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Family Voices on Parental School Choice in Milwaukee: What can we learn from low-income families?

Thomas Stewart
Qwaku & Associates

Juanita Lucas-McLean
Wesat

Laura I. Jensen
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Christina Fetzko
Westat

Bonnie Ho
Westat

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Thomas Stewart, Juanita Lucas-McLean, Laura I. Jensen, Christina Fetzko, Bonnie Ho, and Sylvia Segovia

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The University of Arkansas was founded in 1871 as the flagship institution of higher education for the state of Arkansas. Established as a

land grant university, its mandate was threefold: to teach students, conduct research, and perform service and outreach.

The College of Education and Health Professions established the Department of Education Reform in 2005. The department's mission is to advance education and economic development by focusing on the improvement of academic achievement in elementary and secondary schools. It conducts research and demonstration projects in five primary areas of reform: teacher quality, leadership, policy, accountability, and school choice.

The School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), based within the Department of Education Reform, is an education research center devoted to the non-partisan study of the effects of school choice policy and is staffed by leading school choice researchers and scholars. Led by Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, Professor of Education Reform and Endowed 21st Century Chair in School Choice, SCDP's national team of researchers, institutional research partners and staff are devoted to the rigorous evaluation of school choice programs and other school improvement efforts across the country. The SCDP is committed to raising and advancing the public's understanding of the strengths and limitations of school choice policies and programs by conducting comprehensive research on what happens to students, families, schools, and communities when more parents are allowed to choose their child's school.

Family Voices

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**SCHOOL CHOICE
DEMONSTRATION PROJECT**

School Choice Demonstration Project
Department of Education Reform
University of Arkansas
201 Graduate Education Building
Fayetteville, AR 72701
479-575-6345

http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html

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"I'm saying, being a parent, education is supposed to be equal. It cannot be a privilege; it shouldn't even be so much of a fight that I find with private, charter and public. Our children should receive a good education no matter where they go."

– MPS Parent

"You never really know about a school until you attend it, so stuff comes out."

– MPS Student

"So, it's going from there and if I have any more problems, I'm going to the principal, and then I'm going for the full ride. I'm going all the way until I get some progress."

– MPCP Parent

"How are you going to know if you got the next Mozart and how are you going to know if you got the next whoever if you don't have the resources to utilize their natural skill in childhood?"

– MPCP Parent

We would like to express our deepest appreciation to the families for participating in this study, particularly their willingness to transcend any existing fears or concerns they might have about research and loss of anonymity so that others might benefit from their insights about school choice.

We also would like to thank Marlo Crandall and Lori Foster for their support with producing this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY¹

This report, designed as one component of the comprehensive evaluation of the Milwaukee school system being conducted by the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), is based on focus group conversations with low-income families whose children attend Milwaukee public and private schools. The report seeks to elucidate the demand side of school choice from the perspective of the end users. More specifically, it describes the experiences of low-income families and uses their insights to better understand the strengths and limitations of their attempts to exercise parental school choice. Among its distinguishing characteristics, Milwaukee has the first publicly funded means-tested voucher program in the United States. Coupled with traditional public schools and a robust charter school community, Milwaukee provides an unprecedented set of school options to its residents. Equally as important, Milwaukee provides those interested in urban education reform with a unique opportunity to learn from a city at a relatively advanced phase of school reform.

The findings presented here are based on discussions with an equal number of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) families. Fifty-seven participants—41 parents and 16 high school students—were selected from households that were members of the longitudinal panels that participated in the 2007-08 MPCP Parent Survey and the MPS Matched Sample Parent Survey. The project team used focus group discussions and electronic polling devices to capture parent and student responses to a variety of questions about their experiences. Parents were grouped based on whether their children were currently attending elementary/middle or high schools. Parents representing high school students were encouraged to bring those children to the event, and the high school students were grouped with their peers from MPS or MPCP. Participants were presented a variety of focus group and closed-ended polling questions that covered two general topics: (1) How do families choose, and (2) What are the families' most significant experiences with schools? More specifically, the discussions centered on: (1) the role of gender, (2) school governance and management, (3) measuring student progress and success, and (4) their greatest non-educational challenges. In addition, we allotted a few minutes for participants to share their opinions about matters that were not captured under these four topic areas.

¹ This is the second report in a three-part series using qualitative research methods. This project is being funded by a diverse set of philanthropic organizations, including the Annie E. Casey, Joyce, Kern Family, Lynde and Harry Bradley, Robertson, and Walton Family Foundations. We thank them for their generous support and acknowledge that the content of these reports are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect any official positions of the various funding organizations or research institutions involved.

Following is a summary of the key findings:

- *Lesson Learned 1* — MPS and MPCP families apparently do not factor gender into their school selection decision-making. However, high school parents and students were more likely to report school-based experiences that suggest that boys and girls have quite different experiences. Also, half the MPS high school students reported that they made the school selection, compared to MPCP families who are more likely to make the decision as a family unit.
- *Lesson Learned 2* — Parents and students highly valued strong relationships with school faculty and the administration. Parents appreciated an open door policy and effective communication with teachers. Student treatment in school discipline was criticized by parents for being ineffective solutions to problems. Students also expressed frustration with the faculty's lack of support and inadequate response to their concerns.
- *Lesson Learned 3* — Both MPS and MPCP families seem to use similar methods to measure student progress. Parents strongly recommended online tools to keep track of their children's progress, illustrating for the second time in focus groups the increasingly important role of technology in education. Families often determine academic progress using student school attendance, homework workload and completing assignments as the most reliable measures. Neither group of parents referenced standardized tests as a source of information or feedback about their child's progress.
- *Lesson Learned 4* — Both groups of families identified the lack of financial resources as their greatest non-educational challenge. MPS parents were more likely to describe the bind they faced with limited financial resources and how it affected their children's extracurricular and educational opportunities. MPS high school students were more likely to express concern about their future, specifically higher education, because of their families' present financial circumstances.



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Introduction

In his book *The Paradox of Choice*, author Barry Schwartz tells us that, “choice is what enables us to tell the world who we are and what we care about.”² For parents, the opportunity to choose the school their children attend is arguably the most important choice or decision they will make in a lifetime. However, school choice traditionally has been correlated with household income. The city of Milwaukee offers a unique glimpse into a mature system of school choice for anyone concerned about the benefits and limitations associated with expanding the educational options that are available to families, specifically to families that have had traditional public schools as their only viable options in the past.

Expanded school options have paved the way for “parental school choice” for low-income families. Parental choice is a term commonly used to describe the opportunity all families should have to pursue educational options that are in the best interests of their children. Parental school choice, specifically, begins when families have access to multiple school options. Parental school choice or the role that families play in selecting between multiple school options has always existed for parents with the financial wherewithal. Yet, it is a fairly new and relatively under-researched aspect of education reform in America as it pertains to low-income families. In fact, of all the school reforms that have emerged over the past 20 years, parental school choice has become one of the most novel aspects of education reform because it is a movement toward ensuring that all families have an opportunity to pursue a broader range of school options within and outside the public school system, regardless of income, neighborhood, and other factors that have traditionally limited the school options for some families.

With few exceptions, most traditional urban schools systems with sizable percentages of low-income families have been unable to provide a disproportionate number of these families with quality school options. Milwaukee’s response to the problem has culminated in the form of multiple school options that include the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), a robust public charter school community, the Chapter 220 Program, MPS Specialty schools, and statewide inter-district open enrollment. Milwaukee arguably provides the best model of widespread and varied “parental school choice” in America.

This report is the second in a series of three reports that use qualitative research methods to take a closer look at low-income parent and student experiences with parental school choice as it is unfolding in Milwaukee. In the first-year report,³ we engaged with families participating in the MPCP or with children enrolled in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) as the first step toward capturing the experiences of low-income families with children attending traditional public schools, public charter schools, and private schools in Milwaukee. Having gained the trust and cooperation of these study participants, in the second year of data collection we asked more probing questions about the educational realities of these families. This second year report again describes and at times compares the responses of families with children attending MPS and MPCP schools.⁴

2 Schwartz, B. (2004). *The paradox of choice: Why more is less* (p. 100). New York: HarperCollins.

3 Stewart, T., & Wolf, P. J. (2009). *Parent and student experiences with choice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin* (Report No. 13, p. 24). School Choice Demonstration Project, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas. Available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_13.pdf

4 Note that we will continue to progressively expand the scope of the study to include families with children attending public charter schools. A third and final round of focus groups is scheduled for the spring of the 2010-2011 school year.

Milwaukee's Unique School Choice Environment

Milwaukee is perhaps one of the few places in America where researchers, policy makers, and others concerned about school reform can formally and rigorously explore the true meaning of parental school choice and assess its influences on the academic outcomes for children from low-income families. Few other places in urban America offer low-income families the wide array of school options that exist in Milwaukee. Access to the combination of traditional public, public charter, and private schools through various school choice programs provide low-income families in Milwaukee unprecedented entry to hundreds of K-12 school options. In essence, all families in Milwaukee, including those who choose to remain in traditional public schools, are demonstrating a form of parental school choice.

In Milwaukee, a common way low-income families exercise choice is through participation in the MPCP, a state funded urban voucher program. Similar to the MPCP, the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) provides low-income families living in the nation's capital with the opportunity to attend a private school using a federally funded voucher. However unlike the experiences of families in Milwaukee, District of Columbia parents that are interested in participating in the OSP work with the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF), the program administrator. The WSF hosts informational meetings about the program, verifies eligibility for individual families, assists families in applying for the Program and, once families are admitted into the Program, supplies them with information about the participating schools. In theory, once a family has been accepted into the Program, the WSF provides them with a license to "shop" from the list of participating private schools.

Milwaukee, on the other hand, has a different model. Instead of applying through a program administrator, interested families engage individual schools that are participating in the MPCP. As is often the case, MPCP schools actually recruit families to their schools, inform them of the MPCP, and assist them with applying to



the Program. After the state verifies a family's eligibility, the family often enrolls in the school that assisted them with the application process or uses their voucher to attend that school.

This process suggests that, unlike the OSP, where low-income families actively shop for schools, in Milwaukee it appears that participating schools more actively recruit eligible families. Given the circumstances of the school choice environment in Milwaukee, the process does not lend itself to exploring multiple school options particularly for MPCP families. As Teske and his team point out, this can be very appealing to and consistent with the preferences of the lowest income parents, who may not have access to well-informed peer networks, engage in less extensive data gathering, and end up basing their choices more on school familiarity and proximity than measures of academic quality.⁵ However, a lack of knowledge about all possible options can lead to poor school choice decisions.⁶

Objectives of the Second Year Report

The wide range of school options that now exist in Milwaukee is exciting for most low-income families and intimidating for some, yet making a choice is now inevitable for all of them. Thus, our primary objective is to document the unique aspects of parental school choice for low-income families with children enrolled in traditional public and private schools. We hope the insights and lessons learned from their experiences can raise awareness about the viability of parental school choice for one segment of students: children from families with limited financial resources.

This study is designed to complement the Longitudinal Education Growth Study (LEGS) portion of the comprehensive SCDP evaluation of school choice in Milwaukee by creating a more open forum for families to discuss their experiences with the schools their children now attend. We used qualitative data collection techniques to explore the participants' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and experiences in a way that cannot be fully captured by quantitative methods.⁷ For example, the LEGS study's second year report discerned possibly greater academic gains for MPCP female students compared to MPCP male students.⁸ Thus, in our focus groups, we questioned the extent to which parents and students take gender into consideration when they think about or select schools.

As a follow-up to the first set of focus group sessions we conducted with MPCP families during the spring of 2008, a second round of focus groups were hosted for families in the spring of 2009 that included both MPCP and MPS families. During those focus groups, four general questions were discussed:

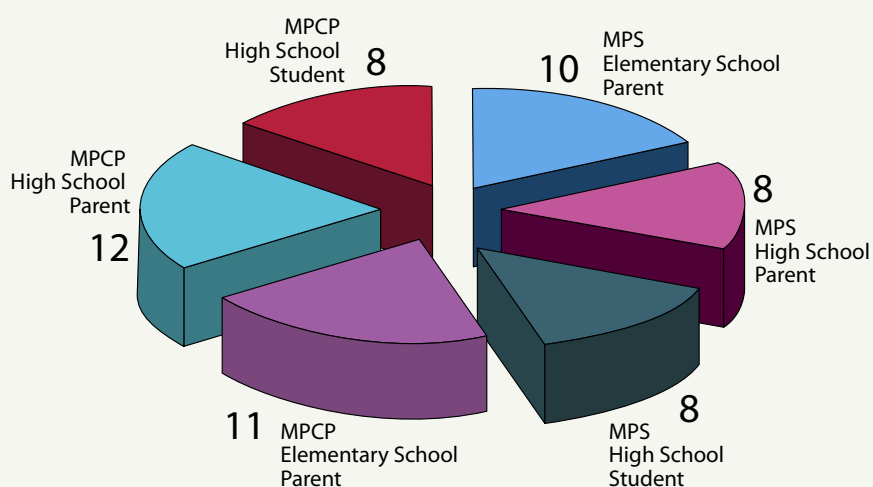
- 5 Teske, P., Fitzpatrick, J., & Kaplan, G. (2007). *Opening doors: How low-income parents search for the right school*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education.
- 6 Dillon, E. (2009). *Food for thought: Building a high-quality school choice market*. Washington, DC: Education Sector.
- 7 Focus groups have been used as an effective tool for measuring the impact of public policy. See for example: Dyer, C. (1999). Researching the implementation of educational policy: A backward mapping approach, *Comparative Education*, 35(1): 45-61; Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus group as qualitative research* (2nd ed.) London: Sage; Shamdasani, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (1992). *Focus groups: Theory and practice*. London: Sage.
- 8 Witte, J. F., Wolf, P. J., Cowen, J. M., Fleming, D. J., & Lucas-McLean, J. (2009). *The MPCP longitudinal educational growth study second year report* (Report No. 10, p. 40). School Choice Demonstration Project, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas. Available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_10.pdf

- (1) How does school governance or management influence parental school choice?
- (2) How do families measure student progress and success?
- (3) How does student gender influence family experiences with schools?
- (4) What are the most challenging aspects of life for families beyond the education of the children?

In addition to the focus group questions, we used electronic polling to solicit the respondents' feedback about other topics related to the focus group questions. For example, the polling included questions that explored the degree to which peer influences, both in school and in the neighborhood, affect students' academic development. These questions corresponded with the focus group discussion about the role of gender.⁹ In short, these data collection methods were customized for the target respondents. The techniques are described in greater detail in the appendices to this report.

The sample of 57 participants—41 parents and 16 high school students— was from a larger group of randomly selected participants. Over 80 percent of the parents who responded to the telephone surveys subsequently agreed to participate in follow-up focus groups if invited to do so. Participants were placed into one of six focus groups, which include four subgroups of parents and two subgroups of students. The focus groups comprised parents of elementary students enrolled in schools participating in MPCP and parents whose students attended MPS, parents of high school students enrolled in MPCP and those with students in MPS, and high school students currently enrolled in MPCP and in MPS. The high school students and their parents were selected as a family unit. The various groups were situated at separate tables inside a single auditorium, far enough from each other so that, for example, the participants in the MPCP high school parents focus group could not hear the discussion among the participants in the MPCP high school student focus group (Exhibit 1). A total of 23 MPCP and 18 MPS families were represented.

EXHIBIT 1: Focus Group Sample Size – Spring 2009 Cohort



⁹ See Appendix C for a complete list of the focus group and polling questions.

The overwhelming majority of focus group parents from both the MPCP and MPS samples were female. In the MPS high school student group, 75 percent of the students were male. In contrast, 63 percent of the MPCP high school students were female. Focus group participants were primarily representative of residents from the city of Milwaukee. The majority of both groups of parents reported that they lived in North Milwaukee, with the exception of MPS elementary parents, who mostly reported that they lived in West and South Milwaukee. The public high school students were equally divided between North, South, and Central Milwaukee. Their private school counterparts were evenly split between North and East Milwaukee.

In order to help readers distinguish the comments of MPCP parents and students from their MPS counterparts, in the sections below we present the direct quotes of MPCP participants in red font and the quotes of MPS participants in blue font. Although our primary goal is to paint of picture of what is happening in general regarding education in Milwaukee, where there are distinctions between the perspectives of MPCP and MPS parents and students, we want those differences to be recognizable.

The authors acknowledge the limitations of such qualitative research. Participating families are self-selected in a number of ways, including their willingness to discuss their experiences with researchers in a public group setting. The statements and experiences of the families in this study are not necessarily representative of all MPS and MPCP families or the broader population of low-income families in Milwaukee. The experiences and opinions that the participants shared were not necessarily caused by their affiliation with the schools their children attend; however, their stories are a lens through which we can look and likely gain a better understanding of parental school choice in Milwaukee.



HOW DO FAMILIES CHOOSE?

Many roles and responsibilities are associated with parental school choice, and perhaps none is more important than determining when a chosen school is the right “quality” and “fit” for the student and the family. Activities that are commonly associated with parental school choice can take on different meanings for parents who participate in means-tested school choice programs like the MPCP. For example, similar research focusing on low-income families participating in the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program—the first federally funded voucher program in the United States—discovered that parents rarely relied on formal data when choosing a private school.¹⁰ Some parents believed that the rapport they developed with the teachers and administrators during the search process will ultimately have an impact on student development.¹¹ During the second year of this study, we attempted to move the discussion with families from mundane questions about class size, teacher quality, and other fundamental features of schools to a more in-depth discussion about what other important factors might influence their school choice decision-making.

Parents Voices on What Influences School Selection

To better understand what motivated or influenced the families’ school selection, we began with a set of polling questions that asked them why they enrolled in their current school. Their responses indicate that school selection decisions were based on a variety of factors other than academic programs offered by individual schools. Several of the MPS high school parents indicated that their child transferred to his or her current school because the child disliked his or her previous school. When asked to elaborate on what the “other” reasons were, parents indicated that they considered the curriculum an important factor in selecting their child’s school. They also took into account sports programs, school location, and prior attendance by other family members

Over half of the MPCP elementary school parents and more than one-third of MPCP high school parents indicated that their child transferred to their current school because they found a better school or disliked their child’s previous school. These responses imply that dissatisfaction with their child’s previous school was the primary driver in their decisionmaking process, according to polling data.

During the focus groups, parents further discussed reasons why they chose certain types of schools for their children. When looking for schools, parents identified environments they believed would be conducive for their children’s learning. For example, MPS parents discussed the importance of teachers being able to give their children enough instructional attention.

10 Stewart, T., Wolf, P. J., Cornman, S. Q., McKenzie-Thompson, K., & Butcher, J. (2009). *Family reflections on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program*. Final Summary Report, School Choice Demonstration Project, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas.

11 Gordon, M. F., & Louis, K. S. (2009). Linking parent and community involvement with student achievement: Comparing principal and teacher perceptions of stakeholder influence. *American Journal of Education*, 116(1): 1-31.

"I think the teachers need to spend a little more time with the kids on all academic areas. They have so many children, and there's a teacher and a teacher's assistant. How is my son getting enough help when there are two teachers and 30 kids in a class?"¹²

"There was like 36 kids in his class. So how are you supposed to watch all of those children with just you and your teacher's assistant?"¹³

Some parents are clearly making tradeoffs between different school characteristics. One MPCP high school parent wanted to keep her son in a Christian environment, but she switched schools because she wanted him to be in a less enclosed environment and surrounded by people he knew. One MPCP elementary parent selected her daughter's school for its reputation and with the hope that, by attending it, her daughter will have better opportunities.

"I do want my daughter to stay in the Choice Program because when it comes to college this school is considered a high academic level school, meaning... this school has come something like Harvard in the Caucasian people's eyesight. So, I want my daughter to be able to have doors open so she could get into any university that she wants, so I do want her to stay in there regardless on the complaints I have."¹⁴

Several MPS parents expressed an interest in supporting the public schools in their community. For instance, one MPS high school parent chose the school her child attends because she wanted her son (and children) to attend schools near their community.

"I chose to keep my children in public school because there was a difference in preference for me. So, I want to stay in the school; I want him to be in the community school that he lives in. I don't want to take him out of public schools, but I do want him to be challenged."¹⁵

Student Voices on What Influences School Selection

Though it was not a direct focus group question, students indirectly touched on factors they believed were involved in their families' school selection. About half of MPS students believed that they chose their schools without much parental involvement, while the other half believed that their parents were predominantly involved in the decisionmaking process. This issue was not discussed among MPCP students, making it the second year that public school students indicated they were involved in the school selection process more frequently than their MPCP counterparts.

¹² MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 6.

¹³ MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 7.

¹⁴ MPCP Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 15.

¹⁵ MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 16.

Consistent with the results of last year's focus group report, MPS students frequently stated that their family made the school selection based on specific programs and academic courses. Five of the eight students questioned cited specific academic programs as influencing their decisions to attend their current institutions. Examples included both art programs and advance placement/college preparatory courses. The influence of specific sports programs or coaches was mentioned as another significant factor in school decisionmaking. Last year, this was among the top three ranked influences on MPS families' high school selections. Both sets of influences seem to be related to potential advantages they offer when applying to universities and colleges.

Having a family member who previously attended the school seemed to be an influence on a number of students. In some cases, parents did this because they relied on personal accounts and experiences they heard from their family members and peers. One student stated that he attended the same school as other family members so that if anything happened, the student had someone there to support him. The financial implications of students attending the same schools as their siblings were mentioned by another student who said his mother sends him to the same school as his siblings in order to save on transportation costs.

"Well, my mom's like you know, she go about like saving her money. So, my sister is only a year younger to me so she had been going to the same school I've been to... We went to the same elementary, same middle, same high school. So, it's like you know, that saves gas, money, we go to the same spot."¹⁶

Overall, high school students from both the MPCP and MPS focus groups reported that gender did not have a significant influence on their school selection. This was nearly unanimous across both student groups, with only 1 out of the 16 students questioned reporting that gender had an effect on their parent's placement decisions. This lone MPCP student is enrolled in an all-girls' school. Though she does not believe gender matters, she had very little personal influence on the decision her parents made.

MPCP students mentioned school reputation as one of the factors they believed influenced their parent's school selections. Both school ratings and test scores were sources of information their parents relied on. In addition to parent influences related to school reputation, students discussed a few other reasons that influenced school selection. These included a student who remained in a private school because he had attended private schools in the past and another student who believed her parents chose her school based on perceived safety and religious affiliation.

"My parents chose it because I was Catholic and I've went to Catholic school all my life. And I guess they feel like it's a safer environment, more educational environment to learn... I guess the faith, then, was the main reason."¹⁷

¹⁶ MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 15.

¹⁷ MPCP High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 18.

Parent Voices on School Governance and Management

During the first round of focus groups with MPCP and MPS families in the spring of 2008, it became clear that a variety of factors influence these families' school choice decisions. Beyond class size, teacher quality, and other more commonly recognized factors, parents mentioned less recognized and understood characteristics such as a school's reputation or whether other family members and friends have had an affiliation with a potential school of interest.¹⁸ However, one aspect of schools that was not mentioned directly by participants was the different ways schools are structured or organized, despite the fact that the ways private schools are governed is what makes them different from one another as well as from public schools.

This year we thought it would be worthwhile to explore how school governance or how a school is managed may have influenced the families' school selection. Several parents actively spoke about their awareness of the ways in which their children's schools are managed prior to making their school selection. They used this knowledge to make their decisions on which school their children should attend.¹⁹

*"And now, see, with the private school, you do get a certain point where you have to go back and forth with them, but you have a more smaller community to deal with, you have a smaller board, when a parent speaks out in a private school, it's heard versus when you go through the MPS, you have to go through this channel that channel, you're actually skipping through a whole rope. A half of the year is gone before you get your result."*²⁰

One MPCP elementary school parent shared that she purposefully chose her son's school, run by a pastor, for "the way it was managed and [for] the class size."²¹

*"I mean not all the parents that attend the church, the kids that attend the school goes to the church, but our principal attends the church, our director is actually the bishop of the church. So it's likely everybody kind of knows everybody, so I know if there's a problem, I know who to go to and I know that something will be done"*²²

An MPS parent shared that her daughter's former school was poorly managed and organized, which led her to make the decision not to have her daughter return to that school. She described her dissatisfaction with a lack of racial diversity among the people engaged in the school's governance.

Another issue that influenced a parent's experience was an administrator she thought had too much authority and managed the school poorly.

18 Stewart, T., & Wolf, P. J. (2009). *Parent and student experiences with choice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin*. School Choice Demonstration Project, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas. Available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_13.pdf

19 We use colored font to differentiate quotations and to distinguish MPS (blue) and MPCP (red) families, respectively.

20 MPCP Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring, 2009, p.15.

21 MPCP Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring, 2009, p.14.

22 MPCP Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring, 2009, p.12.

“The school my daughter goes to is run by one person, she’s the owner, she’s also the founder, the administrator and the principal. So, you have to go through her for everything, and this woman is not very good at communicating with anybody.”²³

Families were asked to explain the way they engage and manage the chain of command in a school if they have problems that need resolution. Parents described more often how they would approach individual members of the school staff to address problems. We learned from parents the importance of being able to communicate easily with school personnel. For example, MPCP high school parents emphasized the importance of an open door policy and thought it was important for effective communication with teachers.

“Very, very high on the list is the communication with teachers. At one of my child’s schools you have to call the classroom, leave a message, wait for them to call you back. Whereas at my other child’s school I can walk into his school and say you know I need to talk to, can I go to whatever class?”²⁴

“I like a school that has the open policy where you can be able to talk to the teachers at any time. I mean, each child should be able to succeed at that school because you got access to the teachers all the time, before school starts and after school.”²⁵

This year, as in last year’s focus group report findings, parents found online access an effective way to address longstanding communication challenges between them and school faculty. For some parents, communication with teachers, in addition to online access, was considered an important way to monitor student progress. Parents’ ability to access teachers allowed them to understand and help their children with homework assignments.

“Each child should be able to succeed at that school because you got access to the teachers all the time before school starts, after school. They are there until five o’clock. You can call them there at home. You got a homework or some kind of assignment that maybe the parents don’t even understand, you call the teacher and say, “Well look, I don’t understand this, how do I do this?” They are right there for you. And then those progress reports coming in between, they are on it. They want to make sure you’re going to college and make sure you succeed.”²⁶

Parents valued relationships when they felt the teachers provided support by making themselves easily available. An MPS high school parent explained the importance of building relationships with teachers:

²³ MPCP Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring, 2009, p. 14.

²⁴ MPCP High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 4.

²⁵ MPCP High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 4.

²⁶ MPCP High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 4.

“...I usually ask the teacher first, because, frankly, they’re my partner that I need to get my child through school, not the principal.... They’re more my partner if I talk to them directly than if I go over their head.... But I prefer to give them a chance first at it because, it may be it’s something as simple as letting them know.”²⁷

For some parents, receiving consistently negative feedback from school members was cited as a problem.

“So, with the other school, it was too much information all the time. It seemed to be more negative, negative. So, it made him perform more poorly and not want to do his homework and things like that....”²⁸

When parents were asked how they dealt with or would likely deal with what they might perceive as unfair treatment of their children, they communicated that they would play an active role in resolving the matter. One parent shared a real experience in which she took an incident to multiple members of the school at different levels of authority in an attempt to advocate for her child.

“At first, I went through with the teacher and then I went to the assistant principal at the time.... The assistant principal didn’t want me to talk to the principal.... I ended up calling down to the administrative building.... The principal decided she wants to call because the director got on her right then and there. But the point is I shouldn’t have had to go through all of those challenges to get my son the education he needs.”²⁹

During the discussions with parents, they were asked to consider how they might address the school if their children were involved in a discipline-related matter. Most MPCP parents said they would identify the source of the issue and take their concerns to the teacher or administrator involved most directly with the matter. If their concern was associated with a teacher, the MPCP elementary parents indicated that they would typically talk to the teacher first. If they could not resolve the issue with the teacher, then they would seek to speak with the principal.

“First, if my son comes to me and tell me that... he’s been treated unfairly, I ask him what teacher because he has three or four different teachers.... And I would set an appointment with that particular teacher to find out what we—what the situation and why my son feels that way. And, if he does not get addressed, the situation isn’t addressed and it keeps happening, then I will take it to the principal.”³⁰

27 MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 15.

28 MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 3.

29 MPCP Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 14.

30 MPCP Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 12.

Student Voices on School Governance and Management

Students responded to both the polling and focus group questions about general matters associated with school governance and management. Like their parents, students were asked how they might address hypothetical situations they might face at school. For example, when asked whom they would approach if they were dissatisfied with their principal, two out of five MPCP high school students polled indicated that they would take their concerns about the issue directly to the source. The remaining three private school students indicated that they would either voice their concerns to the Parent Teacher Organization, school security, or some “other” unidentified source.

MPCP high school students’ discussion centered on their personal experiences with the principals within their schools. Most students reported that their principals were at least aware of who they were individually, though student perceptions of how involved they were in maintaining an active presence and handling student concerns (whether they would be a viable avenue to articulate their problems) varied dramatically.



“Yeah, our principal has got real interest in the students. If you get a certain GPA, he’ll refer you to certain colleges or whatever and get you a full ride.”³¹

“Because if you get in trouble or if you need something or something like that, you always go to the assistant principal. Or if you go to the principal, he’ll send you to the assistant principal, so it’s not really he don’t really control much.”³²

“Half the time, my principal not even there. One time, she wasn’t there for a whole three weeks, and ... she was just gone. Everybody thought she got fired.”³³

³¹ MPCP High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 6.

³² MPCP High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 15.

³³ MPCP High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 15.

Like their MPCP counterparts, MPS high school students presented a clear indication that they were aware of school management and governance, though they overwhelmingly appeared to respond with cynicism and frustration when asked to describe how they might engage school-based personnel.

“Inside the school? Me personally, I wouldn’t go to nobody. Because every staff person on school’s full of BS. So whatever I say, they’re not really taking into consideration. So, I’m not going to waste my time on them.”³⁴

Another student also expressed her aggravation, reporting that her history teacher often made racist comments in the classroom. Rather than filing a complaint about the teacher, students often took things into their own hands, “raising hell at her” during their class periods. The student explained that she and her peers did not believe reporting their teacher would accomplish anything.

When asked about their previous awareness of the school’s administration before attending the school, most students said they had some knowledge, but most stated that they did not know much about the administration. MPS students generally understood the student discipline procedures within their schools. However, MPS students almost unanimously believed that their voices were not heard by teachers and administrators, who they felt do not make an effort to support them.

“Teachers are in unions, so they can’t get fired. This teacher threw a pencil and chalk at me a few months ago.... And I went and told the principal and he said ‘I am going to talk to him.’ Nothing happened.”³⁵

“They stole my calculator. I was mad as hell. They just laughed. They didn’t do nothing. That’s how bad it is.”³⁶

“All the staff in our school is of one mind. They all believe each other.”³⁷

“I think it is just that they are too lazy to say, ‘I want to make a change for my students.’”³⁸

This dissatisfaction with faculty was illustrated with continued discussion during student accounts of their experiences. Three MPS high school students highlighted a specific incident involving students at their school where they claimed that they received no administrative support.

34 MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 17.

35 MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 18.

36 MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 23.

37 MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 10.

38 MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 10.

“They made it seem like our school was bad. And what happened was they threw a water balloon at the police car. A harmless water balloon. And then the police assaulted one of our students. They put him against the bus and let the bus drive off. Scraped his face. So, they [the students] jumped the police man for hurting one of our students. It wasn’t like we just attacked them for no reason. They attacked us first.”³⁹

Students contended that throughout the entire incident no one from the administration came to check on them. They claimed that during the incident, only one of their teachers came out to respond and perceived this lack of intervention or support as a general lack of concern for them from their educators.

Beyond problems related to school communication and discipline, a number of MPS students complained about mismanagement of school funding. From their perspective, school finances are handled poorly. The students felt they again were being ignored as another example of how their school was being managed, often feeling that they had no input on school matters despite the fact that they pay a number of student fees.

“Yeah, we have boxes. I mean, we just got plasma TVs, but we have got boxes we have to sit on.”⁴⁰

“I don’t know what they are doing with their money.”⁴¹

Summary of How Families Choose

Both groups of families use very similar approaches to thinking about and selecting schools. Neither group places an emphasis on student gender when considering schools. However there is general consensus that gender influences student classroom experiences (which is a topic that is explored in greater detail in the next section). MPS high school students appear to play more active roles in the school selection process and, in some cases, report making the decision without parental involvement.

Both MPCP and MPS parents exhibited good knowledge or understanding about the informal ways their schools are managed or governed. MPCP parents appear to have a better understanding of the formal processes and procedures compared to MPS parents. Generally speaking, MPCP parents appear to be more likely to take these factors into consideration when selecting schools. On the other hand, it appears that student and parent relationships with teachers and administrators is extremely important to their relationship with a school. The quality of these relationships appears to influence whether a family maintains a short- or long-term relationship with a school, as well as schools within and across school sectors.

³⁹ MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 10.

⁴⁰ MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 19.

⁴¹ MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 19.

What are families' experiences after they choose?

Definitions of student success or fit can vary significantly. John Witte, for instance, defines student achievement as not only “academic” knowledge and skills, but also employment prospects, social skills, personal identity, health concerns, and mastery of civic and public values.⁴² Other indicators of progress or success may include retention, compliance with school rules, college attendance, grades, and test scores,⁴³ as well as academic aspirations and students’ academic self-perception.⁴⁴ Depending on geographical location, financial resources, and other factors that can impede access to quality schools, families must define and measure success in ways that are consistent with the reality they face. Thus, they may circumvent the detrimental effects of poverty, limited school options, and other obstacles through their behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, goals, and lifestyles as they attempt to guide and support the academic development of their children.⁴⁵ For example, 88 percent of African American families view student academic achievement as a higher priority than the achievement of racial diversity, according to a national survey conducted by Public Agenda and the Public Education Network. A large percentage of these parents emphasized the need to raise and enforce academic standards in failing schools so that students were learning what they were supposed to learn before they progressed to the next grade.⁴⁶

Information obtained from families participating in the MPCP focus group showed that parents do not always use traditional or formal information to assess the viability of a prospective school. Some parents, for instance, focus on word-of-mouth recommendations from other family members and friends when making a school selection rather than using information like graduation rates, grade point averages, or standardized test scores.⁴⁷ A discussion about how parents measure student progress can provide insights into what forms or sources of information are most valuable to them, and whether the way schools report student progress is consistent with parents’ expectations.

Last year, we began this discussion with parents about the expectations they had for their children. We concluded that, generally speaking, all MPCP families want their children to graduate from high school. The majority of the parents and their children in this study expressed an interest in pursuing college.⁴⁸ This year, we continued that conversation by exploring the ways that parents measure student progress and success.

42 Wolf, P. J., & Macedo, S. (2004). *Educating citizens: International perspectives on civic values and school choice*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

43 Desimone, L. (1999). Linking parent involvement with student achievement: Do race and income matter? *The Journal of Educational Research*, 93(1): 11-30.

44 Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students’ academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13(1): 1-22.

45 Halle, T. G., Kurtz-Costes, B., & Mahoney, J. L. (1997). Family influences on school achievement in low-income, African American children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(3): 527-537.

46 Viteritti, J. P. (1999). *Choosing equality: School choice, the Constitution, and civil society*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

47 Stewart, T., & Wolf, P. J. (2009). *Parent and student experiences with choice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin*. School Choice Demonstration Project, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas. Accessed January 12, 2010, from http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_13.pdf.

48 Ibid.

How do Students Measure Their Progress and Success?

During the focus groups, with students who attended both MPCP and MPS high schools, students were allowed to share their insights on how they think about this topic. Both groups of students reported that they use a number of assignment-based indicators as a means of gauging their progress. They spoke in great detail about how they use online resources to access grade reports and test scores. One MPCP student described how the online system is used to convey the information to both students and parents:

“It shows you your grades and your assignments and what you need for projects and stuff like that. Then teacher comments, if you do something that you ain’t suppose to do. It’s access for the student, and then they have it for the parents. If the student is doing something it’s under the parent, then the student can’t see it. Or if you’re missing something or if you did something in class, it’s a comment under there.”⁴⁹

Most high school students across both panels reported that they access their school’s online system to view their grades, attendance, and comments from their teachers in a timely manner. One MPS high school student used the system as a way to maintain teacher accountability. This student actually keeps track of one of her instructors to make sure that he is reviewing her work and providing her with feedback on how she is doing.

“He does not put our work in on time and I do get on him.”⁵⁰

MPCP students also use teacher feedback to measure their progress according to the students. Although students often received feedback online, some also mentioned simply talking to their teachers about how they are doing in class.

Despite relying on these measures as an indication of their academic progress, high school students from both sectors overwhelmingly agreed that they were the ones most accountable for their own achievements and progression through school. One MPS student reported:

“In some ways, [the principal/faculty is responsible for student’s academic outcomes]. But, at the end of the day, I think the student should take charge because it’s their life.... So, I mean, if you want to succeed, you’re going to succeed no matter what.”⁵¹

A small number of MPCP students, however, indicated that they were unsure who was accountable for their academic outcomes.

Success among both groups of high school students was often defined by their progression toward long-term educational goals. MPS students most often cited advancement to college as their most immediate educational goal. One student made the distinction between attending a collegiate institution and graduating from one.

⁴⁹ MPCP High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 4.

⁵⁰ MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 5.

⁵¹ MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 21.

Interestingly, all eight of the MPS students who participated in the focus group expressed an interest in continuing their education beyond high school graduation.

MPCP students responded similarly, citing attainment of a college education as their most important long-term educational goal. All but one private school student reported that their parents expected them to continue their education beyond high school. This student indicated that his mother viewed college attendance merely as a possibility sometime later.



"It would be different for me because my mom, she don't really pressure me. She just wants me to get out of high school.

*She's not pressuring me to go to college because she was like 30 something when she went to college. She feels like school ain't for everybody but you can take chances. But she doesn't try to go like, 'Oh you have to go to college.' She just tells me she wants me to get out of high school."*⁵²

One student, after listening to his peers, expressed relief that his parents were not pressuring him to attend college, though he also felt a bit of concern. He continued:

*"It makes me feel good but then again it makes me feel bad because then I don't want to be 30 something and going to college and everybody else graduated from college. But at the same time, it's like a relief to know that I don't have to go to college. Like some people, their parents want them to go to a certain college at a certain time, but they're not really pressuring me."*⁵³

The parental expectation to attend college was not the only area students felt their parents' influence. Parental expectation also appeared to influence how several MPS students measure their personal academic success. After receiving a B in his advanced placement course, a male student explained how he was reprimanded by his mother for not earning a higher grade, a scolding that made him feel as if he had not succeeded. A female in the same focus group responded that she had gotten a lower grade but that her parents were pleased with her performance, making her feel that she had successfully completed her coursework. Students' definitions of success varied and were clearly influenced by their parents' expectations of them.

⁵² MPCP High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 3.

⁵³ MPCP High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 4.

How Parents Measure Student Progress and Success

High school and elementary school parents across all focus groups said that homework was a tool they used to measure and monitor their student's progress and success. They used this method to continuously keep track of their student's performance. Parents consistently mentioned the value of homework in accounting for their children's performance and understanding of concepts within the classroom.

*"If she's not coming home with homework, I'm worried what's going on."*⁵⁴

*"I measure my daughter's progress and success through—I pay attention to her homework and how well she does..."*⁵⁵

*"...The way I know he's progressing in school is when he does his homework. If I don't have to take much time to explain how to do it—I know he's paying attention in his class."*⁵⁶

One parent expressed concern that her child was no longer bringing school work home, limiting this option of monitoring his progress.⁵⁷ Thus, reliance on homework as a measure of how her child was doing was no longer an option for her. An MPS high school parent criticized the school for not giving her son school work to bring home.

*"Me personally, I look for my son to come home with homework. To me that means a lot. Unfortunately, he does not. So my question is, 'What are you doing in school?' What happened to the word homework? Where's the meaning behind that word? To me homework means you have work to complete at home and return to school the next day; he has none. Never came home with a book. My question is, 'Do you have textbooks?' And so that's the big concern of mine as a parent."*⁵⁸

In addition to using homework as a measurement of progress, parents also place value on student's grade performance, which for many parents can be monitored online. MPS elementary school parents, for example, appreciated the fact that schools are using online programs to allow them to consistently monitor student progress.

⁵⁴ MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 2.

⁵⁵ MPCP Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 3.

⁵⁶ MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 6.

⁵⁷ MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 2.

⁵⁸ MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 6.

*"I look at 'Parent Assist' to see how many empty assignments there are...it's on one of the public school's website. You get an ID and a password, and you can look at what your student's been doing.... So I look at whether, what he's turning in, the grades are good, so he is understanding the material. And then I try to get them to give me another chance, another crack at him doing the homework that he didn't manage to get in his backpack at home...."*⁵⁹

All groups, except for MPS high school parents, cited grades as a measurement of student progress and success. Weekly online grade reports allow parents to conveniently monitor their student's performance. The results of polling support these comments: two out of seven MPS elementary parents indicated that seeing their children earn good grades was their most important immediate educational goal.

Parents also listed longer term outcomes and goals as future markers of their children's educational success. During the polling session, the overwhelming majority of parents from both MPCP parent groups indicated that the most important long-term academic goal for their child was college graduation. One MPS parent's approach in defining success for her daughter was to reach more immediate goals before planning beyond them.

*"My daughter is in middle school, and for me, the least she can do is make it through high school.... I do want her to go to college, but she has to make it through high school first."*⁶⁰

MPS high school parents shared expectations of progress and success that were different from traditional measures. None of the parents mentioned tests as an indication of student progress or success. On the contrary, one parent stated that the nature of exams was not a thorough evaluation of a child and that there were other components missing.

*"The way that they measure his knowledge just by bubble-in sheets or just by doing, 'Do this page, do the other page, do this package and turn it in on time and you will have some extra credits.' This is not the way that a kid should be evaluated because as somebody said, there are many components that can form the knowledge of the kids."*⁶¹

Another MPS high school parent defined success for the child as extending beyond formal schooling, but including community involvement as an important part of their education.

*"My goal would be to have my son complete college and to...not just complete college, but—getting involved in the community.... I believe that a whole background of a child includes not only school, but it includes their religious background, it includes their family background, and their community, so I see it as only being a part of their education, not their entire education."*⁶²

59 MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 2.

60 MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 6.

61 MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 6.

62 MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 3.

Parent Voices on Gender and Race

Parents described some of the challenges their children faced in school. These concerns included issues related to lower expectations based on gender and race. Parents were invited to discuss how the gender of their child might influence their educational experiences. This topic indirectly revealed whether they selected schools for their children based upon their children's gender. Generally speaking, both groups of parents and students believed that there are no inherent differences between boys and girls in terms of learning. As a result, gender does not appear to be a major factor families consider when thinking about schools.

*"I don't see the difference between them being a boy or a girl as long as the parent is involved in their education and the teachers being caring about putting their time in, giving a little extra time. And no matter what school they're going to, goals are to get a good education and succeed and graduate from high school."*⁶³

Several participants reported, however, that gender does have an influence to some degree on student educational experiences. For example, these parents identified gender biases in the schools, and one group of parents pointed out the way schools address students differently based on their gender:

*"[The schools] they're less tolerant of—it's unfortunate, it's natural—boys' behavior is not necessarily the politically correct behavior. So I think they're judged harsher when they express their frustration, and it makes them more frustrated. Where girls get support, they get encouragement and they get nudged in the right direction."*⁶⁴

More than half of the MPS elementary parents felt that girls were more studious and academically focused than their male counterparts. They also believed that boys display more aggressive behaviors, which often leads to an increased likelihood of discipline problems at school.

*"...at the younger ages, when girls are upset, the way they act out is they cry. That gets empathy, that gets support, that gets encouragement. A lot of times when boys are upset, the way they act out is more physical, anger. And all they get is sent to the principal's office."*⁶⁵

MPS high school parents shared similar experiences related to gender stereotypes.

From the parents' perspective, student treatment based upon their gender was further complicated by the students' race. One MPS high school parent described the lower expectations and lesser tolerance her son experienced for being male and African American.

⁶³ MPCP High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 7.

⁶⁴ MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 10.

⁶⁵ MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p.10.

“Lower expectations and less tolerance. There’s things that they would expect of the girls. I mean they even say things to these students. And so my response would be, it is because he’s an African American young man, but it’s also because, I believe, that him being a boy is not just the only reason that they’re treated different. There’s a different expectation on them, and they receive things differently, as well, because they’re a boy.”⁶⁶

Continuing with the theme of lowered expectations, another MPS high school parent discussed her children facing preconceived stereotypes. She described a situation where her son was less respected for his style of dress by his teachers until they met with her.

“I do agree that there is stereotyping there. And it took for me to actually meet in front of the teachers at the parent teacher conference. They even noticed the difference after that. After meeting the parents and finding out I was intelligent and articulate, then they did have a different respect for him, which I don’t think they initially had. I felt as though they thought that they could leave him by the wayside because I was a parent that was not involved or educated or articulate. Because the way he dressed, which was very urban, like I said.”⁶⁷

Parents shared stories of the treatment and challenges their children have faced because of gender, race, and even style of dress. If a student has one of these factors, like in the above example, the parent expressed concern that her child could be left behind.

When it comes to discipline problems in school, parents shared experiences of how their students were treated that they believed were not constructive. When asked how their schools are governed or who they would go to if their children had disciplinary or academic problems, parents shared the challenges they faced with school discipline. Some parents expressed dissatisfaction with the frequency of school suspension and its effect on their students’ ability to learn.

“Everything he does, he’s suspended for. If he’s in the hallways, he’s suspended for 3 days. To me that’s not a way to go about it. Because what are you teaching him? Staying at home? He can’t learn at home. I cannot stop working because he’s at home, so that’s a conflict within itself.”⁶⁸



⁶⁶ MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 9.

⁶⁷ MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 11.

⁶⁸ MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 2.

“See, with MPS, they’re backwards. They want to suspend a child first, then let’s talk later upon reinstatement. To me, that’s backwards.”⁶⁹

One MPS high school parent described the impact of this constant disciplinary action on her personally. As a result of having to take off from work for matters related to her son, she lost two jobs. This parent explained that her experiences with student discipline had a larger impact on not only her job, but her “way of living.”

Student Voices on Gender and Race

Like their parents, students were generally in agreement that gender did have a significant impact on their classroom experiences. They described the impact in a variety of ways. One MPCP high school student reported that her gender provoked preconceived expectations from others. She expressed that she felt an increased pressure to prove herself beyond perceived gender stereotypes of females her age.

“I think as a girl in high school, with the stereotypes, I’m almost expected to mess up. Like, with teen pregnancy and things like that. It’s almost expected of you.”⁷⁰

In their more specific interactions with administrators and teachers, students came to believe they were treated a certain way based upon their gender. MPCP students were more likely to make this claim, though some MPS students made similar comments. The students in general provided a variety of classroom experiences to support their claims. For example, one MPCP student believes that the teachers in her school were often easier on students of the same sex:

“Sometimes my lady teacher, she gives us girls more if we need help. If we need help with something, she’ll give us (girls) a second chance with a problem and the boys not.” And then, my male teacher, whenever we get in trouble then sometimes he’ll be harder on us than on the boys.”⁷¹

Another student disagreed, stating that the female instructors at her current school generally evaluated female students more harshly than males. Others believed that males were treated more critically than females regardless of the gender of their instructors. They stated that males were scored harder and disciplined more often than their female counterparts.

Contrary to the majority of her peers, one MPS student reported that she felt gender had little influence on the way students were treated or how they progressed academically. She suggested another social framework besides gender that explained the academic differences she observed.

⁶⁹ MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 10.

⁷⁰ MPCP High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 9.

⁷¹ MPCP High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 9.

*"I don't think gender really matters to academic success. I think it's more like status.... So it's like, I don't think gender really plays a big role. It's more like social stuff that's gender affiliated."*⁷²

These mixed responses led to a discussion of how race in conjunction with a student's gender shaped the experiences they were having within their schools. An MPS student referred to double standards in treatment that he observed on the basis of both gender and race.

*"The teachers, I don't want to play the race card, but if you are a black male and you say something out of line, they will put you back in line quick..., but like a white girl, they will just let you talk in the corner and nobody says anything."*⁷³

Unlike the varying experiences with gender, some students reported discrete experiences with racism that were often motivated by other students.

*"It's a problem in my school. Even though my school was like, really diverse with each race in my school, each race hangs out with their own race."*⁷⁴

*"I think it is definitely separated. Really separated by race, sometimes we're separated by gender too."*⁷⁵

Some MPCP students identified a similar trend among their peers.

*"You can walk into our lunchroom at any given time... it don't matter. It's always, you will almost never see a group of black people sitting with a group of white people. It's just always been like that."*⁷⁶

Non-Educational Challenges

During the time the focus groups were conducted, America was moving into the early phases of a recession, and we assumed that this would have an impact on participating families. Families discussed problems of limited financial resources in and out of school. Job security posed a less measurable problem and created fears and concerns for both students and parents. For example, MPS high school parents came from predominantly single-parent households. The educational decisions they made for their children were often based upon their limited financial resources, time, and other factors unique to them. Families had to make choices between

⁷² MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 16.

⁷³ MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 11.

⁷⁴ MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 11.

⁷⁵ MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 11.

⁷⁶ MPCP High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 12.

short-term extracurricular activities they could afford for their children and the costs of long-term goals, such as college education.

Parent Voices on Non-Educational Challenges

The parents appear to face many challenges socially and financially. The focus group participants were presented the following question: “What is the greatest noneducational challenge facing your family?” This question was selected by the research team before the economy had reached a recession. At that time, Americans were facing challenges ranging from housing to health to employment. Given the state of the economy during the time the focus groups were conducted, during the spring 2009, it should come as no surprise that nearly all parents across all sectors described challenges that stemmed from the weak economy.

Problems of limited financial resources translate to fewer opportunities for their children. Many of the parents are the single and sole income providers for their children. As one MPS high school parent describes the makeup of the focus group:

“You’ve got all single parents here. So, I would say another thing to look at is not only are we saying it’s a challenge because of finances, but we’re all women here saying it’s a challenge because we’re single moms (household income is halved). It’s very emotional. The kids get into high school and they have different needs, more than elementary and middle school. We might be moms who make \$10 more and then we’re put in a situation that you can’t have it because you make \$10 too much.”⁷⁷

MPS parents reported that they often find themselves in a bind because their income is too high to qualify for aid for students, yet they do not have enough money to cover their family’s basic needs. A parent reports that some extracurricular activities come at a cost.

“For my son not to run the neighborhood streets, just to keep him focused, \$400 out of my pocket just so he can play basketball.”⁷⁸

Both MPS elementary and high school parents reported that they were faced with financial challenges that made it difficult to cover the cost related to in- and out-of-school activities. An MPS elementary parent describes the limitations of free services and how the cost of college will be a challenge.

“I don’t think it affects but it impacts a lot of things that should be happening right now for my daughter to go to college, it all costs money.... That’s just the bottom line. It costs money to make some things happen. I’ve looked around and the free services don’t go far enough.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 21.

⁷⁸ MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 21.

⁷⁹ MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 19.

The discussion about social and financial challenges among MPCP parents focused more on employment-related issues.

"I just want to mention job security is the biggest challenge I see this year... You work for a company, you know it's a good company but hearing what's going on, you have this feeling that you're going to be laid off and, I mean, it takes away some focus. It scares you and you don't know if you will be able to take care of your family; you don't know if your house will be there. That's one of the challenges."⁸⁰

"Being a single parent, I think the majority of a lot of us because our jobs are not promised to us. I work for a hospital but that don't mean anything...."⁸¹

The vast majority of parents gave the impression that they were overwhelmed by and concerned about the economy both in the short and long term. High school parents noted how the economy has affected their children indirectly, and the students worry about their parents' financial and emotional well-being.

"I think it would be safe to say the economy has affected everyone. And you know, people are losing jobs, and they're losing homes. And you just don't know where you live at, where you are going to eat, none of that. And I think this has a great impact on these kids, especially high school seniors trying to go to college. And with the economy they don't know which way to go. It's scary."⁸²

"It's really hard for the kids, the older kids, when you lose a job, because my kids were used to getting, not everything they wanted, but I had money to pay for their field trips and to buy them new school clothes. And, after 10 years, with no job no more, I don't have that...."⁸³

Student Voices on Salient Noneducational Challenges

Along with complications related to race and gender, students were influenced by additional factors that affected them within the classroom. MPS high school students overwhelmingly agreed that financial challenges were the hardest challenges facing their families over the past year. Students reiterated the concerns their parents expressed about their families' lack of financial resources and their inability to cover the costs of student fees and mandatory class supplies.

A number of students expressed concern with how these financial challenges potentially affected their grades and ability to participate in social events sponsored by their schools.

⁸⁰ MPCP Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 16.

⁸¹ MPCP Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 17.

⁸² MPCP High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009. 14-15.

⁸³ MPS Elementary School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 20.

*"You've got to pay student fees, and then you have to buy this calculator that costs \$100. If you don't do it you can't go to prom, homecoming, or any sports. So, my friends have problems paying the fees and getting the calculator. I see some people struggling and I'm like, 'I can't help you. I barely got mine.'"*⁸⁴

One student revealed that his calculator was stolen from his gym locker, and he expressed how much the loss affected him in the classroom because supplies are hard to come by.

*"And low grades because of a calculator, I mean, yeah. Your grades go down, like your quiz grades and everything. Because you can't like, borrow one from someone. Who's going to let you borrow their \$100 calculator? You're screwed."*⁸⁵

These students were concerned about both the short- and long-term implications of their families' financial situation, though a small group of MPS students felt their families' personal financial struggles were more likely to have a larger effect on them in the future.

*"Really, right now [finances]...it's not affecting me.... But I know it probably will...as soon as I graduate and try to go to college."*⁸⁶

Most students mentioned that obtaining funding for higher education was a large barrier to meeting their goal of continuing their education. Sports, activities, and academic achievement were perceived by most MPS students to be important solutions to these barriers and sometimes the only solutions.

*"We can do one thing. We can involve ourselves in all kind of sports. When it's time to go to college, we can depend on athletic ability to try to take us there. That's one solution, grades and try to get some kind of help."*⁸⁷

*"My situation is different. I don't play sports but I participate in many different activities. My mom already told me you're going to have to write for your scholarships. It's already in my head. I've got to write just to make my scholarships."*⁸⁸

MPCP high students were the only subgroup that mentioned challenges that were unrelated to the economy. Their discussion centered on balancing homework with other responsibilities and interests.

84 MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 23.

85 MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 25.

86 MPS High School Student Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 25.

87 MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 7.

88 MPS High School Parent Focus Group. Spring 2009, p. 7.

Summary of Parent and Student Experiences with Schools

Across the board, students and parents revealed the importance of online access as a means of effective communication among teachers, students, and parents. A literal tool provided by the school ends up being a useful and comprehensive method for parents to be informed and more involved in their child's education. In addition to online access, parents monitor their children's progress through many traditional academic measures, including homework and grades. Parents view homework as a standard measure of knowledge and learning. For students, teacher feedback keeps them constantly aware of their academic progression. Both parents and students overwhelmingly mentioned high school and college graduation as their long-term educational goals. Beyond school-based or institutional measures of student progress, some students define success according to parental expectations and personal goals. Unlike defining achievement as something strictly academic, parents express aspirations and expectations of their students that reach to the community, far beyond the classroom and multiple choice tests.

MPS students felt that there are many flaws in school procedures and often felt that their concerns and voices were not acknowledged by school faculty. Students were generally frustrated by lack of opportunity to communicate or express their views with teachers and administrators. Aside from having input on issues they are personally facing within the classroom, some students feel that their schools are not investing school resources in a way that reflects students' interests and preferences.

As part of the general focus group discussion, the participants provided insights about how they manage the day-to-day expectations and standards associated with their schools. Some of them reported they faced challenges of lower school expectations from school faculty and administration. For instance, during a discussion about the role of student gender when selecting schools, several participants highlighted their actual experiences in the classroom. They revealed the different types of treatment based on their children's gender, race, and other factors. Sometimes the differential treatment entailed less tolerance and less respect toward students that appeared to be motivated by gender.

In discussions with families about how gender influenced the students' educational experiences, both students and parents noted gender had a very limited influence on their school choices. However, gender took on a relatively significant role in the classroom and shaped how the students felt they were treated. Students reported facing expectations and varying treatment from teachers based upon their gender, though student's individual experiences varied. Parents and students both brought up the overlapping influences of both gender and race, and how they felt it led to potentially unfair treatment.

In response to the question about the greatest noneducational challenge families faced, many parents reported issues related to finances and the economy. Students cited economic challenges as directly affecting their school lives and their immediate futures. MPS students were more likely to report that they felt the direct impact of their families' financial struggles, and they expressed concern that it could potentially affect their short-term and long-term educational goals. MPCP students rarely mentioned economic problems as their challenge, but they were more likely to discuss challenges related to balancing school life with outside obligations such as family, friends, and jobs.

What important lessons have been learned?

This report is intended to illuminate the experiences of low-income families with students enrolled in Milwaukee public and private schools. Our hope is to raise the awareness of policymakers, philanthropists, and others who have an interest in improving outcomes for children from low-income families. Thus, we would like to end by describing lessons learned from our discussions with students and parents. More specifically: What have we learned about how these families exercise parental school choice, and how can this information be used to improve the experiences these families' have with the schools their children attend?

What have we learned about how parents choose schools in Milwaukee?

One of the lessons learned stems from our understanding of the school marketplace in Milwaukee, and how families choose between these varied options. We assumed that the combination of traditional public, public charter, and private schools participating in the MPCP would challenge these families to gather information and select schools that provided the best combination of quality and fit for their families. For example, Kisida and his colleagues identified some of the distinct differences between MPS and MPCP schools.⁸⁹ They note that the typical school participating in the MPCP has about half the number of students as the average school in MPS, as well as a smaller student/teacher ratio.⁹⁰

Given the different characteristics between public and private schools, we assumed that most families would begin the school selection process with a focus on identifying the best performing schools. Based in large part on the findings from the Longitudinal Education Growth Study (LEGS), we decided to take a closer look at how the gender of the student might affect families' approaches to school selection. The 2009 LEGS found a statistically significant difference in student reading performance that appeared to be related to gender: MPCP females demonstrated lower gains (5.2 percentage points) compared to their public school counterparts and compared to MPCP males, whose gains in reading were 6.4 scale points higher than those of MPS males.⁹¹

Even though these gender differentials in the effect of the MPCP on student achievement were not observed in the analysis of data two years after baseline,⁹² other researchers have recognized the glaring and growing gaps between the males and females in such areas as high school graduation rates and postsecondary attainment. These differences between the sexes have been the subject of increased scholarly attention. For example, a recent study by the Schott Foundation highlighted that more than half of all African American males did not receive

89 Kisida, B., Jensen, L., Rahn, J. C., & Wolf, P. J. (2008). *The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Baseline descriptive report on participating schools*. School Choice Demonstration Project, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas. Accessed January 12, 2010, from http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html

90 Public charter schools in Milwaukee, as another example, fall into several different categories based on who authorizes and monitors the charter. This in turn strongly influences the organization and structure of the governing body. The following link provides more details about the various types of public charter schools in Milwaukee: http://www.weac.org/News_and_Publications/education_news/2007-2008/weacandcharterschools.aspx

91 Witte, J. F., Wolf, P. J., Cowen, J. M., Fleming, D. J., & Lucas-McLean, J. (2009). *The MPCP longitudinal educational growth study: Second year report* (pp. 1-15). School Choice Demonstration Project, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas.

92 Witte, J. F., Wolf, P. J., Cowen, J. M., Fleming, D. J., Condon, M., & Lucas-McLean, J. (2010). *The MPCP longitudinal educational growth study: Third year report*. School Choice Demonstration Project, Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas.

diplomas with their cohort during the 2005-06 academic year.⁹³ A similar study conducted in 2001, which focused on public high school graduation rates for all males, revealed that males graduate from high school at an eight percent lower rate than females.⁹⁴ And when we examine college admissions and completion, this gap increases and is consistent across all racial and ethnic groups.⁹⁵

Our findings show that the low-income families in this study rarely factor student gender into their school decision making. We believe there are two reasons that might explain why gender is not something most of these families currently consider. First, this is a new and relatively controversial area of research. Until the findings become more conclusive about defining learning environments that are more conducive to students of a specific gender, parents will unlikely consider or factor gender into their school decision making. Second and perhaps more important, instead of factoring gender into their school decision making, many of these families appear to struggle with finding the proper balance between “fit for the family” (finances, multiple children, transportation, etc.) versus “fit for the student” (learning environments that are aligned with their child’s interest and developmental level).

The growing school marketplace and the nuances associated with each school clearly challenge the families in this study to play a role in identifying “quality schools” that are a good “fit” for their children. Discerning “school quality” and “student/family fit” requires access to reliable information and the ability to process that information. It is not clear how some families gain information about many of the public schools outside their immediate neighborhoods or many of the private schools participating in the MPCP. However, to the extent that becoming good school consumers is born out of experience, most families do not appear to be having the experiences that would allow them to hone these skills.⁹⁶

What can we learn from the families’ experiences with parental school choice?

The participants’ responses to the hypothetical situations mentioned above further revealed the complex nature of schools and the many ways mundane issues involving student discipline and discrepancies with an administrator can influence a family’s experience with a school. Both groups of parents seem to have a very good understanding of the formal policies and procedures related to student discipline. MPS parents sometimes mentioned the school board as a body to approach if they were experiencing problems with their children. MPCP parents also mentioned their school board of trustees. One MPCP parent explained that the process of communicating with her MPCP school’s board was easier and more direct than if she were in MPS, which she considered more roundabout. It is not clear, however, whether parents take school governance or management into consideration when selecting schools. However, though the MPCP parents did not reference school

93 The Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2008). *Given half a chance: 50 state report on public education and black males*. Cambridge, MA. See also: Greene, J. (2001). *High school graduation rates in the United States*. Report commissioned by the Black Alliance for Education Options. New York: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

94 Swanson, C. B. (2004). *Who graduates? Who doesn’t?: A statistical portrait of public high school graduation, class of 2001*. Washington DC: The Urban Institute: Education Policy Center.

95 This issue has some college admissions officers promoting affirmative action for male applicants as a means to counteract this imbalance. Buchmann, C., & DiPrete, T. A. (2006). The growing female advantage in college completion: The role of family background and academic achievement. *American Sociological Review*, 71(4): 515-541.

96 This would be a worthwhile topic to pursue in the final round of focus groups.

manuals or student disciplinary procedures, they were more likely to manage the situation by engaging a teacher and moving up the chain of command. On the other hand, MPS parents were more likely to engage the teacher, coach, etc., based on their comfort level with individual members of the school staff.

This research suggests that the economic challenges facing the families in this study are not fleeting circumstances that will subside when the local economy improves. Given the fact that many parents were single heads of household, they were more likely to discuss how their limited financial resources may influence their children's behavior. Financially, parents faced basic challenges associated with not generating enough money and job insecurity in an unpredictable economy. Parents recognized that their children were not immune from their concerns about their financial well-being, and the burden of limited resources affected all of their lives. They suggested that these circumstances might have a negative impact on their children's behavior and believe schools should factor this into how they manage students.



APPENDIX A

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

In this section, we summarize the research methodology used to prepare this report, including the focus group administration and data analysis, and unforeseen challenges the research team faced when conducting the focus groups. This section also provides a general profile of focus group participants.

We used a phenomenological qualitative approach to document and describe the “lived experiences” of the participants in this study. Phenomenology is often used to describe the experiences of several individuals or groups surrounding a concept or phenomenon, and we followed the seven basic steps associated with this approach:⁹⁷

1. Identify central phenomenon
2. Ask research questions
3. Data collection
 - a. Focus groups
 - b. Electronic polling
4. Organize and analyze data
5. Reduce the significant number of statements to meaningful units and themes
6. Analyze the context in which the respondents experience the theme
7. Reflect upon and write about the essence of the experiences

Focus Group Administration

The focus groups were conducted on a Saturday morning in May of 2009. The target size was 8 to 10 participants per group, although as many as 15 were recruited to allow for cancellations and no-shows. Each focus group was led by a member of the research team who was skilled in facilitating group discussion. In actuality, focus groups ranged from 7 to 10 participants, with an average of 7. In total, we held six focus groups (excluding charters) with 57 participants (41 adults and 16 high school students).

We used a hybrid approach to data collection to solicit information from the participants. This approach used an audience response system or interactive keypad technology to poll individual participants about their responses to 21 closed-ended questions pertaining to their Milwaukee schooling experience.⁹⁸ Among other topics, the polling questions explored the school selection process and decision making influences, satisfaction with the school choice, and views of school and neighborhood peer influences on student achievement. Participants were

97 Miller, D., & Salkind, N. (2002). *Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement*, (2nd ed.) (pp. 151-153). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

98 TurningPoint Technologies provided technical assistance with the keypads and data management. For more information about TurningPoint, see: www.turningpointtechnologies.com.

also asked a set of questions to assess their basic understanding of public and public charter schools, as well as the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Traditional focus group discussions were also held using a semi-structured protocol consisting of five open-ended questions. The open-ended questions asked participants to reflect on the noticeable changes they had observed in the Milwaukee school context over the past 2 to 3 years, the most significant influences affecting their school selection process, and their satisfaction with the schools chosen. Specifically, the five open-ended focus group questions were:

- (1) How does the gender of the student influence parental school choice?
- (2) How does the governance structure or school management approach influence parental school choice?
- (3) How do broader social and economic concerns facing families influence parental school choice experiences?
- (4) What other factors, beyond the specific research questions, influence parental school choice experiences?
- (5) How do parents measure progress or success?

The overall session lasted 80 minutes. Approximately 55 minutes were spent engaging the participants by using open-ended questions in a traditional focus group format.⁹⁹ Digital recorders and note takers were used to document the focus group discussions, and these data were later transcribed and coded. The balance of the time (or approximately 25 minutes) used the closed-ended questions to solicit additional information from the participants. The participants used keypads to communicate their responses, which were captured in real time and later documented in an Excel report.

The unit of analysis is each of the six distinct subgroups. Due to the small sample size, the polling data are reported in actual numbers rather than in percentages. Keypad polling data represent actual responses given and do not include data from nonresponders. Thus, the keypad data are not always representative of the total sample. We provided participants with a financial incentive to join the focus groups: parents received a cash payment of \$50, and high school students received a cash payment of \$20.¹⁰⁰ We also provided refreshments before the focus group, and on-site daycare was available for those parents who requested the service in advance.

⁹⁹ Given the longitudinal nature of this study, the focus groups were designed to last no longer than 90 minutes. As stated above, they are viewed as an extended conversation with the families that began with introducing them to the focus group concept and building rapport in the first year. This year's focus groups were designed to allow more time for in-depth dialogue as will be future focus groups.

¹⁰⁰ The cash incentive was limited to one parent and one child per family.

Data Analysis

The research team adopted a very straightforward four-step approach to data analysis. At each step in the process, at least two people were involved with reading, analyzing, and summarizing the focus group transcripts. Following is a brief description of the goal and tasks associated with each step in the focus group data analysis process.

- (1) **Individual charts**—two people were assigned to read each of the six focus group transcripts and summarize the major themes in response to the four central research questions. The individual reviews were documented using a standard “focus group chart.” Each chart (for an example, see Appendix D) reflects the salient responses to the discussion questions and provides quotes that support or illustrate the theme.
- (2) **Team charts**—After each team member completed an individual chart, members met as a group to discuss and combine the individual charts and complete a team chart for each transcript. This step in the process challenged each team to synthesize and advance the preliminary findings and observations associated with each transcript.
- (3) **Subgroup comparisons within sectors**—Once the team charts were completed, teams were formed to compare the findings across the three subgroups (elementary parents, high school parents, and high school students) within MPS and MPCP.
- (4) **Subgroup comparisons across sectors**—As the final step in the data analysis process, teams were formed to compare the response across the two school sectors by subgroup.

At each step in the process, two or more people were involved in identifying the key findings and observations that are reported here.



Unforeseen Challenges with the Focus Groups

Due to the challenges we encountered recruiting study participants, we used several outreach strategies. In total, 360 families were selected as candidates to participate in the qualitative study. In the spring of 2009, the prospective families were mailed an introductory letter that explained what a focus group was, provided logistical information about the focus group, and other important information about the event. The letter also contained two toll-free numbers that could be used if the eligible participants had any questions or wanted to confirm their participation.

Of the prospective participants who received a letter in the mail, 107 families were called. Several days prior to the focus group, all parents who agreed to participate received a follow-up telephone call to remind them of the event. Confirmed participants were also mailed a postcard that provided detailed information about the event, time, location, and a reminder of the promised financial incentive. While 44 families formally agreed to participate, only 41 families attended the focus group event.¹⁰¹ These 41 families will remain in the study over the 5-year evaluation and will be invited to participate in the future focus groups to continue the dialogue through 2011. Ten of the families that participated in this round of focus groups participated in the 2007-08 MPCP focus groups as well.

¹⁰¹ Twelve individuals who had not registered for the focus groups prior to the event arrived on the day of and asked to participate. These individuals were considered drop-ins and were allowed to take part in the focus groups.

APPENDIX B

POLLING QUESTIONS ASKED OF MPCP AND MPS PARENTS

1. What is your gender?
2. What grade is the student you are representing currently enrolled in?
3. Where in the Milwaukee area do you live?
4. Including this focus group, how many focus groups have you attended?
5. What is your relationship to the student you are representing today?
6. Who in your family is likely to have the most influence on the decision about the school your child attends?
7. How involved was your child with selecting the school they now attend?
8. How many school-aged children currently live in your home?
9. How many hours per week do you devote to school-related activities?
10. On an average evening, about how many hours do you spend on school work with your child?
11. Why did you enroll in your current school?
12. What is the most important long-term academic goal for your child?
13. What obstacle or challenge most stands in the way of your student achieving their academic goals?
14. Could your family use more support to help the student succeed academically?
15. What types of support could help students who might not otherwise reach their academic goals?
16. Who at your child's school is most responsible for student discipline?
17. Who at your school is most responsible for making sure your school has the resources to function properly?
18. If you were dissatisfied with the principal, who would you most likely tell first?
19. Aside from education issues, what has been the single greatest challenge facing your family over the last year?
20. To what extent does the previously mentioned challenge affect the student's ability to succeed?
21. Think about your child's friends at school, what influence do they have on your child's academic development?
22. Think about your child's friends in your neighborhood, what influence do they have on your child's academic development?
23. Who should be most accountable for student academic outcomes?

APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. How does the gender of the student influence parental school choice?
2. How does the governance structure or school management approach influence parental school choice?
3. How do broader social and economic concerns facing families influence parental school choice experiences?
4. What other factors, beyond the specific research questions, influence parental school choice experiences?
5. How do parents measure progress or success?

APPENDIX D

MILWAUKEE FOCUS GROUP TEAM CHART EXAMPLE

Specific Focus Group Segment: MPCP Elementary Parents

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS	GENERAL OR GROUP RESPONSE	SUPPORTING QUOTE(S)
How does the gender of the student influence parental school choice?	How does the gender of your children influence your family's education experiences?	<p>Girls are studious and boys stay in "trouble"</p> <p>Socializing is different for boys and girls</p> <p>Boys have attention challenges and require more attention</p> <p>Parents don't take gender into consideration when choosing schools:</p> <p>It's not a "gender thing" or "gender doesn't matter"</p> <p>Parents look for characteristics unique to their child and that influences their school choice: Boys are more motivated by sports than girls</p>	<p>p. 7</p> <p>p. 7</p> <p>p. 8(2), 9, 10</p> <p>p. 9(2), 10</p> <p>p. 3, 10(2)</p>
How does the governance structure or school management approach influence parental school choice?	What do you know about the way your school is governed or managed?	<p>These parents seem to understand the protocol. They engage the teacher first and then the principal and the board.</p> <p>"I chose it because of the way it was managed and the class size."</p> <p>Not sure.</p>	<p>p. 12, 13, 14</p> <p>p. 14</p> <p>p. 14</p>
How do broader social and economic concerns facing families influence parental school choice experiences?	Within the last year, with the exception of education, what is the single greatest challenge facing your family?	<p>Attitudes of parents have effect on child's school life</p> <p>Parents are overwhelmed and have natural limitations.</p> <p>Job security. Q: How many parents are single moms and how does this effect school choice?</p> <p>Managing their children's material wants and peer pressure.</p>	<p>p. 15</p> <p>p. 16</p> <p>p. 16 (2), 17</p> <p>p. 18</p>

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS	GENERAL OR GROUP RESPONSE	SUPPORTING QUOTE(S)
What other factors, beyond the specific research questions, influence parental school choice experiences?	Are there any questions or concerns you have about schools in Milwaukee we have not discussed?	<p>One parent notes that her school uses tutor versus pulling her child out of class and creating a stigma</p> <p>One school advertises “If we don’t have it, we will find a way to get it.”</p> <p>False advertise about class size. One parent believes it is racially motivated</p> <p>Academic focus areas in MPS vs. MPCP schools</p> <p>School reputation/outside perceptions are important</p> <p>Boy has a learning disability</p> <p>Parent involvement makes a big difference</p> <p>Parents would like to discuss the family and community influences</p>	<p>p. 4</p> <p>p. 10</p> <p>p. 13, 14</p> <p>p. 14</p> <p>p. 15</p> <p>p. 15</p> <p>p. 3, 4, 5, 17</p> <p>p. 18, 19</p>
How do families measure progress or success?	How do you determine if the student is progressing or succeeding?	<p>This group may not have understood the question. Parents provide examples of inputs.</p> <p>Homework</p> <p>Sports (are used as a source of motivation and leverage)</p> <p>Student attitude</p> <p>No one said anything about standardized testing.</p> <p>Grades</p>	<p>p. 3</p> <p>p. 3</p> <p>p. 5</p> <p>p. 6</p>

The parents represented 7 boys and 3 girls.

Family Voices on Parental School Choice in Milwaukee: What can we learn from low-income families?

About the Authors



Dr. Thomas Stewart is a Senior Research Associate with the School Choice Demonstration Project, and is Principal of Qwaku & Associates. His research, consulting and other professional activities have focused on improving the quality of life for under-resourced children and families. He has held senior executive or board member positions with the Black Alliance for Educational Options, Edison Schools, LearnNow, the National Black Graduate Student Association, NEXT Generation Foundation, Parents International, the SEED Public Charter School, and Symphonic Strategies. In 1994 he became the first graduate of the University of the District of Columbia to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University.



Juanita Lucas-McLean is a Senior Study director at Westat located in Rockville, Maryland. She has more than 30 years of experience in survey research, project management, program evaluation and qualitative analysis. Ms. Lucas-McLean has managed data collection for several large-scale national surveys funded by federal agencies including the Department of Education, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Agriculture. She has a B.A. from Syracuse University and a M.S.W. from Howard University.



Laura I. Jensen is a Research Associate in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas. She coordinates the logistics of the Milwaukee evaluation being conducted by the School Choice Demonstration Project. A former special education teacher, Ms. Jensen previously served as a Project Associate at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time at Wellesley College's Center for Research on Women. She has a B.A. in Psychology from Westminster College and an M.A. in Child Development from Tufts University.



Christina Fetzko is a Research Assistant at Westat located in Rockville, Maryland. She has been involved in a number of Westat's evaluation and technical assistance projects, including Enhancing Performance through Evaluation and Operation and the New York City (NYC) Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) Program Evaluation. Ms. Fetzko works with Westat on the data collection component of the SCDP MPCP evaluation. She received a B.A in Sociology from the University of Tampa.



Bonnie Ho is a Research Assistant at Westat located in Rockville, Maryland where she is involved in the data collection component of school choice program evaluations in Milwaukee and the District of Columbia. Prior to joining Westat, Ms. Ho worked as a research intern at Edweek for the Editorial Projects in Education report Quality Counts 2009. She received a B.A. in English at the University of California, Berkeley.



Sylvia Segovia is a Research Associate at Westat located in Rockville, Maryland. With over 10 years of experience in survey research, she has worked on a number of large-scale national studies, including the Evan Start Classroom Literacy Interventions and Outcomes Study and the Head Start Impact Study. She has a B.A. in Business Administration from the University of Maryland University College.



School Choice Demonstration Project

Department of Education Reform

University of Arkansas

201 Graduate Education Building

Fayetteville, AR 72701

479-575-6345

<http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Research.html>