democratic processes, with the important participation of local communities. Enrollment would be structured to ensure a diverse student body with thoroughgoing integration. Highly qualified teachers would be trained in rich, evidence-based, de-tracked instructional methods as well as an understanding of why such methods matter for both equality of opportunity and the aims of public education in a democracy (Burris, Wiley, Welner, & Murphy, 2008). Administrators would support democratic processes in the functioning of the school, including authentic community engagement.
Resources would be dedicated to ensuring equal access, such as providing transportation and ensuring communication. While it is unlikely that all of these characteristics would be well implemented in a non-ideal world, it seems very possible that steps toward a more democratic model could demonstrate positive academic and social outcomes that could then be expanded (and perhaps even demanded by parents). Without thoughtful attention to the programmatic structure of the new school to be built in East County, my findings suggest that it will offer an opportunity for a like-minded community to develop, creating even more segregation in the area.

These seven specific policy recommendations are measures that are supported by evidence but would need to be democratically negotiated among impacted communities. Although I argue for the value of thoroughgoing integration, the extent to which the district should control enrollment to ensure demographic balance requires input from communities that have been the most marginalized in schools and in policy decision-making. I therefore offer these suggestions for community discussion as potential elements of a strategic plan, but emphasize that it is the public itself that shares in these consequences that needs to engage in defining the steps toward change. At the same time, with states across the country increasingly mandating open enrollment, other districts and the publics that comprise them should consider the value of policy changes such as these in the face of similar outcomes that may characterize their own choice systems.

Because of my methodological focus on a specific context, my findings cannot directly be generalized to the broader population, but can inform theory, research, and policy design (Eisenhart, 2009). The predominant market model of school choice promotes the idea that parents should maximize utility with the narrow aim of academic quality—often defined by test scores—much in the way that the ‘Seeking the Best’ group in my study went about choosing
schools. Importantly, this group drove the creation of elite, affluent public schools that served to exclude students who “didn’t belong there” when their academic performance wasn’t up to par or socioeconomic differences were a cause of social discomfort. Together with the ways in which parents in my study made decisions using heuristics that are increasingly found to characterize decision-making across contexts (Kahneman, 2003), and chose communities of sameness that has been shown to be a pervasive trend (Bishop, 2008), school choice policies based on a rationale of maximizing such narrow aims will clearly continue to enable increased school segregation. Just as Labaree (1997) and others argue that current policies focus solely on social mobility at the loss of the democratic aims of education, the outcomes of school choice policies based on an ‘invisible hand’ in effect prevent the realization of integrated, democratic education.

Rather than focusing on parents choosing the ‘right fit’ for their children’s—and their own—predetermined identities, offering rich democratic education would allow children’s identities to develop in shared, diverse experiences. As Dewey (1916) states, “It is the office of the school environment to balance the various elements in the social environment, and to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment” (p. 20). With two decades of findings of increased school segregation resulting from school choice, and studies such as my own and others offering various insights into the social and cultural contexts in which parents choose communities of sameness, it is time that the public—writ large—becomes engaged in redefining the aims of public education in a democracy. With better understandings of the democratic aims of education, policies can shift from a sole focus on narrow aims to being crafted with democratic ends in mind, including the value of diverse educational experiences. With diverse educational settings, students’ broadened perspectives in turn would be more likely
to change the course of the intergenerational reproduction of inequalities than we can expect to occur with patterns of choosing sameness. Working within current systems of inequalities, we can take steps that reflect more substantive understandings of the purposes of public education in a democracy, and advance them in our overlapping positions as educators, policymakers, civic equals, and parents.
REFERENCES


Retrieved from


APPENDIX A: Enrollment Patterns

Figure A-1. Enrollment patterns for residents in East Middle School boundaries.

Figure A-2. Enrollment patterns for residents in Central Middle School boundaries.
Figure A-3. Enrollment patterns for residents in East High School boundaries.
APPENDIX B: Protocols

Protocol For Initial Phone Interview

Participant ID #: ______________________
Date: ____________________
Time: ________________
File # on audio-recorder: ________________

Thank you for participating in this study - I hope you will also find it interesting. So, in this call, we'll take about 30 minutes to get an initial sense of your own experiences and perspectives in making decisions about schools for your children. Just so you know, I'm also going through this process myself - I have 5th and 8th grade daughters who will be entering middle and high school next year.

I received your electronically signed consent by email, but I just need to quickly reiterate some things and confirm your verbal consent before beginning the interview.

First, being in this study is completely voluntary. You are always free to withdraw your participation at any time or to choose not to answer any questions. And while I sincerely doubt this will come up, I ask that you refrain from informing me of involvement with any illegal activities or situations that I would be professionally required to report, such as child abuse or neglect or any intention to harm yourself or others. Otherwise, everything we discuss will be confidential, and your identity will be protected.

Do you consent to taking part in this interview?

*So that I can review our conversation later, is it ok with you if I audio-record this call?*

*In order to maintain confidentiality, I have assigned participant numbers. Your number will be ___ throughout the course of the study.*

1. So first, it would help me to get a sense of your family's situation. How many children do you have, and what are their genders, grade levels and schools?

2. Are your children open enrolled or are they attending the neighborhood school?

3. Will you be thinking about schools or participating in anything related to Open Enrollment this year?

4. What are some things that you do in the process of thinking about schools for your child/ren?
   - If not mentioned, probe for:
     - Talk with other parents/adults? In what settings and to what extent?
     - Newspaper? School brochures? Web sites? Other media?
     - Open Houses?
5. What qualities do you find important or look for in schools?

6. Does one parent have the primary responsibility for choosing your kids' schools, or would you say that both parents are equally involved?
   - Do (does) your child/ren have a say?
   - What does the decision-making process look like in your household?
   - What other sorts of things do you do related to your kids' schooling? Does the other parent do these things too (or other things)?

7. What do you see as your role as a parent with regard to your kids' education?
   After initial answer, give choices: Would you see yourself as a...
   - As a consumer or client?
   - As an advocate for your child/ren?
   - As a partner in your kids' education?
   - As a member of a school community?
   - More than one of these things / something else?

   * Would this question change if I said, "What do you see as your role as a mother with regard to your kids' education?"

8. What is your overall opinion of open enrollment? Do you like having a choice or do you wish we all attended our neighborhood schools?

9. Any further questions or comments?

10. Plan for focus group & in-person interview scheduling - best times/dates, any needs
Protocol For In-Person Interview

**Time:** 60 minutes  
**Location:** Participant's home, my home, library, or coffee shop [participant's preference]  
**Dates:** Jan. 20th-Feb. 13th

**Review basics of consent form and provide paper copy.**  
*So that I can review our interview later, is it ok with you if I audio-record?*

Fill in any important holes from phone interview/ focus group participation, such as:  
- if child identified as special needs and/or TAG and/or English learner  
- opinion of OE policy  
- any unique experiences/perspectives mentioned in previous participation

1. **(a) [CHILD TRANSITIONING NEXT YEAR & DECISION MADE THIS YEAR]**  
   Did you participate in anything related to OE for your child this year?  
   - If yes: Why did you decide to participate in OE?  
   - Did you submit an OE application?  
     - If yes: What schools did you select, in what order, and why?  
     - If no: Why not?; Did the OE process affect you and your family in any way?

   **[OR]**

   **(b) [CHILD TRANSITIONING BUT DECISION PREVIOUSLY MADE]**  
   You've told me about making the decision earlier to send (child) to (P2P; only NH schools; etc.). Did this change at all for you as you thought about (child's) school for next year?  
   - If yes: How did this change? [+ ask 1(a) questions]  
   - If no: Even though you didn't participate, did the OE process affect you and your family in any way?

   **[OR]**

   **(c) [CHILD NOT TRANSITIONING]**  
   You've told me about making the decision earlier to send (child) to the schools that they have attended [AND/OR] how you are thinking about (child's) future schools. Even though you didn't participate this year, did the OE process affect you and your family in any way?

2. When did you begin thinking about schools for your kids and why?  
   - How did you begin thinking about it - first steps?  
   - Do you remember when you first found out that we have OE in the district?  
     - How did you feel when you found out?

3. Will you take me step-by-step through your decision-making process as you thought about where you wanted (child) to attend (middle/high) school?  
   *If needed, probe for:*  
   - Specific steps involved  
   - Sources of information used, including most relied upon sources  
   - How decisions were discussed/decided within the family
• Change in perspectives throughout process
• Emotions or stress throughout the process & in waiting for notification

4. What is most important to you for your child's education?
• Where do you think that comes from?

5. How much did school open houses influence your decision?
  o What stood out to you from these?
  o Did it matter how schools presented themselves?

6. How many schools did you consider overall? Which ones?
• Did you look at as many schools as possible or did you narrow it down first?
• How did you determine which schools to consider?
• How much weight did you give to the NH school and why?
• Why did you not consider, e.g., (Angevine/Casey/Manhattan/other) even though it is fairly close to you?

7. How did you know that (school) is the right school for (child)?
• How confident are you that you made the right decision?
• How confident are you that your child will get into the school of your choice?
  o What kind of a difference do you think getting in vs. attending (2nd/3rd choice or NH school) will make for him/her?

8. Is the way that you think about schools different or similar to the way that you make other big decisions in your life?
  • (For example: looking for a job, looking for a place to live, buying a car)
  • Is this type of decision-making process similar for (other parent) in terms of schools?
    How about in terms of other decisions for (other parent)?

9. Here is the ranking of preferences that you filled out at the focus group. What was it like for you to rank these? Does this reflect the way you think about schools?
• Do you think your choices ended up being consistent with this ranking?

10. Do you think that OE policy has contributed to increased segregation by ethnicity and socioeconomic status?
• Do you think it is important to have socioeconomic diversity in schools? Why?
• Would you support a district policy that ensured a balanced number of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds in each school, even if it decreased your chances of getting your first choice?
• Would you support a policy that increased access to OE for all families?

11. Any further questions or comments?

12. If submitted an OE application, ask if can call to check results => schedule time
Protocol For Focus Groups

**Time:** 90 minutes  
**Location:** Private meeting room in local coffee shop, library, or recreation center  
**Approximate dates:** December 12, 14, 15, 19, 20 [during the Open Enrollment period]

**Setup:**
- 2 copies of consent forms for all participants (note participant copy with ID).
- Each seat will have: (1) 2 copies of consent forms for all participants (note participant copy with ID); (2) Pre-Questionnaire (coded with participant ID); (3) Paper and pen/pencil for personal Notes (not coded with participant ID); (4) Handout on BVSD's open enrollment policy; and (5) Handout on norms for discussion.
- Light snacks and refreshments will be available for participants.
- Childcare available upon request (currently scheduled for the 2 evening focus groups).
- Audio-recorder ready to be placed in the middle of the table (upon verbal agreement).
- Timer ready for 2 minute responses.
- 3 parts of opening question written on whiteboard.

**Consent forms/ Pre-Questionnaires [10 minutes] => Collect**

**Opening/Introduction [5 minutes]:**
Good morning (evening) everyone. First, I'd like to thank you all for taking the time during this incredibly busy season to attend this focus group.

As you know, this dialogue is part of the study that I'm doing for my dissertation about parental choice of schools. As a former teacher and mother, I'm interested in both the policy side of school choice as well as the personal experiences of what it's like to make decisions about schools for our kids. So in my study, I hope to provide a picture of how open enrollment policy plays out on the ground by representing parents' actual experiences and perspectives.

My hope is that this dialogue will offer us an opportunity to broaden all of our perspectives as we share and hear a variety of viewpoints. As you know, school choice can be an emotionally charged topic. I have included some norms for discussion on the handout that you have. I want to emphasize that we treat the differing perspectives offered here with respect for the fact that there are many ways to think about what is best for our children and to understand what is important for our schools. Finally, I ask that you please treat the content of this dialogue as confidential - including both the identities of participants as well as their contributions. If for any reason, you feel the need to "vent" anything about the dialogue, please feel free to speak privately to me.

While I hope that everyone will feel comfortable in sharing their perspectives here, as voluntary participants, you are always free to withdraw your participation at any time or to choose to not verbally contribute. And while I know this will not come up, I have to ask that you refrain from discussing involvement with anything illegal or situations that I would be professionally required to report, such as child abuse or neglect or predicted harm to yourself or others.
Does anyone have any questions about the consent form? Can I verbally confirm that everyone here consents to taking part in this focus group?

*I will take some notes as we talk, but so that I can review this dialogue later, is it ok with everyone if I audio-record it?

---

Dialogue [65 minutes]: {15 minutes into focus group}
I have a few questions to guide the dialogue, but the purpose of this group is to offer an open exchange among all of us here. I'd like to start with an opening question for each of us to go around and answer as we introduce ourselves, and then I'll open up the dialogue and ask a couple more questions later on in the discussion.

About 5 minutes before our ending time, we'll wrap up our conversation and I'll ask you fill out a Post-Questionnaire that includes some feedback. (If you have to leave early, please let me know so that you can fill this out before you leave.) Also, you have a sheet for personal Notes if there is anything you want to write down during the dialogue, which I will not collect.

I'll ask you to keep your response to the opening question to 2 minutes or less so that we can hear from everyone. I have a timer here to help us with that that I'll start for each of you. And we'll just go around the table if that's ok, but if you don't feel ready when we come to you, you can say "pass for now" and I'll come back to you at the end.

OPENING QUESTION [35 min]:
So I'd like to start by each of us sharing 3 things - these are written on the whiteboard for your reference: (1) your first name - or you can choose a pseudonym if you prefer; (2) the grade levels and schools of your kids; and (3) your response to the following question: What kind of a child do I have, and what do I want for his or her school experiences? (If you have more than one child, you can discuss each child briefly, or choose one to focus on - especially if you have one child that is currently going through this transition.) I will go last.

I have an 8th grade daughter at Angevine, which is our neighborhood school, and a 5th grade daughter who is open enrolled into Douglass. I'll answer the question for each child since they are both transitioning to new schools next year. My 8th grader does well with traditional-type academic environments. She's one of those book smart people that struggles a bit with common sense, much like her mom. She loves to read, sing, and figure skate. She has always been a rule follower - maybe even too much at times, and is very self-motivated. So for her I look for opportunities to be challenged academically and participate in choir, but I really know that she'll do well virtually anywhere.

My 5th grader really enjoys hands-on learning. She also does very well in school but is more intuitive and - lucky for us - is able to help her sister and me out with anything related to common sense. She loves basketball, art, science, and hunting and fishing with her dad. Unlike her sister, she questions the rules, can be mischievous at times, and will do the minimum if you let her. So for her I think about possibilities for experiential learning and art, but I also want to
make sure that she is challenged, that she is not allowed to get away with the minimum, and that she is engaged academically so that her rebellious side doesn't get the best of her as she has opportunities for all sorts of interesting things in middle and high school.

I'd also say that both girls have a strong sense of justice and caring for others. So I look for diversity and schools that promote acceptance of differences as part of what I find important to their development as citizens that understand and respect difference.

**MID-DIALOGUE POLICY QUESTION [30 min]: {50 minutes into focus group}**

So I'd like to shift the conversation somewhat to thinking about how what we want for our children relates to open enrollment policy more broadly. *How does open enrollment policy as it currently stands either foster or hinder what you want for your children's school experiences?*

----------------------------------------

**10 MINUTE WARNING [5 min]: {80 minutes into focus group}**

We have just about 5 minutes of dialogue left. Does anyone have anything they would like to share that hasn't been discussed?

**5 MINUTE CLOSING [5 min]: {85 minutes into focus group}**

We'll need to conclude our dialogue for today (tonight), but if you could use the remaining 5 minutes to fill out the Post-Questionnaire and give that to me before you leave, I would greatly appreciate it. Of course I am also happy to talk with you individually if you have any feedback or questions. Thank you so much again for your time here. I hope you all have enjoyed this as much as I have.
FOCUS GROUP
PRE-QUESTIONNAIRE

Participant # ________

Gender: Female ____  Male ____  Other / prefer not to answer ____

Racial or Ethnic Identity/Ancestry: __________________________

Languages spoken in the home: 1st: _________________ 2nd (if applicable):

_________________

Highest educational level that you have completed:

___ Less than high school  ___ Bachelor's Degree

___ High school  ___ Some graduate school

___ Some college  ___ Master's Degree or similar (specify: ___________)

___ Associate's Degree  ___ Doctorate or similar (specify: ___________)

Occupation, if employed: ________________________________

If employed, circle one:  FULL-TIME / PART-TIME

Does your child have another involved parent/guardian living in the same household?  YES / NO

Does your child have another involved parent/guardian living in another household?  YES / NO
The next two sections consist of qualities of schools and features of open enrollment that were mentioned by parents in the phone interviews. The first section asks you to prioritize the relative importance of school qualities as they relate to your decision-making. The second section asks you to prioritize the importance of features of open enrollment policy.

SECTION 1: Qualities of Schools

Please rank the following qualities in schools that you seek for your child from 1 (most important) to 10 (least important). Each number should be used only once.

____ Opportunities for students who are "advanced" to be challenged academically
____ Support for students who need additional help academically
____ Teachers and staff who know and care about each individual child
____ Strong leadership/ administration
____ Alternative teaching and learning styles, such as hands-on learning, arts-integrated education, and/or collaborative learning
____ Strong anti-bullying program and/or character education (e.g. teaching values such as respect, responsibility, empathy, honesty, etc.)
____ Diversity and inclusion with regard to students' identities in terms of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, ability, religion, gender identity, and/or sexual orientation
____ Highly qualified teachers in terms of content knowledge and qualifications
____ High level of parental involvement
____ Nearby location and/or ability to ride school bus
____ Other: __________________________
SECTION 2:
Please rank the following features of open enrollment policy from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important). Each number should be used only once.

____ The district has a responsibility to ensure that open enrollment policy does not increase socioeconomic stratification and/or ethnic segregation in district schools.

____ Neighborhood schools must be supported in order to maintain the quality of neighborhood schools and/or foster local community.

____ The district needs to expand schooling options in order to meet students' individual needs, such as replications of highly sought-after programs, online options, and/or more charter schools.

____ All families should have an equal opportunity to participate in open enrollment, even if it means spending additional money on transportation, English as a Second Language services, and/or expanded special educational services.

____ The district needs to ensure equal or equitable funding for all schools.

____ Other: ...........................................................................................................
Note: This is only a general overview. For details, please see: http://bvsd.org/policies/Policies/JECC-R.pdf

BVSD open enrollment policy currently has the following features:

- Automatic ability to attend neighborhood school
- 6-week window (generally December and the first half of January) to visit schools and submit an online (only) application for open enrollment
- Daytime school tours and evening information nights are generally offered at every school and found on the BVSD web site as well as in the "School Choice Guide" in the Daily Camera (mid-November)
- Information on schools generally includes a school-provided description, test scores, demographics, school size, average student-teacher ratio, one statistic about parent satisfaction, school hours/address
- Students who qualify for Intensive Learning Centers are assigned placement into a school by the district. Otherwise, students with special needs are given the same consideration as all students in the lottery process. However, parents are encouraged to discuss students' Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) with schools to ensure that their children's needs can be adequately met.
- Parents have the option to select 3 preferences of schools (by order of preference)
- Students who open enroll are not guaranteed transportation, but can apply on a "space available" basis to ride a bus on a current route for that school
- Preferences are given to families (i.e., drawn first from the lottery) according to the following criteria:
  - If open enrolling into any school:
    - Preferences for BVSD employees (half-time or more)
    - Preferences for siblings of students who will be attending that school the following year
    - Preferences for families living within BVSD boundaries
  - If open enrolling into Horizons K-8, Peak to Peak K-12, or Summit Middle charter schools:
    - Preferences for founding families and current/past Board members for that school
    - Preferences for faculty/staff of that school (quarter-time or more)
    - Preferences for siblings who are attending or have graduated from that school
  - If open enrolling into BCSIS, Community Montessori, or High Peaks focus schools:
    - Preferences for students qualifying as low income
    - Preferences for students living within defined geographic boundaries
If open enrolling into Pioneer Bilingual or Lafayette, Ryan, or Sanchez neighborhood/focus schools:

- Preferences for residents of Lafayette and Erie (within BVSD boundaries)
- Open enrollment acceptance is determined by lottery and e-mailed (only) at the beginning of February, with later offers from wait lists sometimes occurring as late as the beginning of the school year. If parents wish to decline an open enrollment acceptance, they must notify the district within 10 days.
FOCUS GROUP
POST-QUESTIONNAIRE

Participant # ________

Please briefly respond to Questions 1-3 regarding any possible changes in your perspectives.

1. After today's dialogue, are there any changes to your perceptions of your child(ren)'s needs?

2. Are there any changes to the qualities that you seek in schools for your child(ren)? (For example, do any qualities seem more or less important than they did before the dialogue?)

3. Are there any changes to the features of open enrollment policy that you find important? (For example, do any features seem more or less important than they did before the dialogue?)

Did you find the focus group beneficial? Circle one: YES / NO / SOMEWHAT

Why or why not?

Do you have any recommendations for future focus groups?

Any additional comments / questions / concerns?

Thank you!
## APPENDIX C: Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>Deductive (D)/ Inductive (I)</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Right Fit&quot;</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Any mention of finding &quot;a good fit&quot; or &quot;the right fit&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Any discussion of diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAG</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Mentions of the Talented and Gifted (TAG) program as this was frequently brought up in positive and negative ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPEN HOUSES</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influential</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Open houses influenced their perceptions and decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not influential</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Open houses did not influence their perceptions and decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforced choices</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Open houses reinforced their choices or leanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt sense of &quot;fit&quot;</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Sense of good fit - intuitive - mention of &quot;gut feeling&quot; or noticing how child reacted to the setting; includes feeling comfortable or welcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gut check</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Baseline acceptability - i.e. didn't give bad feeling or turn participant away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noticed:</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Subcodes track what participants noticed at open houses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Condition and design of building; technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional methods</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Observations of teaching styles and methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership/ organization</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Impressions of administrators and how school is run overall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offerings</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Number and types of courses and extracurriculars available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students &amp;/or kid-centered</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Impressions of students' engagement and development; school focus on students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INFORMATION</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Subcodes track sources used to acquire information about schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources:</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Active research - Actively seeking out information about schools and putting clear effort into process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insider information</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Gained through volunteering, personal connections to educators or those who know them, discussions with educators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media/ internet</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Use of websites and local newspaper/ media sources; Includes test scores, school climate survey data, class/ school size, mission/ philosophy, demographic data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open houses</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Attendance at open house events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/ social network</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Information gained through other parents/ friends/ colleagues/ known others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior knowledge of schools</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Prior knowledge through older siblings/ work in district/ etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/ district information</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Information given to parents by schools and mailed or emailed by district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers/ specialists</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Information gained directly from teachers or education specialists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recalled information:</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Subcodes track what parents recalled/ mentioned from gathered information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anecdotes</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Mentions of stories about others' experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danger</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Rumored presence of drugs/ violence/ gangs/ sexual maturity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offerings/opportunities</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Awareness of course and extracurricular offerings at each school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/student satisfaction</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Whether or not parents and students are happy with each school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation of school</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Rumored reputation of being a &quot;good school&quot; or a school to be &quot;avoided&quot;, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Type&quot; of parents/students</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Includes types/ attitudes of parents and students perceived to attend certain schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Amount of homework/ schoolwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FOSTER GROWTH</strong></td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demand on mother</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Increased support provided by mother at home when child's needs not met at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular &amp; enrichment</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Child involved in extracurricular activities &amp;/or coursework or activities that enrich perceived talents (including academics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor academic progress</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Continuous weighing whether teacher/ school are a &quot;fit&quot; for child's needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor peers/friendships</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Keep tabs on child having an &quot;acceptable&quot; group of friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect from danger</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Avoid schools rumored to have gangs, fights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect from risky behavior</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Steer child away from making &quot;risky&quot; choices (drugs, alcohol, sex)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support academics at home</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Help with homework, studying, keeping track of due dates, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support self-esteem</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Desire to ensure child feels good about him/ herself; does not become disheartened; concern about child feeling &quot;dumb,&quot; socially &quot;excluded,&quot; or bullied; any mention of whether or not child &quot;thriving&quot; or &quot;flourishing&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand individual needs</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Stated understanding of child's academic or social-emotional needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INSTITUTIONS</strong></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>These codes track parents' relationships with schools and district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of academic needs:</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Subcodes tracked types of needs mentioned for their children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Mention of particular interests of children (e.g., art, engineering, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning style</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Mention of child's specific &quot;learning style&quot; and/or desire to ensure learning style is accommodated in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Child identified with special needs (physical, attention, emotional, learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAG/ Advanced</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Child identified as gifted or discussion of particular needs for &quot;advanced&quot; curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-emotional sensitivities</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Specific mentions of ways in which child is particularly sensitive and/or social aspect of school is highly important to him/her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of options/ system</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Parent indicates awareness of options and how open enrollment works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect personal accommodation</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Mentions of importance of individual accommodations for child, e.g., understanding for demanding extracurricular schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervene</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Any reference to stepping in to address issues at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet with teachers/ admin</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Mentions of meeting with educators outside of typical parent-teacher conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>&quot;Active&quot; involvement in school classrooms and/or on committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PREFERENCES</strong></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>These codes track discrete qualities that parents found important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics/ Not test scores</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>&quot;Strong&quot; academics but not as measured by test scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics/ Test scores</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>State tests, school awards &amp; recognition as best indicator of academic quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator quality</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>&quot;Strong&quot; leadership and/or administrators know kids, are accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class/ school size</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Typical class sizes and school size overall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Frequency and quality of communication with teachers and admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Continuous community and/or educational philosophy from one school to next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse student body</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Primarily socioeconomic and ethnic diversity; also by ability, religion, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualization: Acceleration</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Being challenged at advanced levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualization: Know students</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Fear that child will not be noticed or adequately engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Won't &quot;slip through cracks&quot;&quot;</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Any mention of fear of one's child &quot;slipping through the cracks&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualization: Meet child where they are</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>References to meeting needs based on current knowledge, skills, &quot;learning style&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualization: Support needs</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Supporting child when having difficulty learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional methods</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Teaching styles and methods (kinesthetic, visual, art-based, Core Knowledge, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know friends/ community</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Desire for kids or parents to know people attending same school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistics &amp;/or Location</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Consideration of logistics (transportation, etc.) given siblings, location, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar community</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Desire for similar philosophies, parenting styles, interests, etc. in school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-emotional</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Attending to social-emotional development, anti-bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher quality</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>&quot;Good&quot; teachers understood by results, methods, rapport with kids, reputation, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ASPIRATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D</th>
<th>These codes track responses to &quot;What is most important to you for your child's education?&quot; and similarly broad aims mentioned at other times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic excellence</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community involvement</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse experiences</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of learning/ well-rounded</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-emotional well-being</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE OF ASPIRATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D</th>
<th>These codes track responses to &quot;Where does (that aspiration) come from for you?&quot; &amp; other mentions of why believed certain aspects of child's education to be important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family: &quot;It's how I was raised&quot;</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal educational experiences</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of child</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PARENTAL ROLE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D</th>
<th>These codes track responses to &quot;What do you see as your role as a parent in your children's education?&quot; &amp; other mentions of how they saw themselves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advocate</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community member</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not consumer</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner/Facilitator</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>mother: same as &quot;parent&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother: Closeness</td>
<td>role as &quot;mother&quot; evokes sense of emotional closeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother: Guide</td>
<td>role as &quot;mother&quot; evokes sense of responsibility to guide them in right direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother: Nurture</td>
<td>role as &quot;mother&quot; evokes role of nurturing growth, providing love/affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother: Social-emotional</td>
<td>role as &quot;mother&quot; evokes responsibility to attend to social-emotional needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Good Mother" Any reference to being a "good mother" - includes doubts, wishes, conceptions, challenges, etc.

**DECISION-MAKING**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analytic</td>
<td>indications of analytic comparison of qualities, data collection, weighing of options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximizing</td>
<td>aims to find &quot;best&quot; school/ match to narrow preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuitive/ Emotional</td>
<td>mentions of using intuition or emotional feelings in decision-making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>calculated moves to improve odds, use of insider connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum standard</td>
<td>aims of school being &quot;good enough,&quot; acceptable above minimum standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranking easy</td>
<td>ranking of preferences activity was easy, straightforward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranking difficult</td>
<td>ranking of preferences activity was difficult, didn't align with thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary decision-maker</td>
<td>participant plays primary role in making decision; includes doing &quot;legwork&quot; and reporting to father or being primary voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared decision-making</td>
<td>both parents share equally in decision; discuss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child involved</td>
<td>child (partially or fully) involved in choice of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to parent(s)</td>
<td>child not involved; decision entirely with parent(s)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FEELINGS ABOUT OE**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relief/Freedom/Pleased</td>
<td>recalled pleasant feelings when first found out about open enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelming</td>
<td>recalled being overwhelmed when first found out about open enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrelevant</td>
<td>didn't seem to matter when first found out about open enrollment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice proponent</td>
<td>strongly favors school choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes choice but sees issues</td>
<td>likes school choice but qualifies with negative aspects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislikes but participating</td>
<td>would rather not have open enrollment but compelled to participate given it exists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would move or go private</td>
<td>would move/go private if no choice and/or unsatisfied with schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NH school proponent</td>
<td>strongly favors neighborhood model, against school choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neg: Flight harms NH schools</td>
<td>statements of flight and impact on diverse neighborhood schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neg: Judged by other parents</td>
<td>statements of feeling judged by other parents either for participating or not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neg: Loss of continuous friendships</td>
<td>lamenting loss of continuous friendships from one school to next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neg: Loss of NH/ Divisive</td>
<td>lamenting loss of neighborhood community and friendships, division among parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neg: Marketing/ Sales pitch</td>
<td>schools have to market themselves, seen as turn-off, dislike dog &amp; pony show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neg: Typecast schools</td>
<td>Gossip that characterizes schools in certain ways, including badmouthing, bragging, misperceptions; includes test scores misunderstood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EMOTIONS</strong></td>
<td>These codes track emotions mentioned by participants in the decision-making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>Overwhelmed/stressed/tension in making “right” decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confused</td>
<td>Indecision, don't know what's best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>Feel confident and clear in choice process and decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highs &amp; lows</td>
<td>Ups and downs in feeling confident/hopeful and stressed/disappointed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility/ burden</td>
<td>Responsibility on mom to make the &quot;right&quot; choice for her child; can be moral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOCIOECONOMIC INTEGRATION</strong></td>
<td>Believes/knows that open enrollment has contributed to increased stratification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware</td>
<td>Doesn't think open enrollment has contributed to increased stratification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaware</td>
<td>Isn't sure whether open enrollment has impacted stratification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impt: &quot;Exposure&quot; to differences</td>
<td>Socioeconomic diversity important so that kids get &quot;exposed&quot; to &quot;real world&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impt: Funding equity</td>
<td>Socioeconomic diversity important so that schools are funded more equitably</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impt: Preparation for workplace</td>
<td>Socioeconomic diversity important to prepare for diverse workplaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impt: Understand diverse perspectives</td>
<td>Socioeconomic diversity important to understand variety of perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unimportant</td>
<td>Belief that socioeconomic diversity in schools not important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>POLICY MEASURES</strong></td>
<td>These codes track stated support for various policy measures that they believe would improve the district's open enrollment system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support SES preferences</td>
<td>Would support preferences for families who qualify for FRL in lottery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't support SES preferences</td>
<td>Would not support preferences for families who qualify for FRL in lottery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support increased access</td>
<td>Would support measures for increased access, such as transportation, increased information, more ESL programs, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't support increased access</td>
<td>Wouldn't support additional measures for increased access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support NH schools</td>
<td>Should focus support on neighborhood schools rather than OE policy changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESIDENTIAL CHOICE</strong></td>
<td>Schools or district purposefully in mind when chose residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purposefully for schools</td>
<td>Unaware of assigned schools when chose residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1ST CONSIDERATION OF SCHOOLS</strong></td>
<td>First thought about schools for children before preschool age (anywhere from before pregnancy up until needed daycare/preschool)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before preschool</td>
<td>Need for childcare primary consideration in choosing preschool/daycare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool - what sought:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K prep or special needs</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Match home practices/ values</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SCHOOLS NOT CONSIDERED</strong></td>
<td><strong>D</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not considered: Eliminated</td>
<td><strong>D</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not considered: Reputation</td>
<td><strong>D</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not considered: Not on radar</td>
<td><strong>D</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D: Counts

Note: The numbers in the columns under each participant indicate the number of excerpts for which that code was applied, i.e., the number of unique instances in which the participant discussed something related to that code. "Instances" then sums the number of instances of that code throughout the data for all participants.

"Counts" and "%" indicate the number and percentage of total participants for which that code was used at all.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANT</th>
<th>Joanna (1)</th>
<th>Diane (2)</th>
<th>Crystal (3)</th>
<th>INSTANCES</th>
<th>COUNTS</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Right Fit&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>64%</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAG</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>31%</td>
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</table>

**OPEN HOUSES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Crystal (3)</th>
<th>INSTANCES</th>
<th>COUNTS</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influential</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not influential</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforced choices</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt sense of &quot;fit&quot;</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gut check</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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**NOTICED:**

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<th>Crystal (3)</th>
<th>INSTANCES</th>
<th>COUNTS</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community/ climate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Instructional methods</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership/ organization</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offerings</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students &amp;/or kid-centered</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>53%</td>
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**INFORMATION**

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<th>Diane (2)</th>
<th>Crystal (3)</th>
<th>INSTANCES</th>
<th>COUNTS</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active research</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insider information</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>67%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media/ Internet</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open houses</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents/ social network</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>198</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>School/ district information</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers/ specialists</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42%</td>
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**RECALLED INFORMATION**

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<th>Crystal (3)</th>
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<th>COUNTS</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/student satisfaction</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation of school</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Type&quot; of parents/students</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>58%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
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<td>0</td>
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**FOSTER GROWTH**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Crystal (3)</th>
<th>INSTANCES</th>
<th>COUNTS</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demand on mother</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extracurricular &amp; enrichment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor academic progress</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor peers/friendships</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect from danger</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect from risky behavior</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support academics at home</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support self-esteem</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand individual needs</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>78%</td>
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</table>
### INSTITUTIONS

#### Aware of academic needs:

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<th>0</th>
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<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning style</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special needs</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAG/ Advanced</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>39%</td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>120</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52</td>
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<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet with teachers/ admin</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>28</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>88</td>
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#### Preferences

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academics/ Not test scores</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>22</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Administrator quality</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class/ school size</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>17%</td>
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<td>123</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Continuity</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courses &amp; extracurriculars</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>72</td>
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<td>72%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualization: Acceleration</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualization: Know students</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional methods</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know friends/ community</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>27</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistics &amp;/or Location</td>
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<td>117</td>
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<td>92%</td>
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<td>112</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>92%</td>
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### ASPIRATIONS

#### Academic excellence

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<tr>
<td>Community involvement</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse experiences</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of learning/ well-rounded</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-emotional well-being</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>53%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### SOURCE OF ASPIRATIONS

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<th>1</th>
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<th>72%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family: &quot;It's how I was raised&quot;</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal educational experiences</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of child</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17%</td>
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### PARENTAL ROLE

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<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Purposefully for schools</td>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
# APPENDIX E: Matrix for Vertical Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANT</th>
<th>Joanna (1)</th>
<th>Diane (2)</th>
<th>Crystal (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| OPEN HOUSES | Not influential  
|             | Gut check    | Influential | Influential |
|             | Instructional methods | Felt sense of "fit" | Gut check    |
|             |             | Leadership/ organization | Leadership/ organization  
|             |             | Students &/or kid-centered | Community/ climate  
|             |             |             | Facilities |
| INFORMATION | Active research | Insider information  
|             | Media/ internet | Open houses    |
|             | School/ district information | Parents/ social network  
|             |             | Teachers/ specialists |
|             |             | Anecdotes       |
|             |             | Danger          |
|             |             | Offerings/opportunities  
|             |             | Parent/student satisfaction  
|             |             | "Type" of parents/students |
| Recalled information: | Reputation of school |             |
| FOSTER GROWTH | Monitor academic progress  
|             | Understand individual needs  
|             | Support academics at home    |
|             | Support self-esteem  
|             | Understand individual needs |
|             | Protect from danger  
|             | Protect from risky behavior  
|             | Support self-esteem |
| Aware of academic needs: | Special needs  
|             | Volunteer       |
|             | Aware of options/ system  
|             | Expect personal accommodation  
|             | Intervene        |
|             | Meet with teachers/ admin |
| PREFERENCES | Academics/ Test scores  
|             | Individualization: Know students  
|             | Won't "slip through cracks"  
|             | Individualization: Support needs  
|             | Social-emotional   |
|             | Administrator quality    |
|             | Class/ school size |
|             | Individualization: Know students  
|             | Won't "slip through cracks"  
|             | Individualization: Support needs  
|             | Social-emotional   |
|             | Community      |
|             | Diverse student body  
|             | Know friends/ community  
|             | Logistics &/or Location  
<p>|             | Academics/ Not test scores |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Teacher quality</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Logistics &amp;/or Location</strong></th>
<th><strong>Teacher quality</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Social-emotional well-being</strong></th>
<th><strong>Diverse experiences</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Love of learning/ well-rounded</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASPIRATIONS</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>SOURCE OF ASP'NS</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>PARENTAL ROLE</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>DECISION-MAKING</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>FEELINGS ABOUT OE</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>EMOTIONS</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>SES INTEGRATION</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>POLICY MEASURES</strong></td>
<td><strong>Academic excellence</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Family: &quot;It's how I was raised&quot;</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Advocate</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Analytic</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Would move or go private</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Confident</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Aware</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Don't support SES preferences</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social-emotional well-being</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Family: &quot;It's how I was raised&quot;</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Not consumer</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Maximizing</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Dislikes but participating</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Anxious</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Preparation for workplace</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diverse experiences</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Love of learning/ well-rounded</strong></td>
<td><strong>Diverse experiences</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Love of learning/ well-rounded</strong></td>
<td><strong>Diverse experiences</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Love of learning/ well-rounded</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARENTAL ROLE</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Advocate</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Consumer</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Mother: Same as &quot;parent&quot;</strong></td>
<td><strong>Partner/Facilitator</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Support</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Mother: Closeness</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Mother: Guide</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Minimum standard</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Up to parent(s)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Ranking easy</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Primary decision-maker</strong></td>
<td><strong>&quot;Good Mother&quot;</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Community member</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Advocate</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Support</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DECISION-MAKING</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Analytic</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Maximizing</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Minimum standard</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Risk</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Up to parent(s)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Ranking easy</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Primary decision-maker</strong></td>
<td><strong>Intuitive/ Emotional</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Primary decision-maker</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Child involved</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Ranking easy</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Primary decision-maker</strong></td>
<td><strong>Minimum standard</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Up to parent(s)</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Shared decision-making</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Primary decision-maker</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Ranking easy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FEELINGS ABOUT OE</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Would move or go private</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Choice proponent</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dislikes but participating</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Overwhelming</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Neg: Marketing/ Sales pitch</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Neg: Flight harms NH schools</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Neg: Loss of cont. friendships</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Neg: Loss of NH/ Divisive</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Neg: Typecast schools</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Would move or go private</strong></td>
<td><strong>&quot;Good Mother&quot;</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Community member</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Advocate</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Support</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Mother: Same as &quot;parent&quot;</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Anxious</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Responsibility/ burden</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Confused</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Responsibility/ burden</strong></td>
<td><strong>Responsibility/ burden</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Aware</strong>&lt;br&gt;&quot;Exposure&quot; to differences</td>
<td><strong>Aware</strong>&lt;br&gt;Understand diverse perspectives&lt;br&gt;Unsure&lt;br&gt;&quot;Exposure&quot; to differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td><strong>Don't support SES preferences</strong></td>
<td><strong>Support NH schools</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Vertical Analysis: Summarized

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Joanna (1)</th>
<th>Diane (2)</th>
<th>Crystal (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aspirations</strong></td>
<td>Academic excellence</td>
<td>Social-emotional well-being</td>
<td>Diverse experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prefs</strong></td>
<td>Academics/ Test scores</td>
<td>Social-emotional</td>
<td>Diverse student body Location Know friends/ community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Info</strong></td>
<td>Published data</td>
<td>Insider info/ specialists Social network Open houses - influential Recalled information</td>
<td>Social networks (move from CA) One open houses - gut check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Foster growth</strong></td>
<td>Monitor academics</td>
<td>Support self-esteem</td>
<td>Protect from danger/ behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutions</strong></td>
<td>Aware of options/ system Intervene</td>
<td>Learning style Social-emotional sensitivities Meet w/ teachers/ admin</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental role</strong></td>
<td>Consumer Mother = parent</td>
<td>Partner Mother = nurture</td>
<td>Community member Mother = parent Natural growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decision-Making</strong></td>
<td>Maximizing Minimum standard Ranking easy</td>
<td>Ranking - would group Child involved</td>
<td>Pragmatic Minimum standard Shared dec-making Up to parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opinion of OE</strong></td>
<td>Choice proponent Dislikes but participating Overwhelming Neg: Marketing</td>
<td>NH schools proponent Neg: Flight harms schools Neg: Loss of NH/ divisive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotions</strong></td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>Confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy</strong></td>
<td>Support only with resources</td>
<td>Support increased access</td>
<td>Support NH schools/ SES prefs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX F: Decision-Making Steps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANT</th>
<th>Dec-Making Style / Aim</th>
<th>Residential Choice?</th>
<th>Transition?</th>
<th>What was the Impetus?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joanna (1)</td>
<td>Analytic / MAX</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>Time to look for schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane (2)</td>
<td>Intuitive / SAT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>Time to look for schools; Specialist advice &amp; negative SN hearsay about NH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal (3)</td>
<td>Analytic / SAT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>Time to look for schools; (1) Elem: Move from CA; (2) MS: Transition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANT</th>
<th>STEP 1 - Choice Set</th>
<th>STEP 2</th>
<th>STEP 3</th>
<th>DECISION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joanna (1)</td>
<td>Scores + Location + SN</td>
<td>Compare data w/ in choice set</td>
<td>Open houses (reinforce)</td>
<td>Scores + continuity + curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane (2)</td>
<td>SN/ specialists</td>
<td>Open houses (feeling + child)</td>
<td>Insider info (reinforce)</td>
<td>Meet Social- Emotional needs + Academic support + Likelihood of getting in + Specialists + Location + Feeling at OH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal (3)</td>
<td>(1) SN; (2) Open house (gut check)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1) Know friends/ community + Advice; (2) Keep decision not to participate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Abbreviations:
- Elem: elementary school
- MS: middle school
- NH: neighborhood
- OH: open house
- MAX: maximizing
- SAT: satisficing
- SN: social network