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## School Choice: The Personal and the Political

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## **WORKING PAPER SERIES**

### **School Choice: The Personal and the Political**

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**School Choice: The Personal and the Political**

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## Abstract

Enrollment in school choice programs is growing, so is overall support for school choice. Many have analyzed what demographic characteristics impact attitudes towards school choice. This paper adds to the literature by exploring the interaction between personal decisions regarding school choice and broader support for school choice programs. Focus groups were conducted in St. Louis and Kansas City with 35 parents of school age children. Participant responses indicate that school choice programs illicit mixed emotions from parents. Most participants personally support school choice and exercise choice themselves by sending their children to magnet, charter, or private schools. At the same time, they have reservations about broader school choice programs. As Schelling (1978) suggests, these individuals act in their own self-interest despite the impact it might have on the aggregate. More to the point, they are willing to express choice themselves, but deny it to others. This fits within Shuls and Wolf's (2015) model of the "school choice dilemma," which illustrates how individuals may be better off when they choose their child's school.

Keywords: school choice, education policy, charter schools

## School Choice: The Personal and the Political

In many instances, the self-interested decisions of individuals may lead to suboptimal outcomes for the aggregate population. This reality is discussed in depth by Schelling (1978) in “Micromotives and Macrobehavior.” He writes, “And though people may care how it all comes out in the aggregate, their own decisions and their own behavior are typically motivated toward their own interests, and often impinged on by only a fragment of the overall pattern” (p. 24). Once the dust settles, so to speak, individuals become satisfied with their position relative to others; the system is said to reach a state of equilibrium. That is not to say that the system in equilibrium is the optimal system or even the best system for an individual; but given the decisions of others, each individual would not change their current decision. Schelling’s theory applies to many areas of life. In regards to this paper, Schelling’s work is particularly explanatory of an individual’s personal decision on where their child goes to school and their decision to support or oppose private school choice programs.

A prime example of this decision making process comes from urban parents deciding whether their child should attend the local public school. This study explores individual’s personal decisions and political positions on school choice. Personal decisions are those that the individual makes for themselves and their children, such as whether they will attend a local public school. Political positions are the stances individuals take on school choice issues, such as whether they support a private school choice program. The responses in this study were collected from five focus groups with parents in St. Louis and Kansas City, Missouri. Though informative, the responses here are meant to explore rather than explain. The idea is to help establish a hypothesis or theory about individual choices and positions in regards to school choice. This

project could inform future research which explores these relationships in a more systematic and quantitative manner.

Thinking again of Schelling's work, it is easy to see a direct application to schooling decisions. For example, a parent whose child is ready to begin kindergarten takes into account the decisions of her neighbors. If her local public school's test scores are abysmally low and most of the parents on her block have already elected to enroll their children in a charter or private school, the parent's decision will be influenced by these factors. Indeed, many parents in the United States struggle with this very issue, especially parents in struggling urban districts. As Schelling (1978) suggests, parents are making decisions based on their perception of the facts – school quality – and based on the decisions of others – neighbors sending their children to charter and private schools.

One parent in the focus group, Jennifer, a married mother of two, recently faced this school choice dilemma (personal communication, August 7, 2013). She and her husband, both in their early 30s, moved to Kansas City just a few years ago. They considered sending their children to the low-performing local public school and working with other parents in the neighborhood to turn things around. You might call this idea *missionary schooling* — sending your child to a low-performing school in an effort to *save* the school. Stillman (2012) refers to this process as “tipping in” in her study of “Gentry parents” in three gentrified areas of New York City. Back in Kansas City, Jennifer, who might be identified as a “Gentry parent” remarked, “We would love to all band together and invest, but that's way too high of a cost.” She and her husband had already secured a spot in one of Kansas City's highest-performing charter schools for their daughter. Rather than take the chance of sacrificing their child's education for the greater good, they sent her to the higher-performing charter school.

Though sending her child to the charter school might have resulted in a suboptimal outcome in the aggregate, Jennifer and countless parents like her act in their own self-interest. This paper explores the relationship between self-interested behaviors and a broader interest in helping the aggregate through school choice programs. Specifically, what is the relationship between personal beliefs about school choice and political support of school choice programs? This paper addresses this question through information obtained from five focus groups with parents of school age children, in which school choice was the topic of conversation. As Berg and Lune (2012) note, “focus group interviews are guided or unguided group discussions addressing a particular topic of interest or relevance to the group and the researcher” (p. 164). This methodology is useful in exploring the relationship between individual preferences for choosing a school and support for broader school choice policies.

### **Related Literature**

School choice is a growing part of the educational landscape in the United States. The first modern school choice programs were established in the early 1990s. Milwaukee established the first voucher program in 1990 and in 1991. Minnesota passed the nation’s first charter school law. Due to the developing and expanding nature of school choice programs, exact numbers of programs and participants regularly vary. As of the 2013-2014 school year, 43 states now have charter school laws (Ziebarth, 2014) and there are 39 private school choice programs in 18 states and the District of Columbia (Alliance for School Choice, 2014). From 2001 to 2014, the number of students utilizing a private school choice program has grown roughly tenfold, from 29,003 to 308,560. Additionally, there are now more than 2.5 million students attending charter schools (Ziebarth & Bierlein Palmer, 2014).

Just as enrollment in charter schools has climbed, public support of school choice programs has also risen in recent years. According to the 2014 poll conducted by *Education Next* and the *Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard*, charter schools receive almost twice as much support as they do opposition, 54 percent to 28 percent (Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2014). Private school choice programs also received strong support. The strongest was for tax credit scholarships, 60 percent support compared to 26 percent opposed.

Poll data for Missouri show similar levels of support for school choice programs (DiPerna, 2014). Sixty-four percent of respondents said they supported charter schools, while only 24 percent indicated they oppose charter schools. The margins for support of charter schools among participants from St. Louis and Kansas City were +42 and +27, respectively. Vouchers, tax credit scholarships, and education savings accounts also received favorable support.

Many researchers have attempted to identify what types of individuals are most likely to support or oppose school choice programs. In general, older individuals tend to oppose school choice programs (Brasington & Hite, 2013; Brunner & Sonstelie, 2003; Brunner, Sonstelie, & Thayer, 2001; Brunner, Imazeki, & Ross, 2010; DiPerna, 2014), while racial minorities tend to be more favorable to school choice programs (Brasington & Hite, 2013; Corcoran & Stoddard, 2011; DiPerna, 2014; Howell et al., 2002). Several studies have examined why parents participate in school choice programs. For example, Stewart and Wolf (2014) explore why parents chose to participate in the Washington D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. Parents suggested they were “traveling to a destination more than escaping from a less-desired situation” (p. 44). Few, however, have explored why parents of school age children might support or oppose school choice programs. Personally expressing choice and politically supporting private

school choice programs can be very different things. That is where this research makes a significant contribution to the literature and attempts to develop some grounded theories.

### **Methodology**

A total of five focus groups were held with parents of school age children, two in St. Louis, Missouri and three in Kansas City, Missouri. These cities were chosen primarily out of convenience, as the author resides in Missouri. Yet, St. Louis and Kansas City happen to have features similar to many urban centers. In Missouri, St. Louis and Kansas City are the only two areas where charter schools are currently in operation. They also boast strong private school markets. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics Private School Universe Survey, more than 10,400 students attended a private school in Kansas City in 2014; more than 24,300 in St. Louis. However, the state does not have a private school scholarship program. This makes Missouri's urban centers much like cities in other states.

Three focus groups were held in Kansas City and two were held in St. Louis. Two of the Kansas City focus groups were held at the main branch of the Kansas City Public Library. The third was conducted at an early childhood center in a disadvantaged Kansas City community. One focus group in St. Louis was held at a tony private elementary school. While the school is popular among urban elites, the school also offers numerous scholarships to low-income families. Part of the school's mission is diversity. The other St. Louis focus group was held at the offices of an educational advocacy organization which serves low-income families. These sites were chosen for a variety of reasons. First, numerous attempts were made to recruit a diverse sample of participants. There was, however, also an element of convenience. These organizations saw the requests and offered to help recruit participants. In all, 35 parents participated.

Parents were recruited to participate in the focus groups in a variety of ways. Flyers about a “discussion on education” were sent to every private, traditional public, and charter school leader in St. Louis and Kansas City. This resulted in very few responses. Therefore, flyers were sent to individuals and organizations that are active in education issues. A total of 13 people were recruited in this manner. Other parents were recruited through partnerships with an early childhood center, a private school, and an organization that works with parents. Parents were offered a \$20 gift card for their participation.

Standard focus group procedures, as described by Berg and Lune (2012), were followed. Berg and Lune note that focus groups are frequently used to test the validity of research findings, but they can also be used as a “stand-alone data-gathering strategy” (p. 164). In this study, the focus groups were used for the later purpose.

The focus groups were relatively small, with an average of seven participants per group. The author, a Caucasian male, served as the moderator of the focus groups. Per Berg and Lune’s (2012) guide, the groups began with an introduction to the focus group and an introductory activity. The moderator then discussed the basic rules of the focus group. This was followed by short question and answer discussions. At four points during each focus group, participants partook in a special exercise intended to illicit more empirical data via questionnaires. These questionnaires asked respondents to disclose demographic information and attitudes about educational issues (See Appendix A). The questionnaires gathered information about the next topics that would be discussed. This allowed for the collection of data that had not been shaped by the focus group discussion.

In the first segment, participants were asked to rate their satisfaction of their child’s school. This was followed by a discussion about the quality of educational options in their city

(See Appendix B). Next, parents were asked to provide their overall impression of the local public school district, the city's charter schools, and the local private/parochial schools. A discussion followed about the overall strengths of each school sector and about school choice programs. In the third segment, participants were asked to list the top three factors they consider when choosing a school from a list of possible school qualities. The fourth questionnaire asked participants to indicate where they typically get information about a school's quality. This paper focuses on the information obtained from and the conversations surrounding the first two questionnaires since these were most applicable to the topic of support of school choice programs.

Because the study is limited in its scope, with just 35 participants in five focus groups from two Missouri cities, the findings are at best suggestive. However, they can begin to inform more research along similar lines.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Due to the nature of self-selection into the focus groups, there is a potential for self-selection bias and for non-response bias. In other words, participants may differ from the general population. It is not clear if they are more or less interested in school choice. Since they are willing to participate in a discussion about education, however, it may be assumed that they are more engaged in education issues than the average parent. In terms of observable characteristics, parents in the focus groups differed from the average St. Louis and Kansas City parents on a few dimensions.

Descriptive statistics for each focus group (Table 1) and the comparison populations (Table 2) are presented below. Population statistics were computed using data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and Proximity One (2014). These statistics

indicate that the sample was relatively similar to the population of the cities in terms of income, but differed on other characteristics. The sample included a higher percentage of black parents and a lower percentage of other minorities. The sample and the population also varied on the types of schools that students attend. Population estimates for the percent of students in charter and district public schools were produced by dividing the number of students enrolled in charter and district public schools by the total number of students enrolled in K-12 education. These data indicate that the focus group sample includes relatively few parents of students who attend district public schools and oversamples parents of homeschool and private school students. This again reflects that parents who chose to participate in the discussion may be more engaged in education issues than the average parent.

[Table 1 About Here]

Unfortunately, the data do not provide accurate estimates of students enrolled in non-public educational settings. This is difficult for a number of reasons. First, students may enroll in St. Louis and Kansas City private schools without living within the boundaries of the city school districts. Additionally, there is no data tracking homeschool enrollment. This makes it difficult to compare St. Louis and Kansas City non-public sectors with other cities. We can, however, compare public school enrollment. Indeed, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools does this annually (2014). Kansas City ranks in the top five cities in terms of charter school enrollment by market share; St. Louis ranks in the top twenty.

[Table 2 About Here]

## **Results**

When asked to rate the quality of the school systems in their city, participants overwhelmingly gave higher marks to private schools, with 90 percent rating the schools either

“good” or “excellent.” In comparison, only 8.8 percent rated the district public schools “good” and none rated them “excellent” (See Table 3). One parent said she would give the public school district in her city a “triple F minus.” Charter public schools fared better than the district schools, especially among parents with students in the charter schools. However, not all parents were impressed by the quality of charter schools. One noted that charter schools varied widely in terms of achievement: “There are some that are worse than the Kansas City Public Schools and I would never consider sending my child there.”

[Table 3 About Here]

While nearly every parent agreed that the public education system in the two cities is very poor, many were satisfied with their own schools. In fact, the majority of parents (52.9 percent) indicated they are “very satisfied” with the quality of their child’s school (Table 3). This fits other public opinion polls, which tend to show that parents rate their child’s school higher than they rate “public schools” as a whole (Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2014).

The responses also reflect the fact that many of the parents had chosen their child’s school because they had placed them in a charter or private school. Parents with children in private schools and charter-public schools tended to be more satisfied, with 81.8 percent (private) and 62.5 percent (charter-public) indicating they were “very satisfied.” Only 12.5 percent of the parents with students in district-public schools indicated they were “very satisfied.” None of the parents with a child in a private school indicated they were “unsatisfied” and just 12.5 percent of charter parents indicated they were “somewhat unsatisfied.” Meanwhile, more than a third of district-public school parents indicated they were “somewhat” or “very unsatisfied” (37.5 percent). This also fits within the broader literature, which suggests that

parents are more satisfied when they choose their child's school (Howell & Peterson, 2006; Wolf et al., 2005).

[Table 4 About Here]

### **Personally, Parents Like School Choice**

Given the low regard for the city public school systems, as indicated from focus group participants, it is not surprising that many parents face a school choice dilemma. They want to help the local public schools but they are not sure if they should send their children to the struggling district schools. In other words, they care about the aggregate, but are also self-interested (Schelling 1978). For example, Susan and her husband bought their house in the city before having children. It was not until their kids were 3 or 4 years old that they started giving schools any thought. Susan knew the Kansas City Public Schools were unaccredited so she enrolled her children in a private school. Beth and Mike made the same choice. They would not even consider sending their children to the Kansas City Public School District. "It's not even part of the discussion," they said.

Cheryl, a 25-year-old single mother of four, shared the same sentiment. "The district sucks... I would never have my kids in the district," she said. Cheryl speaks from experience; she graduated from the district just a few years ago. "We probably did more in the halls than we actually did in class," Cheryl said. She did some research and was able to get her oldest into a top charter school, a decision with which she is completely satisfied. Elizabeth reached her decision to abandon the local public schools with much more trepidation. When she moved to St. Louis from Tennessee, she just assumed her kids would go to public schools. She was "floored" when everyone she knew insisted that her kids should not go to the public schools. "I couldn't believe when we were told over and over 'you cannot send your kids to public school in [this

city],” Elizabeth said. After much resistance to the idea, she enrolled her kids in an independent private school.

Each of the parents in the focus groups faced their own school choice dilemma. For some, the dilemma was an obvious struggle; they believed in “public education” or they wanted to improve their neighborhood schools, but they also wanted what was best for their children. Others had not given much thought to improving the district schools. They simply wanted to find the best option for their children.

It is clear from each of these stories, and the stories of other families in the focus groups, that parents personally support school choice. That is, the overwhelming majority of parents in the focus groups expressed choice themselves. More than 76 percent placed their child in a charter school, a private school, or they homeschool. Among those in the district public schools, several of them had children attending magnet schools. Thus, when confronted with the dilemma, parents chose to act in their own self-interest. Given Schelling’s (1978) work, it should be expected that parents would choose to do what they thought was best for their own children.

### **Politically, Parents Have Reservations About School Choice**

Politically, however, many parents have reservations about expanding school choice, especially programs that enable students to attend private schools. During the discussion, parents were asked if they would support a state supported program which allowed students to attend private schools a public expense. The terms “voucher,” “education savings accounts,” and “tax credit scholarships” were mentioned as examples, but it was not necessary for the participants to be familiar with these programs. They only needed to get the basic concept; the state government would pay for students to attend the private school of their choice. When parents were asked if a state supported private school choice program would be a good idea, the

responses were decidedly mixed. The reservations about school choice that parents in the focus groups expressed were varied, but could be categorized into four broad groups. The groups are listed here in no particular order, other than the fact that the second two received broader support or were repeated more often than the first two reservations.

**Reservation No. 1 – School choice may hurt traditional public schools.** Some worried that school choice programs may drain intellectual and financial resources from the low-performing schools. It is possible, they argued, that only families with the wherewithal to take advantage of the program would be able to access the choice schools. This would leave traditional district schools with the most difficult students to educate.

Similarly, some worried that school choice may take funds out of the local school district. Andre thought a private school choice program would divert dollars from where they need to be spent. “Instead of fixing the schools, it sends tax dollars to another school. ... School choice is like putting a patch on the problem. Fix the school and district. Don’t just send the tax dollars somewhere else,” Andre said.

Ayana, who said the only reason her children are not in private schools is because she cannot afford tuition, shared these concerns. “We want better education, but how about in our community?” Ayana said. When students leave the community to go to a private, charter, or other district school, she said it “means a lack of funds to our neighborhoods.” She worries that choice could lead to recreation centers and after-school programs closing because of a lack of students. Part of her concern may stem from frustrations about a controversial inter-district school choice program that roiled emotions in the St. Louis area. Her concern may also be rooted in the historical patronage system in many urban communities (Rich 1996). As Rich (1996) noted, schools in many predominantly black communities were often centers for employment of

local black citizens. Indeed, one Detroit school board member told Rich part of the school board's job was to "give blacks positions and jobs, so that they can hire other blacks in the future" (p. 145). Thus, removing a school from the control of a community might also mean removing jobs.

**Reservation No. 2 – School choice gives the public less control of the school system.**

Others worried that creating private school choice programs would undermine the idea of democratically controlled public schools. The people govern traditional public schools through local school board elections. School choice programs that allow students to attend charter or private schools remove control away from the public. "The money I spend on taxes should stay in the public schools...because I can still have a voice in the management of where the money is going," said a parent, Mike. If we expand school choice outside of traditional public schools, "we sell short our participation in how the education is determined. ...We have less control." It should be noted that at the time of the focus group, the St. Louis school district was governed by an appointed, not an elected school board.

**Reservation No. 3 – School choice may lower the quality of private schools. In**

addition to the concerns about how a private school choice program would impact public schools, there were even more worries about how a private school choice program would impact the private schools. Parents in every group, whether white or black, rich or poor, were concerned that vouchers and other school choice programs would lead to the degradation of private schools. All five focus groups reached a consensus that private schools should be allowed to have a "gate," meaning they need to be able to keep out the disruptive kids.

When the school choice question was posed, Clark, whose children attend private schools, chimed in, "Can we select?" If private schools were not allowed to select their students,

some could foresee “private schools lowering their standards.” This concern was even shared by those in the focus groups with a majority of black parents. Indeed, to safeguard against this possibility, Lamonte and Turner, both black men, suggested that parents and students who receive a private school scholarship have to be held accountable. They believe it is reasonable to place some conditions on parents and students who receive private school scholarships. Billy, whose child attends a charter school, shared their concern. He worried that a voucher could be a “free ticket” that would not be valued because the recipient’s family does not have any skin in the game.

There were also concerns that a private school choice program would detract from the mission of private schools, especially religious schools. Would Catholic schools still be able to recite the Lord’s Prayer and teach the Catechism? Essentially, participants in the focus groups were worried that government involvement in private schools could lead to a watering down of religious doctrine and diminished academic expectations.

**Reservation No. 4 – School choice does not solve the larger problem of concentrated poverty.** The overwhelming concern among focus group participants was that school choice does not solve the larger problem, which they believed was concentrated poverty. Parents in the focus groups recognized that the plight of Missouri’s urban school districts has developed over decades. One parent stated their city has “some really gross racial history.” Another parent noted that the “urban core was basically abandoned.” James, an immigrant to the United States from southeast Asia, recognized that urban public schools have been failing for a long time. “That’s not a secret,” James said. He argued that this failure stems from the fact that the vast majority of students come from impoverished homes.

James, and others, contended that there has been a cycle of poverty in our cities. Students from poor families received little education, grew up, had kids, and have placed little value on the education of their children. Even when parents do value education, they often lack the means to advocate for their children or to help their children. “In order to fix the schools, you have to fix the parents,” Jalissa said. Choice, some argued, would not address this problem. Rather, we need a “holistic solution” that will help address the root causes of poverty.

Bill argued that this battle “has to be fought on all fronts and we have to be in for the long haul.” It cannot happen unless “all of us [are] pulling together for a single positive end.” Bill suggested that schools themselves cannot overcome the problems of poverty and offered an analogy; he said that expecting schools to solve this complex problem is like expecting your heart to heal your body. The heart cannot do it alone, but “you have to have a heart,” just as you “have to have a school system.” Without a quality education system, fixing problems of poverty is impossible. Shontell agreed with that sentiment, stating that “schools alone cannot break the cycle of poverty.” Bill and Shontell both send their children to private schools.

### **I Might Be a Hypocrite, But...**

Like Bill and Shontell, many of the parents in the focus groups personally expressed choice, but had reservations about expanding or creating broader school choice programs. Understanding Schelling’s work, this might be expected. Parents who have already expressed choice, whether via charter schools or by paying private school tuition, may be less inclined to support programs that upset the apple cart. If they are satisfied, as many indicated they were, there is little they can gain from a school choice program.

When discussing why they would not support a private school choice program, some parents called themselves a hypocrite. Clark did not know if he could support a private school

choice program such as vouchers. “I don’t know. This is going to sound hypocritical to some degree, because my kids go to [a private school]...but it seems like you’re pulling even more support away from the public schools,” Clark said.

In a very telling exchange, Elizabeth realized her hypocrisy. She listened as Molly described her “selfish reasons” for supporting a private school choice program. Molly said:

I feel, if the house is burning down, as it is right now, preserve who you can preserve. If I was a parent in the [city] school district and my only option was a failing school for my child, I would choose to fight for my kids – to put my kid in a better school. For very selfish reasons – my own child – I would want that [private school choice program]. If I were poor, I would want that option. I wouldn’t feel it was just that poverty precluded that option for me.

Elizabeth, whose kids attend private school with Molly’s kids, responded:

I mean, I’m a hypocrite. I said “no,” but I totally agree with Molly. If I have no resources and I live in [the] city. How unfair is it of the state to deny me the right to give my kid a better education by getting them out? But my answer was “no,” because it doesn’t address the systemic problem that we’re talking about. It’s saving some kids, but it’s still leaving behind everyone else. So that’s why my answer was “no”...From a policy standpoint, it’s a “no,” but from a personal standpoint, it’s probably a “yes.”

Parents in three of the five focus groups, the predominantly white focus groups, wrestled with this issue. Parents in these focus groups are certainly not the first to attempt to reconcile their personal decision to send their child to a private school and their support for the public education system. Indeed, Swift (2012) wrote an entire book on the matter.

The other two focus groups were comprised predominantly of black parents with students in charter or district public schools. These groups tended to support the notion of private school choice, with some reservations. This too fits with Schelling's theory. Many disadvantaged parents are not happy with the current equilibrium. They see school choice as a means of offering greater educational opportunities.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Many parents in the focus groups grappled with competing ideas. They want to do what is best for their children, but also want a system that helps all kids. This led many of them to personally choosing to pull their child from the district public schools, but opposing the idea of broader school choice for others. They reasoned that school choice would leave some students behind and remove resources from the district public schools. Were these parents making a fair assessment?

In many cases, parents seemed to have overstated the comparison. They did not compare school choice to reality; they compared school choice to a preconceived idea of a perfect education system – a high-quality school in every neighborhood. With this comparison, it is easy to see why they politically oppose school choice – it does not lead to their preconceived ideal. Poverty is the problem, not the schools. If we fix poverty, we will fix the schools. That comparison, however, does not describe the current reality in St. Louis or Kansas City. In both cities, the public school district model has failed to create a high-quality school in every neighborhood. It has led to a disparate education system. It could be reasoned, as Wolf (2010) suggests, that school choice would actually advance the cause of social justice for these disadvantaged students.

Parents in the focus group also compare governance in a school choice system to a preconceived idea of a democratically controlled school that is accountable to taxpayers. In that comparison, it is easy to see how parents would lose control if they moved to a choice-based system. However, in most instances the average parent in an urban public school has little to no power to shape his or her child's school district. Indeed, voter participation in school board elections is notoriously low. Moreover, the St. Louis Public School District does not currently have an elected school board. The board has been replaced by an appointed board of three individuals. A similar situation has occurred in other struggling Missouri public school districts. Nevertheless, by moving to a choice system, parents may lose some in terms of power over governance, but they gain the ability to choose the school that will meet their child's needs. To many, that is an excellent trade.

Comments in each of the focus groups made it clear that parents personally support choice, but they have political reservations. Some of the stated concerns may be assuaged with more information about choice programs. For instance, there is mounting evidence that private school choice programs improve student achievement and academic outcomes of participants, save taxpayers money, and lead to improvements in local public schools (Forster, 2013). Parents knew little, if any, about the existing research about private school choice programs. Of course, there may be some unspoken reasons for not supporting school choice. For instance, many parents may have found themselves in what Schelling (1978) describes as a state of equilibrium where they are satisfied with their child's school. School choice may disturb their equilibrium. For these unspoken reservations, it may not be possible to alleviate parents' concerns.

In this matter, Shuls and Wolf's (2015) theoretical model – the school choice dilemma – is quite fitting. Shuls and Wolf use the game theory prisoners' dilemma to develop a model for

understanding individual and group decision-making about school choice. They argue that it is always beneficial for an individual to choose their child's school. They suggest this is a Nash equilibrium, where your outcomes could not be improved unilaterally. This explains why parents would individually support school choice. Of course, an individual's outcomes can still be affected by the choice of others. A private school choice program could upset the equilibrium by allowing other, disadvantaged individuals to "defect" or choose to send their child to my school. Therefore, it makes logical sense for an individual to support their own choice while politically opposing choice programs for others.

Of course, the findings presented here should be interpreted with some caution. The sample size is small, 35 participants, and there was likely sample selection bias. Still, the comments were informative and could serve as a foundation for future research on why parents support or oppose school choice programs. Future research should explore the tensions between personal decision making regarding school choice and political support. Some research has come close to this by obtaining demographic information about respondents and their attitudes towards school choice, however, more pointed questions could be asked in this regards.

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**Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics by Focus Group**

Characteristic	Focus Groups				
	1	2*	3	4	5
Number of Participants	4	9	6	9	7
Number of Children Per Family	2	3.5	3	1.9	2.9
School Type					
Charter – Public	0	3	5	0	0
Homeschool	1	3	0	0	0
Private	2	1	0	1	7
District – Public	1		1	6	0
Mix	0	1	0	2	0
Race					
White	2	9	1	0	4
Black	1	0	5	9	2
Other race	1	0	0	0	1
Average Age of Parent	41.3	36.3	34.3	33.6	43.6
Annual Household Income					
Less than \$25,000	0	0	5	6	0
\$25,001 to \$50,000	1	3	1	3	1
\$50,001 to \$75,000	2	3	0	0	0
Above \$75,000	1	2	0	0	6

\* Incomplete information was gathered from one participant

**Table 2: Descriptive Information about Focus Group Participants**

Focus Group			Comparison		
	Characteristic	Statistic	Characteristic	Kansas City School District Population	St. Louis School District Population
Avg. Number of Children		2.8	Average Family Size	3.3	3.5
Average Age		37.2	Median Age	34.9	34.5
Type of School	Charter - Public	23.5%	Charter - Public	27.4%	20.3%
	Homeschool	11.8%	Homeschool		
	Private	32.4%	Private		
	District - Public	23.5%	District - Public	42.1%	39.8%
	Mix	8.6%	Mix		
Race/Ethnicity	Black	50.0%	Black	36.3%	48.2%
	White	44.1%	White	52.3%	46.6%
	Other race	5.9%	Other race	11.4%	5.2%
Household Income	Less than \$25,000	32.4%	Less than \$25,000	29.6%	38.1%
	\$25,001 to \$50,000	26.5%	\$25,001 to \$50,000	29.2%	28.1%
	\$50,001 to \$75,000	14.7%	\$50,001 to \$75,000	16.0%	15.4%
	More than \$75,000	26.5%	More than \$75,000	25.2%	18.4%
Number of Participants		35		238,276	355,078

**Table 4: Focus Group Participant Ratings of School Systems in Kansas City and St. Louis**

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
District- Public	70.6%	20.6%	8.8%	0%
Charter- Public	25.9%	37.0%	37.0%	0%
Private	3.3%	6.7%	50%	40%

**Table 5: Focus Group Participants' Satisfaction with Their Child's School**

Category	Very Unsatisfied	Somewhat Unsatisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied
<b>By School Type</b>				
Homeschool	0.0%	25.0%	25%	50.0%
Private	0.0%	0.0%	18.2%	81.8%
Charter	0.0%	12.5%	25.0%	62.5%
Public	12.5%	25.0%	50.0%	12.5%
<b>By Race/Ethnicity</b>				
Black	5.9%	17.7%	47.1%	29.4%
White	0.0%	6.7%	20.0%	73.3%
<b>By Income Level</b>				
Less than \$50,000	5%	10%	35.0%	50.0%
More than \$50,000	0.0%	14.3%	28.6%	57.1%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>2.9%</b>	<b>11.8%</b>	<b>32.4%</b>	<b>52.9%</b>

## Appendix A: Questionnaire

How many children do you have?

\_\_\_\_\_

What type of school does your youngest school age child attend? (circle one)

District/Public	Charter	Private	Other
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How satisfied are you with your child's school? (circle one)

Very Unsatisfied	Somewhat Unsatisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied
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What is your race/ethnicity? (circle one)

Caucasian	Black	Hispanic	Other
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What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your annual household income? (circle one)

Less than \$25,000	\$25,001 to \$50,000	\$50,001 to \$75,000	Above \$75,000
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What is your overall impression of the St. Louis Public School District? (circle one)

Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
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What is your overall impression of charter schools in St. Louis? (circle one)

Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
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What is your overall impression of private/parochial schools in St. Louis? (circle one)

Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
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## **Appendix B: Discussion Questions**

The following questions were used to guide the conversation during the focus groups. However, since these were open discussions, other questions were asked in response to specific issues raised by the group.

1. What is the state of education in your city?
2. What led to where we are now?
3. What are the solutions?
4. What do you think about the school options?
5. What do you think about a program that would allow students to attend private schools at public expense, programs like these are sometimes called “vouchers,” “education savings accounts,” or “tax credit scholarships”?
6. Why or why not?