



## K-12 Public Education through the Public Eye: Parents' Perceptions of School Choice

The post-Katrina public school landscape in New Orleans is uniquely characterized by open enrollment and citywide school choice. With no formalized attendance zones, all public schools in New Orleans are open to any student residing in the city limits, regardless of where they live. Parents and students are faced with a variety of schools and school types from which to choose. Additionally, charter schools make up a growing majority of the public schools in New Orleans and, as of October 2010, enrolled 71 percent of the public school students in the city. The all-choice model is meant to provide a diverse portfolio of schools that allows parents to “vote with their feet” and choose the best, most appropriate school for their children.

This unique, first-of-its kind, all-choice model has some unintended consequences for the parents, students, teachers, school leaders, and community of New Orleans. Because parents must select their child's school from a variety of schools, access to information about schools' performance is critical in the decision-making process. Furthermore, application and enrollment processes can be varied and sometimes complicated, creating a stratified system where parents and students who are less sophisticated or less able to navigate the choice system are relegated to the worst schools. Additionally, with just 13 percent of students attending the school in their neighborhood, transportation may cause issues for many schools and families. The lack of neighborhood schools may also have an effect on community and parent engagement.

In its *Spotlight on Choice* project, the Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University is exploring and assessing the transparency, equity, and sustainability of school choice in New Orleans, including application and enrollment processes, transportation, student mobility, and transfer policies.

### Key Findings

- Parent perception of public schools in New Orleans has become increasingly positive: 66 percent of parents surveyed in 2011 felt that schools are better after Hurricane Katrina, compared to 31 percent of parents surveyed in 2009.
- The majority of parents surveyed in 2011 (90 percent) strongly agreed that it is important to be able to choose their child's school, up from 81 percent in 2009.
- 86 percent of parents surveyed in 2011 agreed that information on school options is readily available, up from 62 percent in 2009.
- Over two-thirds of parents reported applying to only one school. This was true for parents of students at both RSD and OPSB schools.
- Nearly all parents said they value a school's academic performance, faculty and staff, and safety and discipline when choosing their child's school.
- The factors influencing school selection varied between low-income families and higher income families. Low-income parents placed relatively more importance on the school's proximity to home, the availability of transportation and after-school care or extended day programs, and the recommendations of friends and family.
- 82 percent of parents felt it was important that their child be able to attend their neighborhood school, though just 27 percent said that their child's school is less than one mile from home.
- Parents of students with special education needs seemed to be less pleased with the enrollment process than other parents. They were more likely to disagree that information on school options is readily available and more likely to have plans to change schools next year.



As part of this project, the Cowen Institute commissioned its third annual public opinion poll to assess public school parents' experiences in the open enrollment system and their perceptions of the availability of information on public schools and public school options. Giving a voice to parents on issues such as the availability of information and the ease of the enrollment process is crucial to creating structures and systems that ensure equitable access to high-quality public schools for all students in New Orleans.

### Methodology

This public opinion poll is the third annual survey conducted by the Cowen Institute to gauge public opinion about public schools in New Orleans. The survey was conducted by phone in October and November of 2011 by Market Research Insight on behalf of the Cowen Institute. The methodology was identical to that used in previous Cowen Institute opinion polls conducted in November 2009 and October 2010. The 2011 public opinion poll targeted public school parents. Because many parents may have more than one student enrolled in a public school in New Orleans, parents were asked to think of the experiences associated with only one of their children attending a New Orleans public school, the child that most recently celebrated a birthday.

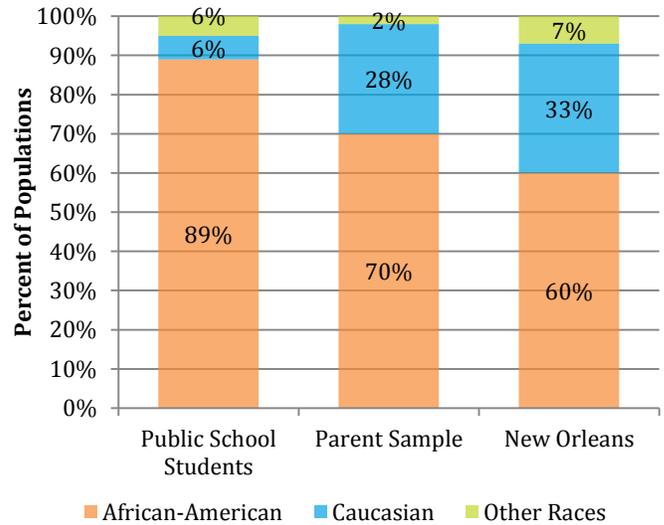
The sample population consisted of 349 randomly selected registered voters who are also parents of public school students in Orleans Parish. Though registered voters tend to be slightly older and have slightly higher educational attainment on average than the adult population as a whole, voter lists provide the most comprehensive sample of residents available for surveying and is the common standard used in survey research.

The survey sample is more representative of the racial and ethnic distribution of the city as a whole, and not of public school parents specifically. Although demographic information on parents of public school students is unavailable, the closest approximation to this information is data on the racial composition of students. About 89 percent of public school students in 2010 were African-American.

### Survey Respondents Demographics

Of survey respondents, 70 percent were African-American while 28 percent were Caucasian. More than half, 62 percent, reported an annual household income of less than \$35,000 per year, compared to 43 percent citywide as reported by the U.S. Census' latest American Community Survey five-year estimates. Generally, our sample had a lower household income than the city as a whole, though this is unsurprising. Many middle and upper income parents in New Orleans send their children to private and parochial schools, resulting in a reported income of public school parents lower on average than the overall population. (Public schools enroll only 68 percent of the students in PK-12 grades in New Orleans.) Figures 1 and 2 show the racial/ethnic and annual household income distribution of the 2011 survey sample as it compares to Census data on the city at large.

Figure 1: Racial/Ethnic Background of the Sample Population, New Orleans Public School Students, and New Orleans At Large



The majority of survey respondents, 63 percent, were between the ages of 25 and 44. About 32 percent were high school graduates with another 28 percent having attended some college. The survey sample was somewhat more educated than the New Orleans population at large, with 31 percent of respondents with at least some type of college degree compared to 25 percent as identified in the latest Census data.

Figure 2: Reported Annual Household Income of the Sample Population and New Orleans At Large

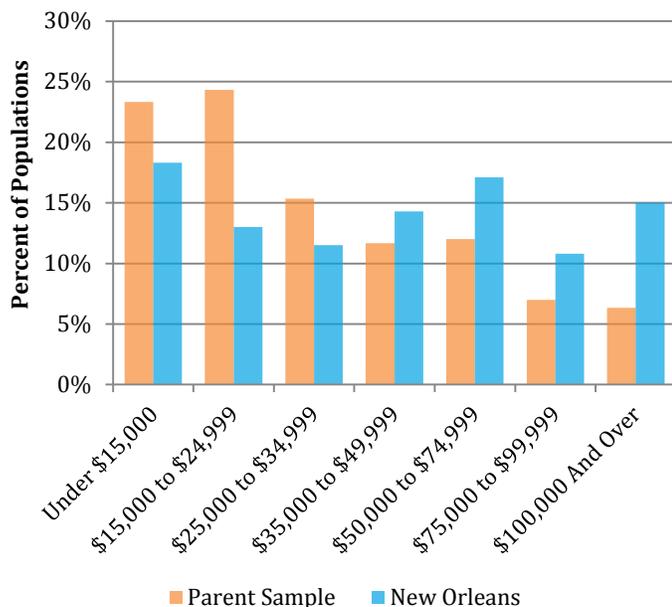
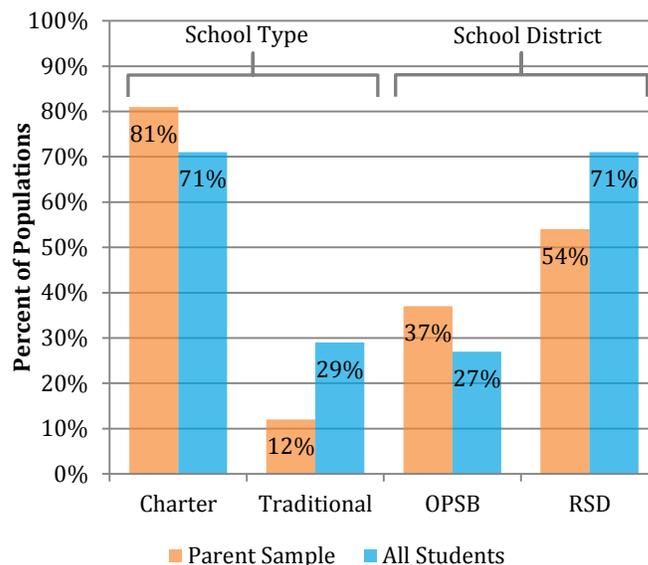


Figure 3: Percentage of Parent Sample by Child's School Type (2011)



Most of our respondents reported that their child attended a charter school, 81 percent, compared with 12 percent of parents whose child was enrolled in a traditional public school. (It was unclear in 7 percent of cases what type of school the child attended.) This differs somewhat from the October 2010 public school student enrollment counts, where 71 percent of public school students in New Orleans attended a charter school and 29 percent attended a traditional school. It is estimated that nearly 80 percent of students attend charter schools in 2011, though official data is not yet available. Charter schools make up the majority of schools in both school districts in New Orleans, the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and the Recovery School District (RSD). Survey respondents included a larger proportion of parents with a child in an OPSB school, 37 percent, compared to the percentage of public school students that actually attended OPSB schools in 2010 (27 percent).

According to data provided by the Louisiana Department of Education, most Caucasian students attend public schools governed by the OPSB. This was also true for our sample, with 81 percent of Caucasian public school parents reporting that their student attends an OPSB school, compared to only 19 percent of African-American parents.

Children of parents reporting an annual income below \$15,000 are the most likely to be in charter schools – 96 percent compared to 84 percent of all survey respondents. Children of parents reporting the lowest incomes are also significantly more likely to be enrolled in RSD schools, 93 percent, compared to 56 percent across the entire survey sample. There is generally a decline in the percentage of students enrolled in RSD schools as parental income increases.

Interestingly, a significantly larger percentage of parents surveyed, 15 percent, reported that their child received special education services (SPED) than the latest available average for all schools in New Orleans (the state reported 9 percent in 2009). Parents were not asked to specify their child's type of need, which could include gifted and talented. SPED data varied substantially by both race and school type. Among African-American parents, 16 percent reported that their child received special education services compared to 9 percent of Caucasian parents. Among parents with a student in an RSD school, 18 percent, compared with 11 percent among OPSB parents, reported having a SPED student. Additionally, 16 percent of charter school parents reported having a SPED student compared with 10 percent of traditional school parents.

### Survey Results

Because this survey focused on their experiences within an open enrollment, choice-based system,

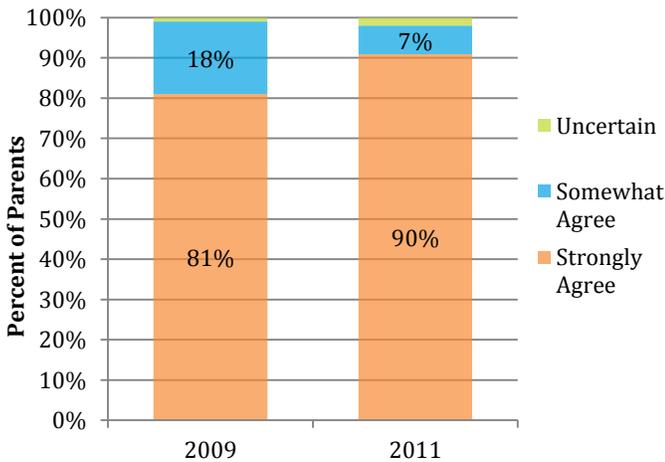
parents were asked about the type of information available and their satisfaction with access to information. They were also asked about the factors that were important to them when making choices about schools in New Orleans and their experiences with and perception of the enrollment process. The survey also allowed parents to identify the mode of transportation and the importance of school location. Lastly, as in the previous polls, respondents were asked about their general satisfaction with public schools and public education in New Orleans.

### School Choice

#### The Value of School Choice

School choice has become increasingly valued by public school parents. Almost all parent respondents (98 percent) agreed/strongly agreed that it is important to be able to choose what school their child attends, with 90 percent of parents reporting that they strongly agree. The percentage of parents that strongly agreed was higher 2011 than in 2009 (81 percent). Less than 1 percent of parents disagreed in both 2009 and 2011. While nearly all parents valued school choice, there was some variation in responses by school type as charter school parents were more likely to strongly agree (92 percent) that being able to choose their child’s school is important compared to traditional school parents (80 percent).

Figure 4: It is important that I am able to choose what school my child attends. (2009 and 2011)



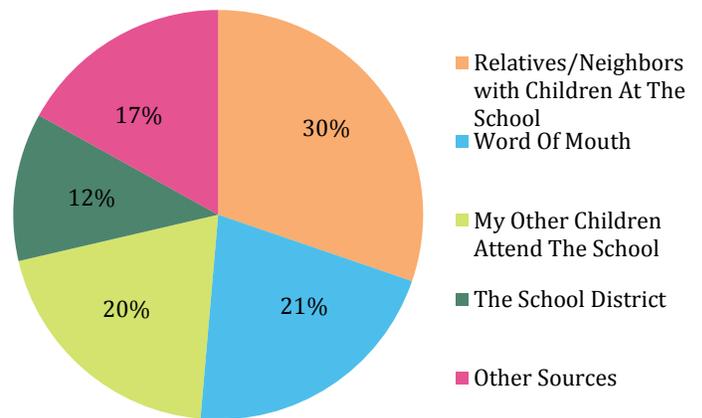
#### Availability of Information about Schools

For a market-based system of choice to be successful where quality schools thrive and poor-performing schools close due to parental demand (articulated

through their choices), it is vital that parents have easy access to accurate information on schools to inform their decisions. A number of the poll questions focused on the availability of information and the type of information accessed by parents.

We asked respondents how they first heard about the school where they enrolled their child. A plurality of parents first heard of their child’s school through relatives and neighbors, 30 percent, with another 21 percent hearing about the school through word of mouth, and 20 percent because one of their other children attends or attended the school. An additional 12 percent learned about the school through the school district. Figure 5 shows the percentage of parents who first heard about their child’s school through each of the various sources. 17 percent of parents identified other responses, which included: school fairs (5 percent); the New Orleans Parents’ Guide (2 percent); advertisements and signs (2 percent); the newspaper (1 percent); visits from school staff (1 percent); staff at another school (1 percent); and other (5 percent).

Figure 5: How did you first hear about your child’s school? (2011)

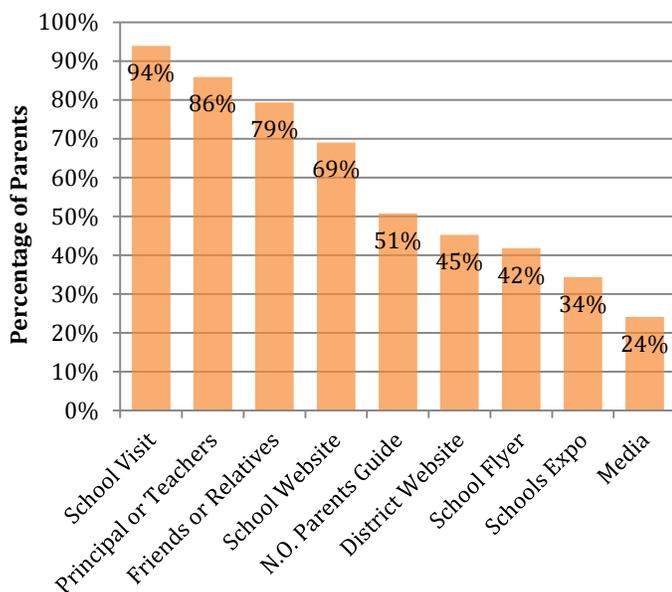


While about 20 percent of all parent respondents first heard about the school where their child is enrolled because one of their other children attends or attended the school, there was some variation in responses about the relationship between siblings and school awareness. Three times more RSD parents than OPSB parents (31 percent versus 9 percent) said they first heard about the school because one of their other children attended the school. More charter school parents than traditional school parents (24

percent versus 7 percent) said that they first heard about a school because one of their other children attended. More than six times as many African-American parents than Caucasian parents (27 percent versus 4 percent) first heard about a school because their other children attended.

Parents were also asked to identify all the sources they accessed for information on public schools. Almost all respondents (94 percent), regardless of race or income, reported receiving information on the school they selected for their child from a school site visit. Principals and teachers (86 percent) and friends and relatives (79 percent) were also popular sources of information. The media was the least-accessed, with only 24 percent of parents reporting it as a source of information on schools. Figure 6 shows the frequencies of sources.

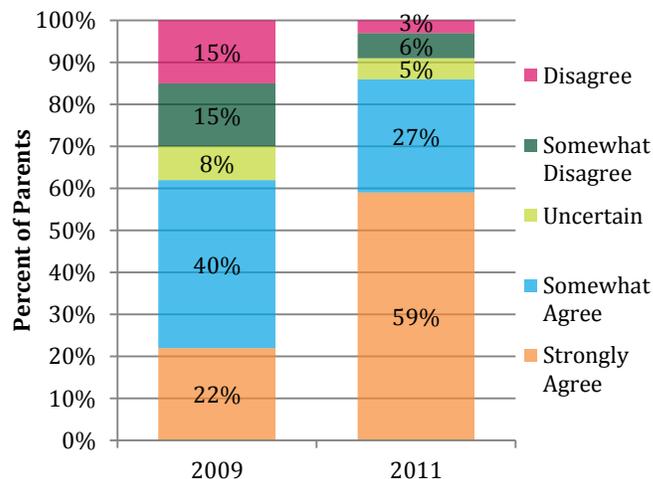
Figure 6: What sources did you use to get information about the school you chose? (2011)



Given that access to information is important in an all-choice system, the survey asked parents if they felt that information on their school options was readily available. Most parents, 86 percent, agreed/strongly agreed that information was readily available, with 59 percent strongly agreeing. While there was little difference in the percentages of African-American and Caucasian parents that agreed/strongly agreed, more Caucasian parents (69 percent) than African-American parents (55 percent) agreed strongly. The 2011 results represent a

significant increase in the perception of information availability over the 2009 parent poll. In 2009, only 62 percent of parents agreed/strongly agreed and of those only 22 percent agreed strongly. Figure 7 shows parents' perceptions on the availability of information about school options in both 2009 and 2011.

Figure 7: Information about public school options is readily available. (2009 and 2011)

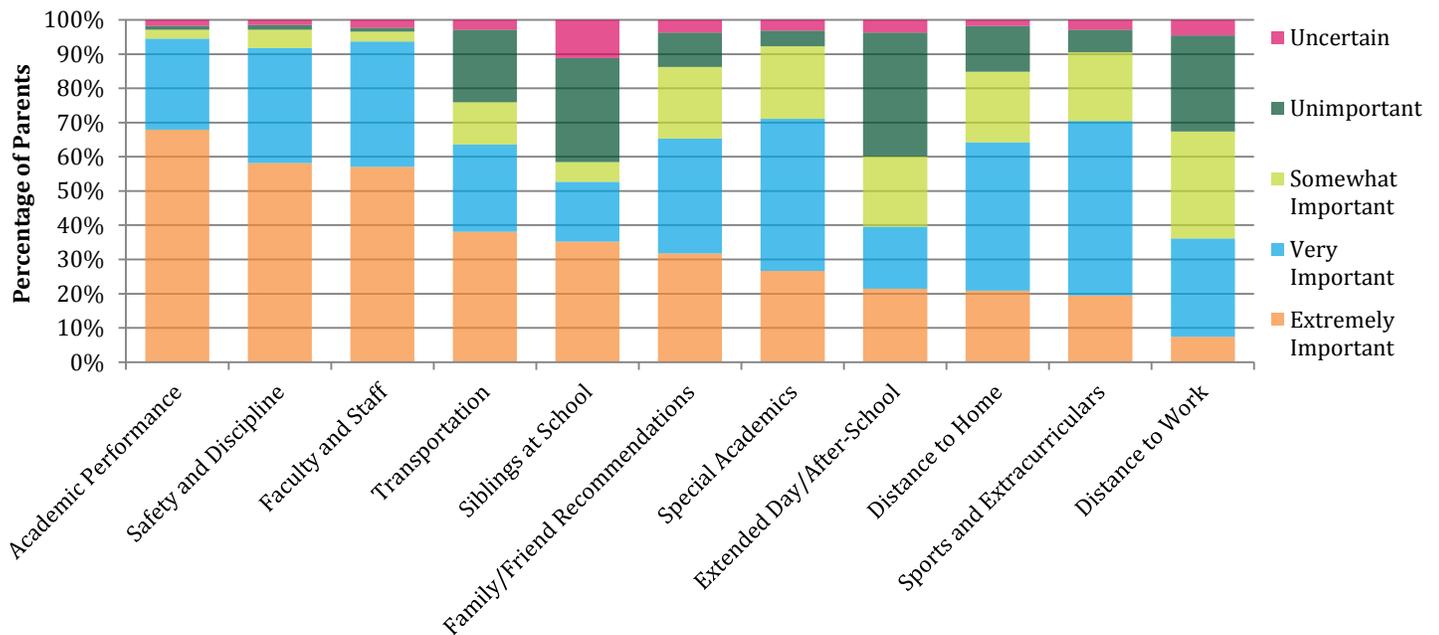


There was some variation in the answers to this question by income. Interestingly, those at the highest income bracket (\$100,000 or more annually) were the most likely to feel that there is not enough information about public school options readily available; 16 percent disagreed/strongly disagreed. Comparatively, only 3 percent of parents with an annual household income under \$15,000 disagreed/strongly disagreed that information was readily available. There was no clear pattern among respondents of other income groups or other parent or student characteristics.

#### Decision-Making Factors in School Choice

Survey respondents were asked about the importance of 11 different factors in their decision on where to enroll their child in school. Overall, parents agreed that a school's academic performance (95 percent), faculty and staff (94 percent), and safety and discipline policies (92 percent) were very important or extremely important to them in choosing a school. The availability of special academic programs (71 percent) or sports and extracurricular activities (70 percent) were also important. Figure 8 shows how important parents felt each factor was in their decision-making.

Figure 8: Importance of Each Factor to Parents in Their Choice of Schools for Their Children (2011)



The importance of some factors in school choice varied by school type, race, and income. About half of the parents of students in RSD schools (49 percent), African-American parents (47 percent), and low-income parents (57 percent) found the availability of extended-day school programs and afterschool care to be much more important than other parents.

Lower-income parents (parents reporting an annual income of \$15,000 or less) also differed from parents in other income groups in important ways. They generally found discipline and safety “extremely important” at higher rates and placed greater value on school recommendations from family and friends in making decisions about where to send their children to school. Low-income parents also reported that having a sibling at the school was important at greater rates than other parents.

### Enrollment Process

The RSD is launching a new centralized enrollment system for the 2012-13 school year. For all traditional and charter schools under its jurisdiction enrollment and student assignments will be made through the new system. Previously, however, the application and enrollment process had been managed by individual schools. Families were required to submit a separate application for each school and could be accepted and have a seat

reserved at multiple schools. OPSB and BESE schools continue to have separate and often different application requirements and deadlines.

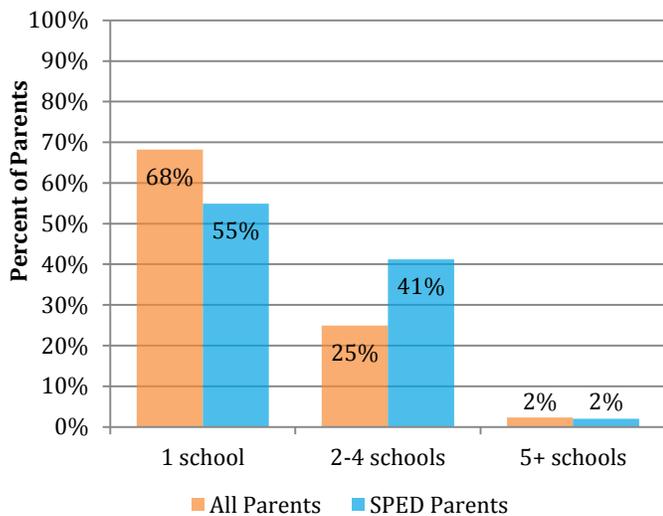
### Application Requirements and Submissions

To help inform the implementation of the enrollment system, the poll asked a number of questions about the current enrollment process to understand how families applied for and enrolled in public schools for the current 2011-12 school year. When asked about enrollment requirements, parents reported that their child’s school required the following: an application (88 percent); parental participation (70 percent); academic requirements, such as certain test scores, past report cards, or a writing sample (49 percent); and, a behavior or discipline contract (31 percent).

Though parents can apply to as many schools as they like, most parents (68 percent) reported applying to just one school, while 25 percent of parents said they applied to two to four schools, and just 2 percent of parents said they applied to five or more schools. Similarly, the majority of parents (76 percent) reported that only one school accepted their child for enrollment, while 20 percent reported that their child was accepted at two or more schools. Of those parents who applied to more than one school, 30 percent said their child was accepted to only one school. This pattern was true regardless of

race/ethnicity and income level. However, parents of SPED students were significantly more likely to report applying to multiple schools than other parents: 43 percent of parents of SPED students applied to two or more schools compared to 24 percent of parents of non-SPED students. Figure 9 shows the responses of all parents and parents with SPED students.

Figure 9: How many public schools did you apply to for enrollment? (2011)



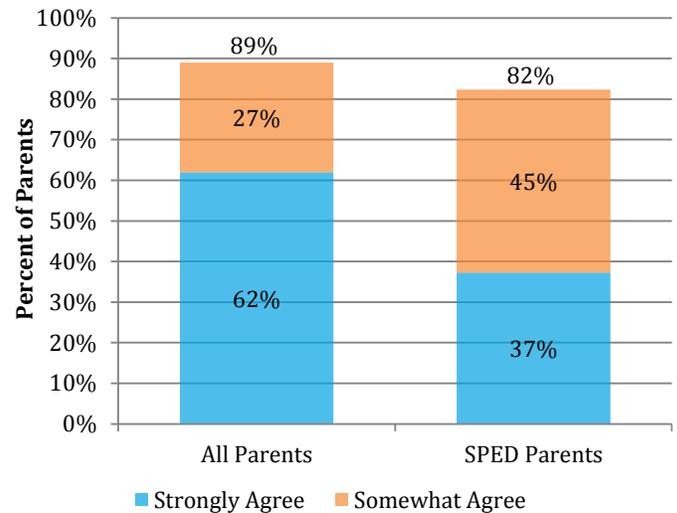
Parents were asked how they submitted the application and other necessary information to apply to enroll their child in school. Most parents (85 percent) submitted enrollment information in person at the school site, while 7 percent enrolled their child in person at the district central office. This aspect of the enrollment process also varied for parents of SPED students, with 18 percent submitting enrollment information in person at the district central office compared to 6 percent of parents of non-SPED students.

#### Parent Satisfaction with School Enrollment

Overall, parents reported satisfaction with the enrollment process and its outcomes. When asked whether it was easy to register their child for school, the majority of parents (89 percent) answered that they agreed/strongly agreed, not significantly different from 2009 (84 percent). However, parents of SPED students were less likely than parents of non-SPED students to agree/strongly agree that it was easy to register their child for school (82 percent versus 90 percent). Figure 10 illustrates the

percentage of parents satisfied with the school registration process.

Figure 10: It was easy to register my child for school. (2011)



Parents surveyed in 2011 were generally satisfied with the enrollment process outcomes. When asked if their child is enrolled in the school that was their first or second choice, the overwhelming majority of parents (95 percent) agreed/strongly agreed that their child is enrolled in their first or second choice in 2009. There was variation in the responses by traditional school parents compared to charter school parents; while almost no charter school parents (less than 1 percent) disagreed/strongly disagreed that their child is enrolled in their first or second choice school, 12 percent of traditional school parents disagreed/strongly disagreed.

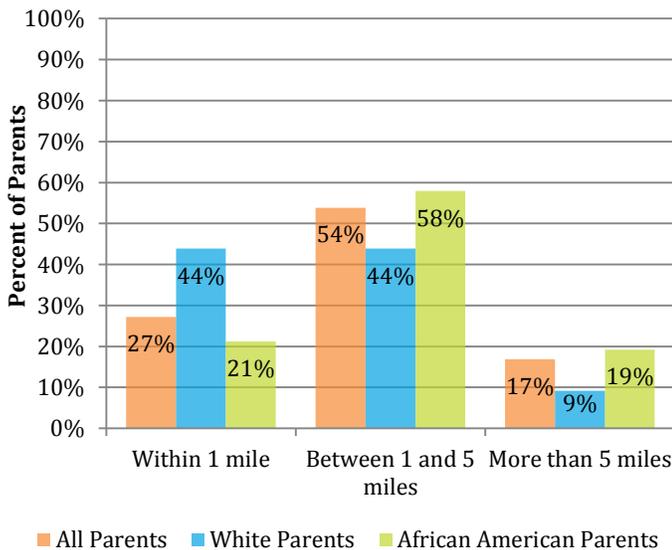
Additionally, most parents (87 percent) said they do not have plans to change their child's school next school year. Of the 10 percent of parents that planned to change schools, about half reported that their child's school will not offer the necessary grade level. The other half of parents said they planned to change schools because their child's school is closing, they are unhappy with the school, or another unspecified reason. Among parents of SPED students, however, 14 percent said they wished to enroll their child in a different school next year, compared to only 6 percent of parents of non-SPED students. Nearly three-quarters of parents of SPED students who

planned to change enrollment next year reported doing so for reasons other than the school not offering the necessary grade level. RSD parents were also more likely to say they would like to change their child's school next year with 11 percent reporting plans to change schools compared to 5 percent of OPSB parents. Similarly, while 10 percent of African-American parents said they intended to change their child's school next year, just 5 percent of Caucasian parents reported plans to change enrollment.

### Access and Transportation

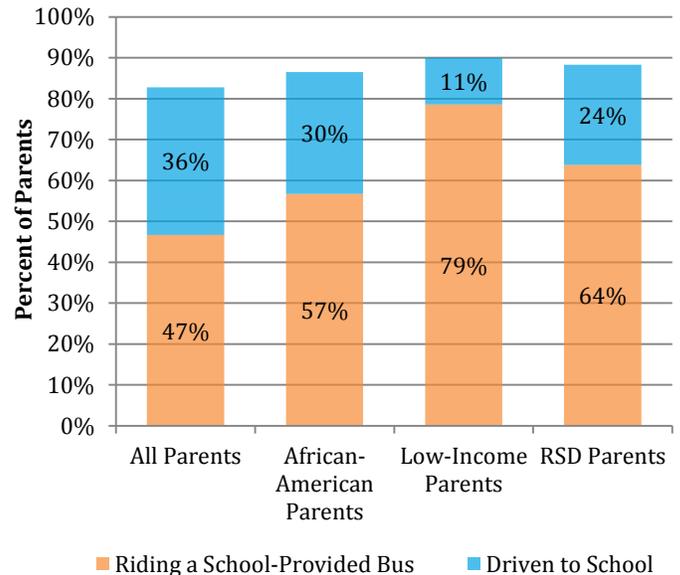
As a result of citywide open enrollment, many public school students in New Orleans travel outside their neighborhood to attend school, making transportation a critical issue for many families and schools. The poll asked parents a number of questions related to transportation issues. When asked how close in proximity their home is to their child's school, just over half of parents (54 percent) said between one and five miles. More than a quarter of parents (27 percent) reported living within one mile of their child's school, while 16 percent reported living more than five miles away. The response to this question varied somewhat by race. African-American families were less likely to live close to the school: 21 percent of African-American parents said they live within a mile of their child's school compared to 44 percent of Caucasian parents.

Figure 11: About how close in proximity to your home would you estimate your child's school to be? (2011)



The poll also asked parents about the method of transportation that their child takes to school most days. The most common response was that their child rides a school-provided bus (47 percent), followed by being driven to school (36 percent), walking or biking (14 percent), and riding public transportation (1 percent). Responses varied, however, by race, income, and school type. Riding a school bus was more commonly reported among African-American parents than Caucasian parents (57 percent versus 24 percent). Additionally, bus-ridership decreased and driving to school increased as parents' income increased: 79 percent of the poorest parents (annual income of \$15,000 or less) reported that their child rides a school bus compared to 16 percent of the wealthiest parents (annual income of \$100,000 or more), and 11 percent of the poorest parents said their child is driven to school compared to 63 percent of the wealthiest parents. Finally, parent responses suggested that riding the bus was more common among RSD students (64 percent) compared to OPSB students (29 percent), and OPSB students were more likely to be driven to school (51 percent) compared to RSD students (25 percent). Figure 12 shows the variation in responses by mode of transportation.

Figure 12: How does your child travel to school in the morning on most days? (2011)



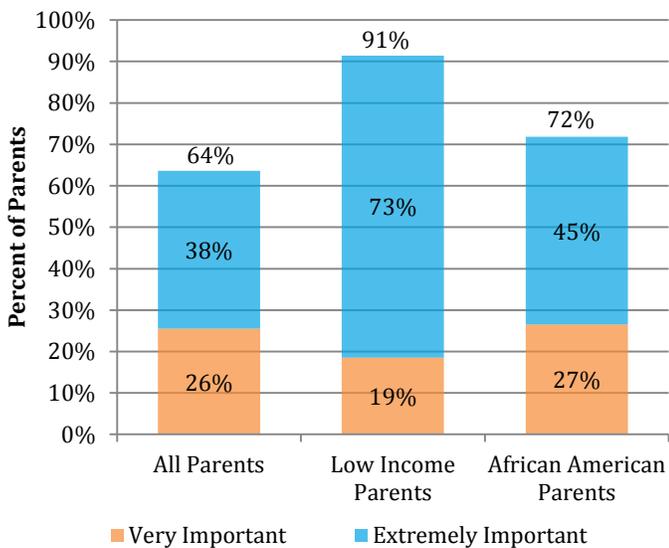
Parents were also asked about the importance of a school's distance from home or work as well as the importance of transportation as a factor in deciding to enroll their child in the school. The school's

distance from home was rated as important/extremely important by 64 percent of parents, while the school's distance from work was important/extremely important to 36 percent of parents.

When asked about the importance of the availability of transportation, 64 percent of parents reported that it was important/extremely important, with 38 percent specifying the availability of transportation as extremely important. Low-income parents as well as African-American parents, whose children generally rely on a school bus to get to and from school, were more likely to value the availability of transportation when choosing their child's school. 73 percent of the poorest parents (annual income of \$15,000 or less) responded that transportation is extremely important compared to 5 percent of the wealthiest parents (annual income of \$100,000 or more).

Similarly, 72 percent of African-American parents felt that the availability of transportation was important/extremely important in their decision to choose the school, compared with 45 percent of Caucasian parents. Figure 13 illustrates parents' responses to the importance of transportation.

Figure 13: Importance of Transportation Availability in Decision-Making (2011)



Parents felt it is important that their child is able to attend their neighborhood school. The majority of parents (82 percent) agreed/strongly agreed that it is

important that their child be able to attend their neighborhood school, up slightly from 75 percent in 2009. Parents of SPED students, however, were somewhat less concerned with having access to their neighborhood school with 63 percent responding that they agree/strongly agree. There was also significant variation in the answer to this question by income. The importance of neighborhood schools declined as income increased. While 84 percent of parents with an annual household income under \$15,000 agreed/strongly agreed that having access to neighborhood schools is important, only 47 percent of those in highest income bracket felt that it is important that their child be able to attend their neighborhood school.

### Public Schools Post-Katrina

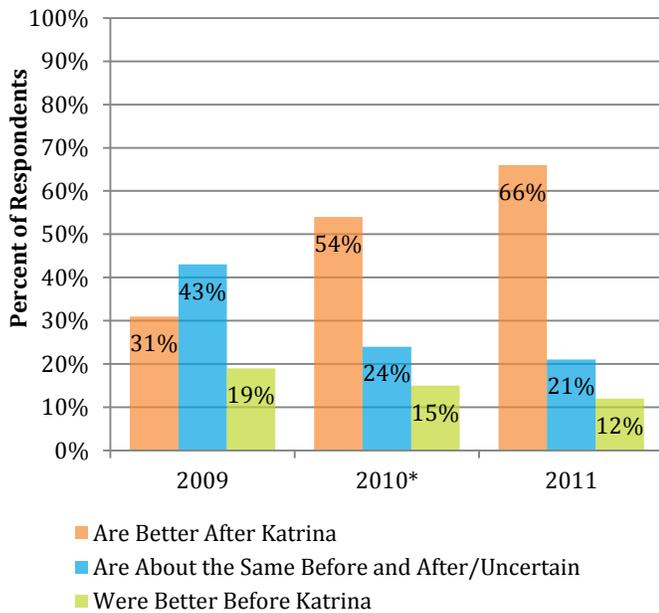
For the last three years, the Cowen Institute's public opinion poll asked respondents about their perception of the quality of public schools and public education in New Orleans. In the past six years, public education in New Orleans has changed significantly, with a state takeover of the majority of schools and the transition to a system of predominantly charter schools. The Cowen Institute's 2010 public opinion poll surveyed randomly selected registered voters; the 2009 and 2011 poll surveyed randomly selected registered voters who had at least one child attending a public school in New Orleans.

In all surveys, participants were asked whether or not they believed that public schools in New Orleans are better since Hurricane Katrina, were better before Katrina, or are about the same before and after. The percentage of parents that said public schools are better after Katrina has nearly doubled since 2009. The 2011 survey found that 66 percent of parents questioned felt that public schools in New Orleans are better after Katrina. This compares to 54 percent of survey respondents in 2010 and 31 percent in 2009. Figure 14 compares parent and voter responses on the quality of public schools in New Orleans for each survey year.

In 2011, responses of public school parents varied, however, by school type. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of charter school parents responded that schools are better than they were before Katrina, compared to 42 percent of traditional school parents. Additionally, more than three-quarters of RSD parents (76 percent) felt that schools are better since

Katrina, compared to 61 percent of OPSB parents. Responses also varied by the parent's age: younger parents, between 18 and 44 years old, were more likely to feel schools are better post-Katrina (82 percent) than parents aged 45 and older (60 percent). Interestingly, parents of SPED students responded similarly to parents of non-SPED students with over two-thirds saying that schools are better post-Katrina. There was no significant difference in responses according to race or income.

Figure 14: Public Schools in New Orleans Are Better, the Same, or Worse Than Before Hurricane Katrina

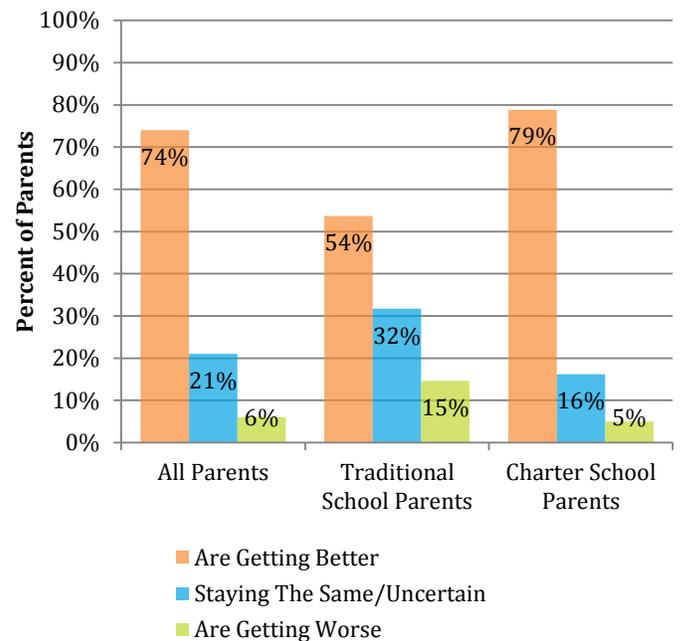


\*Respondents include voters who may or may not have a child in a public school in New Orleans.

Parents not only reported that schools are better after Hurricane Katrina, but that they continue to feel optimistic about improvements going forward. In 2010 and 2011 participants were asked about the trajectory of public schools in New Orleans: are schools getting better, getting worse, or neither improving nor getting worse? In 2011, 74 percent of survey respondents said that schools are getting better, compared to 58 percent in 2010. Though the 2010 and 2011 responses are not directly comparable since the 2011 poll surveyed only public school parents rather than general voters, the responses illustrate an increasingly positive perception of public schools in New Orleans.

Again, responses varied by school type as well as the parent's age. 79 percent of charter school parents said that schools are getting better, compared to 54 percent of traditional school parents. Additionally, 82 percent of RSD parents responded that schools are improving, compared to 66 percent of OPSB parents. Likewise, 91 percent of parents between 18 and 44 years old responded that schools are getting better, while 64 percent of parents 45 and older felt schools are getting better. Again, there was no significant difference in responses according to SPED, race, or income.

Figure 15: Public Schools in New Orleans are Getting Better, Getting Worse, or Staying the Same (2011)



## Conclusion

New Orleans currently has a system of public schools in which parents can choose what school their child attends. The 2011 poll results make it evident that parents overwhelmingly support their right to choose and are generally pleased with the application and enrollment processes. It is clear that parents support policy of school choice.

However, there remains room for improvement in the open enrollment and school choice system. For example, most parents hear about their child's school largely through word-of-mouth and social networks rather than official school or district sources.

Additionally, most parents only apply to one school. These responses indicate that some parents may not be fully taking advantage of the school choice that they so strongly support. Additionally, parents of special education students reported less satisfaction with the application and enrollment process indicating that the system may serve some families better than others.

There are currently significant changes being made to the application and enrollment process in an effort to rectify some of the unintended consequences that have resulted from the system of open enrollment. The RSD is establishing a centralized application process for its schools, while many of the OPSB schools have come together to standardize their applications. Parents' access to accurate and comprehensive information about public schools and the enrollment process will continue to be crucial to ensuring a successful system. We hope that the results of this poll can inform these new application processes, as well as any future changes to the enrollment system, to ensure equitable access to high quality public schools for all students in New Orleans.



The Scott S. Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives at Tulane University is an action oriented think tank that informs and advances research-based policy, legislative, and programmatic solutions to eliminate the challenges impeding the success of K-12 education in New Orleans and beyond.



### **Applied Research at the Cowen Institute**

We serve as an objective voice to education leaders, policymakers, the media, and the public about what is taking place in public education in New Orleans—particularly in the areas of accountability, finance, facilities, and governance—by disseminating relevant data and research. This publication, and others released in the past, can be found at <http://education.tulane.edu>.

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