Spotlight on Choice
Parent Opinions on School Selection in New Orleans

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The Scott S. Cowen Institute
for Public Education Initiatives
at Tulane University

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School choice and open enrollment policies play a growing role in education reform across the country. The success of school choice as a policy for reform centers on the ability of all parents to be informed, rational consumers. In theory, parents consider a set of preferences, qualities, and school characteristics that they consider important; they gather information about school options, and ultimately select the school that best fits their varied needs.

In New Orleans, all public schools—both charter and district-run—are citywide access schools, allowing parents to select among various schools and school types regardless of where they live. In the 2012-13 school year, over 80 percent of public school students are enrolled in charter schools and more than 60 percent of students attend school outside their immediate neighborhood. The far-reaching school choice policy in place today in New Orleans is unprecedented.

In order for school choice policy to effectively increase the quality of public education, it must be responsive to the way in which parents navigate the school system, the qualities they value and desire in schools, and how they feel about the quality of school options. This study uses information gathered in parent focus groups to evaluate the extent to which the assumptions of school choice hold true. We conducted nine focus groups in July and August 2012 with 81 families, representing approximately 132 school-age children, 114 of whom were attending a public school in Orleans Parish.

Our analysis addresses several issues related to the implementation of an effective school choice program:

- Do parents have adequate information about the application and admissions processes to ensure their children have access to all available school options?
- Do parents have accurate information about schools and school options in order to select the school that best fits their children’s educational needs?
- What criteria do parents use to make school decisions, and how do parents prioritize their preferences in order to select schools?

These key questions are critical to understanding the extent to which school choice in New Orleans has afforded parents with better education options for their children.

KEY FINDINGS

Based on the focus group discussions, we conclude that, due to limited seats at high quality schools and a complicated application process, school choice in New Orleans currently does an inadequate job providing all parents with access to the best schools for their children. In order to present evidence to support this conclusion, the focus group results are organized into four sections: Information, School Selection and Decision-making, Quality Schools, and Parent Satisfaction.

Information

The focus groups revealed that misinformation about the public school application and admissions processes in New Orleans proliferates among the system’s primary consumers. Because parents relied heavily on information from friends and
family members, misinformation was widespread. The changes associated with the implementation of OneApp, the Recovery School District’s new school application process, contributed somewhat to the amount of misinformation.

Despite misinformation about the application and admissions processes, parents generally reported feeling that they had access to reliable and accurate information about school programs and quality. Parents in the focus groups primarily trusted their friends and families to provide them with information about schools. Although many participants accessed information through other means as well, they felt that the best information stemmed from the experiences of their friends and family members.

Though some parents reported a sense that schools were either reluctant to share information or falsely marketed themselves, most parents discussed the value of visiting schools and attending school open houses. Nonetheless, many parents believed that the only way to really know about the quality of the school is to enroll your child. Perhaps as a result, the decision-making process did not conclude after initial school enrollment. Parents continued to evaluate their decision and assess other opportunities. They did not hesitate to transfer schools when they felt a better option was available.

School Selection and Decision-making

The focus group conversations also revealed the immense complexity involved with school choice decision-making. Most parents reported beginning the school choice process with a small subset of schools in mind. This initial list differed for each parent and child, depending on their family’s circumstances, and was most often based on the school’s reputation and location or proximity to home.

With this smaller subset of schools in mind, parents then sought additional information and weighed their priorities to make a final decision, taking into account factors such as academics, curriculum, and school culture. It was clear that parents based their decisions on more than just test scores. In identifying schools that would best fit their child’s needs, parents seemed to consider the whole child and searched for schools and programs that addressed a variety of interests. Nonetheless, the most important decision-making factor, above all else, was a school’s reputation among the parent’s community based on word of mouth.

For focus group participants who had children with special education needs, the difficulties could be overwhelming. Parents of students with special education needs, whether their child had a physical or mental disability or was gifted, approached school selection somewhat differently than other parents and encountered more challenges. They reported that they had a difficult time finding schools that were viable options for their family, and they often sacrificed other priorities such as proximity and keeping siblings together to ensure their child was well-served.

Quality Schools

School choice is intended to give parents access to higher quality schools that best meet the needs of their individual children, but choice among limited high quality options may not feel like choice at all. The focus group participants were both passionate and articulate about the features they wanted in New Orleans schools. Parents’ descriptions of quality schools went beyond standardized test scores, which are commonly used to define school quality in New Orleans. In addition, parents’ expectations for quality schools exceeded the qualities they reported seeing in schools today.
Parent Satisfaction

In general, parents viewed the reforms that have been implemented post-Katrina as positive and were supportive of school choice. In fact, parents did not hesitate to exercise their right to choose, and nearly half the parents participating in the focus groups used school choice to leave a school because they were dissatisfied. Yet many parents articulated difficulties adjusting to the changes in the public school system. Some parents expressed a distrust of the reforms and were reluctant to embrace the changes. Parents felt stressed and anxious about the school selection, application and admissions processes. Most commonly, however, parents expressed frustration with the lack of quality school options. Many parents were able to enroll their child in a school they felt met their needs, but most had to make compromises in choosing that school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers and public education stakeholders in New Orleans and across the country have the opportunity to create a school system that provides access to quality school options for all parents and families. Based on our findings, policymakers should prioritize identifying solutions that will:

1. Make it easier for parents to access schools by including all public schools in a single application and more clearly communicating admissions requirements;
2. Help schools and parents meaningfully engage with each other so that parents have a voice in improving their children's schools;
3. Provide parents with access to relevant and reliable information about schools, including information from the perspectives of other parents;
4. Ensure that students with special education needs are able to receive services at a school of their choice; and,
5. Provide parents with quality school choices close to home by increasing the number of and capacity at quality schools in underserved neighborhoods.

Lastly, it was clear from the focus group discussions that ongoing communication with parents and families about school choice is critical to ensuring a successful program that truly meets the needs of those who use it. The districts must continue to support and improve communication with parents and through parents, recognizing that parents rely most on information from each other.

The education reforms undertaken in the wake of Hurricane Katrina were revolutionary. Overnight, parents who had returned to New Orleans came back to a radically different school system where parents could choose any public school in the city and charter schools dominated the public education arena. Unfortunately, limited seats at high quality schools and a complicated application process impede some parents from gaining access to the best schools for their children. New Orleans can and must do better to ensure school choice is an effective and successful policy for reform.
School choice and open enrollment policies play a growing role in education reform across the country. A core tenet of school choice as an education reform mechanism is that the quality of schools improves through a competitive process where parents gather information about schools’ tests scores, specialized programs, and teachers and then choose the best from a diverse set of educational alternatives. Theoretically, parents will select the highest quality schools, low-performing schools will close due to declining demand, competition will force schools to focus on improving quality, and the overall quality of public schools will improve.

The success of school choice as a policy for reform centers on the ability of all parents to be informed, rational consumers. As rational decision-makers, parents will select the highest quality schools, low-performing schools will close due to declining demand, competition will force schools to focus on improving quality, and the overall quality of public schools will improve.

In order for school choice policy to effectively increase the quality of public education, it must be responsive to the way in which parents navigate the school system, the qualities they value and desire in schools, and how they feel about the quality of school options. Answering these key questions about the parent decision-making process is critical to understanding the effectiveness of school choice as a successful reform strategy in New Orleans.

Since 2005, all public schools in New Orleans—both charter and district-run—have been citywide access schools, allowing parents to select among a variety of schools and school types regardless of where they live. This qualitative study uses information gathered in parent focus groups to examine the extent to which parents have access to adequate information and utilize it to make rational school choices.

This research study builds on the findings of an October 2011 phone survey of public school parents commissioned by the Cowen Institute to assess parents’ experiences in the open enrollment system and their perceptions of the availability of information on schools and school options. Parents’ conversations in the focus groups reaffirmed the phone survey findings while adding valuable context. The full phone survey results are available on the Cowen Institute’s website at www.coweninstitute.org.

This paper is organized in the following way. It begins with a brief background of school choice and the education landscape in New Orleans. The background section is followed by an explanation of our research methodology. Next, our research findings are
presented in the results section, which makes up the bulk of this report. Finally, the report concludes with a series of recommendations to ensure the school choice policy in New Orleans truly serves New Orleans’ parents, students, and families. Through the exploration of the individual attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of parents participating in school choice, this report considers the extent to which the critical assumptions of full information and rational decision-making hold true in New Orleans.
Hurricane Katrina served as the catalyst for public education reform and provided the opportunity for fundamental changes in the structure and governance of public schools in New Orleans. Following the storm, charter schools began to dominate the portfolio of schools operated by both the local Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and the state-run Recovery School District (RSD) in New Orleans. Given the nature of both the flood damage and the sporadic return of residents to their neighborhoods following the storm, public school attendance zones were abolished for all schools, creating a system of citywide school choice.

As of the 2012-13 school year, over 80 percent of public school students are enrolled in charter schools and more than 60 percent of students attend school outside their immediate neighborhood. All public schools in New Orleans—both charter and district-run—are citywide access schools, allowing parents to select among various schools and school types regardless of where they live.

Under OPSB and RSD, families have access to a range of options and, as failing schools are closed and new charter schools open, the options are continually changing. In the 2012-13 school year, the OPSB directly operates six schools and provides oversight to 12 charter schools; four of these OPSB schools have selective admissions criteria. The RSD, which enrolls the majority of public school students in the city, directly operates 12 schools and provides oversight to 56 charter schools. Two-thirds of the RSD charter schools are operated by charter management organizations (CMOs) and belong to one of ten charter networks. Often the schools within a network share a common culture and curriculum. Twenty-eight charter schools (18 RSD schools and 10 OPSB schools) do not belong to a network. Lastly, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) oversees four charter schools located in New Orleans that also enroll students from nearby parishes. Appendix A includes a detailed organizational chart of public schools in New Orleans.

In addition to the many public school types in New Orleans, the Student Scholarships for Education Excellence Program provides low-income students access to publicly-funded scholarships to attend non-public schools. In the 2012-13 school year, 2,440 students (6 percent of total public school enrollment) are participating in the program. The scholarship program has been in place in New Orleans since 2008. Overall, more than 25 percent of school-age children in New Orleans attend a private school compared to 17 percent statewide.

The state of Louisiana primarily relies on annual School Performance Scores (SPS) to report and monitor public school performance. Each year, the Louisiana Department of Education calculates a numerical SPS for public schools and assigns a corresponding letter grade. The SPS is based on student performance on state assessments, as well as dropout rates and attendance rates. Based on the 2012 SPS in New Orleans, seven schools (9 percent) received an A, 11 schools (14 percent) received a B, nine schools (11 percent) received a C, 20 schools (25 percent) received a D, and 32 schools (41 percent) received an F. Twelve schools did not receive an SPS or a letter grade because they were
new schools or were slated to close. School performance in New Orleans is improving at a faster rate than the state average. The city’s combined District Performance Score in 2012 was 93.7, up 65 percent from 56.9 in 2005.

The public school application and admissions processes have evolved in the years since citywide open enrollment was first implemented. Initially, individual schools managed their own application process, meaning applications and deadlines varied across the system. Schools made their own admissions decisions and held their own lotteries.

Beginning with the 2012-13 school year, RSD implemented a centralized enrollment process, OneApp, in which all RSD schools (charter and district-run) were required to participate. Only RSD schools participated in the first year of OneApp. In the 2013-14 school year, OPSB direct-run schools, BESE charter schools, and non-public scholarship schools will join OneApp. As of this writing, no OPSB charter schools had elected to participate. The 12 OPSB charter schools with an independent application process include eight of the 10 highest performing schools in the city, based on 2012 SPS. In December 2012, OPSB passed policy changes that will eventually require these charter schools.

Using OneApp, parents rank schools in order of preference, which allows parents to complete one application form per student. The applications are analyzed by the RSD central office and school assignments are generated based on a computer algorithm that prioritizes sibling placements, as well as large geographic catchment areas. The OneApp system is intended to streamline and simplify the school selection and application process.
Research Methodology

This study uses information gathered in parent focus groups to examine the extent to which parents have access to adequate information and utilize it to make rational school choices. Nine focus groups were conducted in July and August 2012 with 81 families, representing approximately 132 school-age children, 114 of whom were attending a public school in Orleans Parish. With an intentional focus on public school choice, the majority of the participants had children enrolled in public schools. Nonetheless, as parents often move fluidly between public and private schools, the focus groups included parents of children in both public schools and private schools, as well as those attending private schools with publicly-funded scholarships.

The Cowen Institute contracted with an established civic leader to recruit participants through broad outreach across the New Orleans community in an effort to ensure participation reflected the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup of the city. Informational flyers were posted in public areas such as libraries, coffee shops, and grocery stores, and they were distributed to parents at summer camps and local events. The flyers provided information about the topic of discussion, the purpose of research, compensation, and a phone number and email address to sign up for a session.

Parents who called or emailed to express interest in the focus groups were given a choice of sessions with a variety of times and locations. All parents or guardians who volunteered were invited to participate and were assigned to a focus group that best met their availability. Approximately 120 parents called or emailed to express interest in participating in the focus groups; some of the interested parents were not available for any of the scheduled focus groups or signed up but did not attend a focus group. Every effort was made to accommodate interested parents.

The focus group participants represented a wide range of characteristics. Focus groups included parents of students who attended all school types: Recovery School District (RSD) and Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) schools, charter and district-run schools, private/parochial schools, Head Start preschool programs, and public schools in nearby Jefferson Parish. The families represented 14 of the city’s 17 major zip codes and 41 of the 90 public schools in New Orleans. Because the emphasis of this study was on public school choice, the majority of parents (91 percent) had at least one student enrolled in a public school. Seventy-one percent of the participants had children enrolled in public charter schools, while 12 percent had children enrolled in district-run public schools. A total of 10 (7.6 percent) participants had students enrolled in non-public schools in New Orleans. Appendix B includes detailed participant information and demographics.

The focus group sessions included an average of nine participants, with individual sessions ranging from five to 14 participants. Participants were compensated for their time with a $50 gift card. Seven focus groups were held on a weekday evening while the other two were held on Saturday afternoons. Focus groups took place in accessible and convenient community locations across the city.
Professional facilitators led the focus groups. At the beginning of each session, the facilitators assured participants of their anonymity and asked them to share openly. All participants were provided with and signed an IRB-approved consent form and completed a brief informational survey (see Appendix C). Facilitators used the same set of questions in each session and prompted dialogue with probing questions, when necessary. The facilitator guide is located in Appendix D. During the focus groups, Cowen Institute research staff audio-recorded the dialogue and took extensive notes.

Following the focus groups, Cowen Institute research staff transcribed, coded, and analyzed the dialogue, organizing responses into the overarching themes and topics that are presented in this report. Every effort was made to accurately capture the conversations and dialogue that took place during the focus groups.

Although the participating parents are broadly representative of New Orleans’ school population, their experiences may not be descriptive of all parents in New Orleans. It is likely that parents who volunteered to participate possess stronger opinions, either positive or negative; the focus groups may have attracted parents who are more involved in and aware of their children’s education than the average public school parent in New Orleans. Additionally, despite offering various times and locations, transportation limitations and/or scheduling constraints may have served as a barrier to many parents interested in participating.

Nonetheless, this report offers a rare opportunity to hear the voices of many families participating in school choice. The majority of this report consists of actual quotes from parents regarding matters central to school choice policy, including how parents access information, how they select schools, what qualities they look for in schools, and their overall satisfaction with navigating the school choice system in New Orleans.
School choice, as a mechanism for public education reform, assumes that parents act as informed, rational consumers. Our analysis addresses several issues related to the implementation of an effective school choice program:

- Do parents have adequate information about the application and admissions processes to ensure their children have access to all available school options?
- Do parents have accurate information about schools and school options in order to select the school that best fits their children’s educational needs?
- What criteria do parents use to make school decisions, and how do parents prioritize their preferences in order to select schools?

These key questions are critical to understanding the extent to which school choice in New Orleans has afforded parents with better education options for their children.

The focus group discussions illustrated that parents in New Orleans invest an incredible amount of time and energy researching and selecting their children’s schools, placing enormous stress on the importance of their decision. Parents reported consulting with their friends and family, visiting schools, and weighing their priorities based on their family’s circumstances and resources. Many parents said they were forced to choose between a school close to home and a school that they believed would offer their child the best education.

Navigating the complex system was not easy, even for the most determined and committed parents. The parent focus group discussions revealed that misinformation about the public school application and admissions processes in New Orleans proliferates among the system’s primary consumers. Because parents reportedly relied heavily on information from friends and family, misinformation appears to be widespread. When parents rely on inaccurate or misleading information, children miss out on the many quality educational opportunities that exist in New Orleans today.

These findings suggest that, due to limited seats at high quality schools and a complicated application process, school choice in New Orleans currently does an inadequate job providing all parents with access to the best schools for their children. In order for school choice policy to effectively increase the quality of public education, it must be responsive to the way in which parents navigate the school system, the qualities they value and desire in schools, and how they feel about the quality of school options.

The following analysis provides an opportunity to hear the voices of many families participating in school choice. It is through their perceptions and experiences that we gain a better understanding of the complexities of the public school system in New Orleans, the implementation of school choice, and the extent to which the theory of school choice as a mechanism of education reform is reflected in practice.
A successful school choice system relies on parents’ access to reliable and accurate information. Parents must be equipped with adequate information about the application and admissions processes and with accurate and reliable information about schools and school options.

Information on the Application and Admissions Processes

The school application and admissions processes have been a key focus for public education stakeholders and leadership in New Orleans. To ensure all parents have equal access to public school options, the process must be readily understood and require minimal resources for participation.

Parents in the focus groups described their participation in the application process in a variety of ways, which depended on the timeframe and the type of school, along with other individual factors. About half the focus group participants had recently completed the application process for the 2012-13 school year, while the other half had decided to stay at the same school as the previous year, meaning it had been at least one year since they applied to schools.

Misinformation is Widespread

It was clear from the discussions that parents were influenced by misinformation about the process. Throughout the focus groups, parents made unknowingly false statements or expressed confusion about certain aspects of the application process, admissions requirements, and the school system in general. Navigating the complex system is difficult; schools under OPSB have different application procedures, timelines, and requirements than the majority of schools under RSD. Furthermore the implementation of the RSD’s a new application process, OneApp, added to the level of confusion.

Oftentimes during the focus group discussions, parents exhibited a high level of misinformation about schools’ admissions requirements and attendance zones. In a number of cases, parents said they could not apply to the more popular open admissions schools because they didn’t live in the school’s district or didn’t meet the GPA standards, even when the particular school did not actually have either of these restrictions. Thus, one of the biggest challenges of the application process was a lack of accurate information.

“IT FELT LIKE I HAD TO JUMP THROUGH HOOPS TO TRY TO GET THROUGH THE APPLICATION PROCESS.”

OneApp

Parents’ discussions of the application and admissions processes often reflected their experiences with OneApp. However, only half the parents who applied to schools for the 2012-13 school year (one-quarter of all focus group participants) reported using OneApp. Parents who did not use OneApp had either applied only to OPSB schools and/or private schools, or applied to RSD schools after the OneApp deadline.

Parents using OneApp submitted the completed application to the RSD through a school or one of four family centers. The RSD used a computer program to match each child to their “best option” based on the school ranking on the application, the sibling preference, and large geographic catchment zones. Parents then received a letter notifying them of the school their child was assigned to attend. Most of the focus group participants who used OneApp were satisfied or neutral about the process, but several parents expressed frustration with the degree of uncertainty associated with the new process.
“With the OneApp it was good and scary because usually you can just go and apply to more than one school. If one didn’t work out, you could go to the other school. With OneApp you get into only one school.” (Elementary school parent)

“And then having an appeals process where you give up your spot in order to appeal, so I gave up my spot at [School Name] in order to try to get into [School Name]. He did eventually get in, but it was a really long period of not knowing where he was going to get in.” (Elementary school parent)

In addition to the frustrations with the new process, quite a few parents misunderstood how OneApp worked. For example, parents talked about the importance of applying early with OneApp; however, OneApp gave no priority to early submissions. In one focus group, not a single participant acknowledged having heard of OneApp. At the far extreme, one parent did not know about school choice at all: “They go by your neighborhood. You can’t just put your child in any school you want to. It all depends on where you live” (Elementary school parent). Such statements, which often garnered enthused nods or sparked questioning from other focus group participants, illustrated the need for additional outreach and information.

Applying to High-Demand Schools

In addition to the handful of public schools in New Orleans with selective admissions requirements, a few schools with a reputation of being high performing are extremely popular and therefore only a small percentage of families who apply are accepted.

Parents who applied to selective admissions or the high-demand, higher performing schools frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the school’s application process. Parents revealed confusion, frustration, and concern regarding inequities associated with the application system. Several parents—including those who did not apply to the more competitive schools—suggested that only people with a personal connection can get into the city’s top schools.

“I don’t understand. [Selective Admission School Name] is supposed to be a public school, correct? I’ve never seen children have to take a test to get into a public school in my life. I will never understand it.” (Elementary and high school parent)

“It’s still hard to get into that school. You’ve got to know somebody to get your child in that school.” (High school parent, talking about a popular open enrollment school)

“The issue for me in New Orleans is actually getting your kid into the school that you’ve done all the research on. Researching is fine, making the decision is fine, but the process of enrolling your child for me has been nightmarish. It is ridiculous to get your kid into whatever school you choose for them.” (Elementary school parent)

“I just wish there was a better public education system in the city. It felt like I had to jump through hoops to try to get through the application process. All these separate processes. That gave me consternation.” (Elementary school parent)

Information on Schools and School Options

A successful school choice program requires that parents have access to accurate and comprehensive information on school options.

Information Sources

Although focus group participants described a variety of sources used to garner information on schools and evaluate school options, word of mouth was not only the most frequently used source of information...
on schools, but parents also said it was the most reliable. In particular, parents tended to trust the information based on the experiences of friends and family who have children in school or who work in schools.

- “The most important thing with guiding my decision was talking to other parents. I just called, I sent out a text message, an email blast: I’m looking for a school, this is what I’m looking for.” (Elementary school parent)
- “Sometimes the best information is from teachers and parents, especially ex-parents so you can find out why they left the school.” (Elementary school parent)

Many parents also felt that it was important to go visit schools, take a tour, and meet the principal and teachers. Often parents said they visited schools while submitting an application, thus only visiting after selections had been made.

- “Once someone says this is a good school, the first place I would go is the internet to see what kind of curriculum they have, and then go to the school and fill out the application, have a tour, see what they do on a day to day basis.” (Elementary and high school parent)
- “I went to open houses. I asked questions. They have all that information for you. What percent this, what percent that.” (Elementary school parent)

Parents of students with special education needs, on the other hand, said they visited numerous schools prior to the application process to find out if schools could serve their child.

- “I checked out at least eight schools. I didn’t officially apply to all of them because some of them when I walked in the door told me they wouldn’t take my son.” (Elementary school special education parent)

Although parents expressed the value of the opinions and perspective of family and friends, they also mentioned getting information on schools from the internet, advertisements, the New Orleans Parents’ Guide to Public Schools, and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans’ Schools Expo. Though these resources did not give a complete picture of the school, parents felt that they were a good place to start.

- “Online. We went online for this new school and found out the curriculums and how they were rated compared to other schools, and they even have information about the teachers themselves and how they are qualified to teach in these different areas that they’ll be teaching in. I felt that was important. They had important information online. We felt good about that.” (Elementary school parent)
- “Three years ago I was driving in my car and I heard on the radio that a school was about to open up, and I hurried up and signed my kids up there.” (Elementary school parent)
- “I think, for me it was the book [the New Orleans Parents’ Guide to Public Schools]… The information about the schools was in there, so you could narrow your search down instead of going from one school to another.” (High school parent)
While parents frequently used the internet and Parents’ Guide, some parents expressed concern about the accuracy of the information from these sources. Parents also shared instances in which a school was inaccurately represented in its promotional materials.

- “But it was just a big old front that it was going to be such a good school. Children were fighting all the time. They had metal detectors. It was not at all like they said. Not at all. They had a billboard. They had meetings with the parents before you enrolled your child.” (Elementary school parent)

- “I find that even though you go on the internet and even in the hand booklet, a lot of the information isn’t accurate…. They say that they have all these great things going on at the school. You find out when you are actually enrolled in that school that this isn’t actually going on. For example, over at [School Name], they said they’d have ACT prep every Saturday, an arts program, someone coming to teach kids about opera. But when we got there, nothing. None of that was after school.” (High school parent)

Information Accessibility
Parents gave mixed responses on their ability to easily access the additional, detailed information they wanted. Many parents were able to easily find information on curriculum, extracurricular activities, and school performance, including test scores and school rankings. Yet several parents complained that the specific information they wanted was not readily available or that schools were unwilling to share information. In particular, parents requested access to information on school discipline policies, teachers and school leaders, and where students go after graduation.

- “It takes the fun out of it. You might be thinking about your child’s education and going further in life, you get excited about it. You start making phone calls to schools and you start to get these attitudes and doors in your face.” (Elementary school parent)

- “There is not enough information because some of the stuff I would really like to know about is the teacher change or attrition rate. That’s not available.” (High school parent)

- “I wanted to know where students are going after they leave the school. What high school do a lot of these kids go to? That was important information.” (Elementary school parent)

Parents who were explicitly looking for information about special education services reported having difficulty accessing what they needed. These parents were more likely to go directly to the district office or school to get information, were often frustrated with the availability of reliable information, and frequently visited numerous schools in order to find one that would best suit their child’s needs.

Conclusion: Information
Parents relied on word of mouth to access information about the application and admissions processes and about schools and school options, and they considered word of mouth the most reliable source of information. Their perceptions of other sources of information differed, and many parents felt that much of the available information was misleading, inaccurate, not
available, or didn't paint a complete picture of the school and/or school experience. Most parents agreed that they could not fully know about a school until their child had enrolled there.

Based on the amount of misinformation that existed among school parents participating in the focus groups, word of mouth alone, as the major source of information regarding the application and admissions processes, is inadequate and potentially detrimental to the success of the choice program. Because the application process is complicated and it is unclear which schools have neighborhood or academic requirements for admission, parents relying on word of mouth as a source of information may miss out on potentially beneficial opportunities for their children.

SCHOOL SELECTION AND DECISION-MAKING

School choice policy assumes that parents are rational decision-makers and will select the best schools for their individual children. School choice supporters argue that the quality of schools will improve through competition by allowing parents to gather information about schools’ tests scores, specialized programs, and teachers, and then choose the best from a diverse set of educational alternatives.

Focus group participants described school selection as a complex, dynamic, and multi-step process. Parents of school-age children in New Orleans have access to all public schools in the city, in addition to the private schools across the region; however, perhaps because of the vast array of choices, focus group participants described using certain criteria to narrow their search to a specific school or group of schools. Parents participating in the focus groups listed numerous factors and considerations that influenced their decision, including school performance, as well as deeper, multifaceted elements such as school culture and overall quality. Many parents noted more than one factor that helped narrow their choices, often requiring a compromise in the final decision-making process.

“I’m willing to drive her [across town], but for me to do that I have to think that the school is really much, much better than something I could get closer to home.”

Identifying Options

Although parents have access to all public schools in the city, many focus group participants began the school selection process with an abbreviated list of school options already in mind. For most parents, this subset of schools was defined by two overlapping themes: schools close to home and/or schools that they felt had a positive reputation. These initial criteria often limited the range of schools considered in the decision-making process.

Some parents, particularly those with unique circumstances, were more deliberate than others about this initial narrowing process. For parents with a child requiring special education services, identifying schools that could meet their child’s special needs was a top—and often singular—priority. Several parents specified that they exclusively considered certain historically high-performing public schools or private schools, based predominantly on these schools’ reputations.
Proximity
Most commonly, parents said they considered schools that were close to home, in their neighborhood, or generally convenient. Parents valued proximity because it allowed them to easily access the school when needed, and because it shortened the trip to and from school for their children. Nonetheless, most parents in the focus groups had children attending a school outside their neighborhood.

- “I knew that location was the most important thing. If I can’t get her, can my aunt or someone else get her?” (Elementary school parent)
- “Travel is a big thing so we wanted the best school that was close, to find out the best school that was close for him to go to.” (Elementary school parent)
- “Not that this is the most important thing, but, you know, as a single mom who works with no transportation, proximity is definitely something that I need to look at. So even when I realized that I needed to pull him from [School Name], it was also, I need to make sure that I’m able to get him to school on time. So looking at how to do that, that’s something I look at.” (Elementary school parent)

Parents described their preference for enrolling their students in their neighborhood school. Although neighborhood attendance zones no longer exist for public schools in New Orleans, parents articulated the value of community often associated with neighborhood schools.

- “That sense of community—if I know the parents in my kid’s class, or they are walking home, there’s time to play—that doesn’t happen if everybody is busing across the city.” (Elementary school parent)

Special Education
Parents of children with special education needs faced unique challenges when selecting schools. These parents universally said their chief concern was finding a school that could serve their child’s needs, whether their child had a physical or mental disability or was gifted. They were looking for a school that could strike a balance between providing the necessary accommodations while ensuring an academic program that would help their child reach his/her highest potential. Parents of children with special education needs reported that they had a difficult time finding schools that were viable options for their family. They frequently sacrificed other priorities such as proximity and keeping siblings together to ensure their child was well-served.

- “But for us, the decision was just trying to find services. That was becoming a treasure hunt.” (Elementary school parent)
- “I have an autistic child, and I want him to go to school with my daughter but I didn’t want him to be at any school that couldn’t give him the services that he needed. So I had to search around to schools that can attend to his needs.” (Elementary school parent)
- “I couldn’t put him in the school closest to my house because they didn’t have the [special education] services.” (Elementary school parent)
Because parents can and do choose to enroll their children in schools across the city, the time children spend on the school bus can be lengthy. A few of parents reported that they had left schools because of the long day their children experienced as a result of traveling back and forth across the city on the school bus.

- "When I first came back here my [children] had to go across town to [School Name]. They had to get up at like 5:15 in the morning, be on the bus by 5:15, and then they get home at 5:00pm. I had issues with that.... just being on the bus so long, no air, being so far away, and me having to travel back across the bridge constantly.” (Elementary school parent)

Many parents said they valued school proximity but did not select a school close to home. Several parents said their children were not accepted to their neighborhood school, while other parents said another factor, such as academic performance, weighed more heavily.

- "I'm willing to drive her [across town], but for me to do that I have to think that the school is really much, much better than something I could get closer to home. It is a factor, but it is one factor weighed in. It is mostly academics.” (Elementary school parent)

Reputation

The reputation of a school was another critical factor considered by parents when defining the initial subset of school options for their children. Parents said they relied on the recommendations of trusted sources, including friends, family members, and neighbors who have children in school or who work in the school system. While parents often combined reputation with other issues, including proximity, reputation was generally the highest priority for the parents who mentioned it.

- “Basically it was word of mouth. You choose whichever school you think is the best school and will give your child the best education. My friend said this was the best school.” (Elementary school parent)
- “I talked to several parents before I made the decision to put him anywhere.” (Elementary school parent)
- “My nephew graduated from [School Name] and my son wanted to follow in his footsteps. [My nephew] said it was a good school.” (High school parent)

A small number of parents reflected on their own personal experience attending a school as a child. However, most of the schools these parents referenced are now operated by private charter organizations and often now have a different name and/or building than it did during the parents’ tenure.

- “I went to the school. It was [Former School Name] before it was [Current School Name]. And when I went to [Former School Name], it was good. It had good teachers. I don’t know if they came back after the storm, I was just pleased about what it said about it.” (High school parent)
- “My daughter went to [School Name], so she has very strong feelings that she wanted her kids to go there.” (Elementary school grandparent)
Decision-making Criteria

With an initial subset of schools in mind—generally defined through proximity and/or reputation—focus group participants described gathering additional information based on their preferences and weighing their various priorities in order to make a final decision. As school choice theory assumes, parents cited a variety of considerations, and each parent noted multiple concerns. While a number of parents mentioned a school’s letter grade or School Performance Score, few actually said they made their decision based on these performance indicators. Parents most commonly identified a high level of academic preparation, a holistic and comprehensive curriculum, a wide variety of extracurricular programs, and a safe, nurturing school environment as factors important in their decision-making process.

A small number of focus group participants said they chose a school based on its reputation or location without any additional information. These parents generally applied to only one or two schools and selected whichever school accepted their child. Even so, almost all parents said they visited their child’s school at some point during the enrollment process.

“Academics are important. I want him to have the best education that’s possible. I don’t want him to go to a school where he can’t learn or the teachers are bad. The academics are important.” (Elementary school parent, C school)

“Are they going to teach them? Are they going to sit in there are color and watch TV all day, or are they going to try to teach them to get them ready for the first grade?” (Head Start parent)

“Obviously he needs to be challenged more. Also, when I looked at the scores, they are a D school. Even though his grades are great, what’s it going to look like when he graduates from high school? I want him to be able to thrive in a competitive environment when it comes to going to college.” (Elementary school parent, transferring to a B school)

“For me the main factor is the academics.... Test scores and general academic performance. I want to know where students are going to college, who is academically prepared for high school.” (Elementary school parent, private school)

“So my main concern, it was about being around kids who would learn as quick as her. I could see that she might have a gift that other children didn’t have.” (Elementary school parent, B school)

Academics

Overall, parents strongly valued academic preparation when selecting their children’s school and many parents specified that a school’s academic program was their highest priority. However, parents defined “academics” in a variety of ways. Few parents said they made their decision based on a school’s letter grade, though many parents did reference this information. Instead, parents defined “academics” more broadly. Parents frequently said they meant that the school was intellectually challenging and would adequately equip their child for the next level of school and beyond. Still, parents depicted varying standards to measure the strength of a school’s academic program.

“I want to know where students are going to college, who is academically prepared for high school.”
Private Schools
Though just 10 of the focus group participants had a child in a non-public school, many of the parents’ responses about private schools and scholarships revealed an implicit assumption that private schools are superior to public schools. When speaking about the decision between public and private school options, most parents explained that cost was a major determinant. Because of the costs of tuition, they either did not consider private schools at all or only considered those that offered scholarships. Parents weighed factors such as proximity, academics, and the school environment against the cost of private school.

- “I went to Catholic school but couldn’t afford it for my sons, so it was always an issue of what schools to send them to.” (Public school parent)
- “I was broke every month [sending my child to private school], but I sacrificed and it was wonderful. The education, the quality, was just great. She was so far behind coming from Orleans Parish to that school. If I can afford it, I’ll put her back in that school. I love it.” (Public elementary school parent)
- “He was unhappy, so we went for [Private School Name] because there’s no other school anywhere that would take him. A good school.... He got a scholarship because they are trying to increase the diversity. He got a scholarship; otherwise it’s an expensive school.” (Private elementary school parent)

Focus group participants who selected a private school did so for a variety of reasons. In most cases, parents had considered both public and private school options, though a small number had exclusively looked for private schools. Many of the private school parents participating in the focus group had applied to top tier public schools, many of which have selective admissions requirements, but their children were not accepted. For these parents, academic preparation was the overwhelming priority and selecting a private school was viewed as a necessary concession.

- “So we applied for [Selective Admissions Public School Name] and we applied for [Private School Name] and he got waitlisted.... So we literally just enrolled him at [Private School Name] because we needed to go somewhere. [It] is the closest school that we know of that’s a good school.” (Private elementary school parent)
- “We applied to one of the [public] middle schools that we thought was going to be a good fit for him for next year and he didn’t make it. He was like number 14 on the waitlist. So we talked to some people and they told us about a private school that we could apply and get financial aid.... We’re just going to make a sacrifice because I couldn’t imagine another year.” (Private elementary school parent)

Overall, parents who selected or considered private schools shared many of the same values and priorities as the parents who exclusively looked for public schools. However, private school parents were able to access scholarships or had the necessary resources to pay tuition.
Holistic and Balanced Approach

Many parents said they were specifically looking for a comprehensive curriculum that provides more than just an emphasis on preparing students to pass the state assessments. Parents were interested not only in academic preparation but a holistic, balanced educational approach that would teach their children life skills and allow them to be creative.

- “For me, a good curriculum, that was one of the priorities…. The curriculum I think really does need to include that children are human beings. They’re not robots. The issue of them having worksheets and worksheets and worksheets is just a problem. At some point the kids need to be able to express themselves.” (Elementary school parent)
- “I wanted her in a school with an arts program because her sister was gifted in theater and visual arts, so I wanted her to have those opportunities.” (Elementary school parent)
- “So it was kind of, for me, looking for a combination of academically challenging and something that would give them some richer experiences beyond just the narrow route of reading, writing, and math curriculum.” (Elementary school parent)

Extracurricular Activities

Similarly, parents were concerned with the type and variety of extracurricular programs available to make school fun and engaging.

- “Extracurricular activities and after school programs. A lot of things to keep them involved; keep them wanting to go to school; make school fun.” (Elementary school parent)
- “So I was looking at [teacher experience], and the extracurricular activities like another parent said. [Extracurricular activities are] important because that is expression. You have to give a child a chance to express. Critical thinking skills and expression.” (Elementary school parent)

School Environment

In addition to looking for a strong academic program, parents frequently discussed looking at the classroom and school environment when selecting a school. In general, parents sought a nurturing, supportive school culture and a small, safe learning environment.

- “I needed something for her to learn and also a family setting, environment, where you know your child is getting love. Some places are scary.” (Elementary school parent)
- “The teacher-child ratio in the classroom is very important.” (Elementary school parent)
- “I want to add that diversity was really important…. My concern about some schools, many schools, is that they’re homogenous. They are either all black or all white. That is not the world that we live in and it’s not the world, I want my children to be able to relate to everyone…. That is, obviously academics is number one, but that is something that was really important when I looked at schools. How well is it going to prepare my child to live in the real world by being around all different types of people?” (Elementary school parent)
Safety, in particular, was an important aspect of school environments to many parents. Some parents voiced concerns about bullying and fighting in schools. For other parents, the safety of the neighborhood was as important as safety inside the school building.

- “I want to make sure it’s a safe neighborhood so you don’t have to worry about it. Just the environment around the school is safe.” (Elementary school parent)
- “If you’re going to lack in the neighborhood, you’re going to lack in the school. When deciding on a school, the neighborhood and the area have a lot to do with it.” (Elementary and high school parent)

Parents seeking an inviting, caring learning environment frequently mentioned the length of the school day and school discipline practices as important indicators. Many parents looked for a well-rounded, balanced educational program with less focus on strict discipline, while, on the other hand, a handful of parents were interested in an orderly school environment with stricter discipline practices.

- “I want him to be in a small school where he doesn’t have to walk on a literal line, where he can be an individual and have space to be a little boy.” (Elementary school parent)
- “I had some criteria in terms of public school. I didn’t want him to go to school with metal detectors, and I didn’t want too much discipline on him.” (High school parent)
- “I just wanted a school with more structure and more discipline. I looked at the way the school looks and the uniforms.” (Elementary school parent)

**Teacher Quality**
Throughout the focus groups, parents repeatedly talked about the importance of competent teachers and principals. The issue came up more frequently when parents described high quality schools in general rather than as a factor used to select a specific school. Nonetheless, some parents did say they looked at teachers and principals when selecting a school, many of whom had had negative experiences with their child’s teacher at a previous school. Parents had opposing definitions of “good teachers;” some parents valued certification or content knowledge, while others cared more about enthusiasm or experience.

- “Teachers and education are most important. If this one has the best teachers, that’s how I pick it.” (Elementary school parent)
- “Also the level of education or certifications that teachers had; that is my second priority for my children.” (High school parent)
- “There is something missing; it’s not just your credentials, it’s something that comes with credentials.” (Elementary school parent)

**Race/Ethnicity**
Some parents discussed their desire for schools with a diverse body of students and teachers—a rarity in both public and private schools in New Orleans. However, parents are generally unlikely to openly and explicitly share such preferences for fear of appearing prejudiced or discriminatory. However, research on parent preferences in
the school selection process suggests that parents may exhibit preferences for schools with teaching staff and student bodies similar to their own demographic background. The focus groups presented in this report did not overtly explore issues of race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, and no parents explicitly stated that they considered such issues when selecting their child’s school. Further research is necessary to understand the impact of school demographics on school selection in New Orleans.

Conclusion: School Selection and Decision-making

The success of school choice as a policy for reform centers on the ability of all parents to be informed, rational consumers. Parents in the focus groups acted rationally in their school selection process, considering which schools will best meet the needs of their children. However, some of the qualities they prioritized, such as proximity to home, may occasionally conflict or compete with school performance.

Although parents technically have access to all public schools, parents first considered a small subset of schools that were close to home or that the parents felt had a positive reputation. For parents with a child requiring special education services, identifying schools that could meet their child’s special needs was a top—and often singular—priority. These criteria often limited the range of schools considered in the decision-making process.

“I’m saying a high quality school is a village of people who have a passion for children.”

QUALITY SCHOOLS

School choice is intended to give parents access to higher quality schools that best meet the needs of their individual children. The Louisiana Department of Education defines school performance by standardized test scores. Yet, as evidenced in the previous sections, parents consider far more than test scores when evaluating school options. In addition, parents’ descriptions of their ideal school exceeded their expectations of schools in New Orleans, suggesting that, in reality, most schools fall short of parents’ desires.

Defining the Ideal School

When asked to describe the ideal school, focus group participants were both passionate and articulate about the features they would like to see in public schools. Though parents mentioned many of the criteria that defined their school search, their expectations for their ideal school exceeded what they had looked for and seen in schools in New Orleans; indeed, parents’ descriptions of their ideal school were often a direct reaction to qualities they believed were missing in their children’s current schools. In particular, parents stressed the importance of a rigorous and balanced academic curriculum and a caring school environment. Parents also talked in depth about teacher quality, curriculum, and the school environment.

Academics

When speaking about the academic program at their ideal school, parents went beyond the expectations they articulated in their selection process. Parents talked about a school that would not just prepare their students for the next grade level, but one that would prepare their children to succeed in the modern world. Science and technology, world geography, and practical job experiences were all mentioned repeatedly. Several African American
parents also spoke about the need for African American history in the curriculum.

- “But most important is that you teach my child critical thinking skills. More important even than reading and math.” (Elementary school parent)
- “To make a quality school, you need to go beyond... You’ve got to have PE and art and history and world geography, those things that make the kids more well-rounded.” (Elementary school parent)
- “Computers and technology, that’s what the kids are into. I think you’d have more kids learning and being excited about going to school.” (Elementary and high school parent)
- “I think that because we have so many African American children, we always give them American history, but I think that we have to give them a little history about themselves. We need to give them African American history, literature, or dance class.” (High school parent)

School Environment

Parents described the environment at a high quality school as safe, supportive, and child-focused. As one parent put it, a place where “everybody cares.” For many parents, this meant that the parents, teachers, and administrators all communicated and worked together, and parents were engaged in their child’s classroom.

- “I’m saying a high quality school is a village of people who have a passion for children.” (Elementary and high school parent)
- “The other thing, at my dream school, the teachers, parents, and administrators all see each other as a team and think of each other as people who have to rely on each other, build trust, and have a relationship in order to do what’s best for that child.” (Elementary school parent)

Several parents also talked about the physical space, describing a school that is aesthetically pleasing, modern, spacious, and equipped with all necessary resources.

- “I think the environment plays a huge part in it. That’s one of the things I think about when I think what would a quality education, a quality school look like. Physically, it would look beautiful.” (Elementary school parent)
- “Being able to have a classroom that has books, bookshelves to hold the books so they don’t get damaged. Having a place where every student has a desk, space so you’re not too close to other kids. A clean place, bathrooms, enough places for kids to have a rotation system between classes. Just to be able to have a spot and a place for everything.” (Elementary school parent)

Conclusion: Quality Schools

Parents’ descriptions of an ideal school went well beyond the criterion they said they used to select their children’s schools, suggesting a difference between the ideal and the realities of current choices in New Orleans. Nonetheless, most parents seemed to feel it is possible for public schools in New Orleans to someday live up to their ideal.

When asked how they knew a certain school was high quality, parents generally referred to a school’s reputation, both pre- and post-Katrina. As one parent put it, “It’s not rocket science.” Another parent described a high quality school this way: “Everything. A top performing school, you can hear it in the kids. You can hear the happiness in their voices....”
Parents generally expressed appreciation for their ability to choose their children’s schools, most parents asserted that there are not enough quality options available. Parents described a range of emotions related to the school choice process, from anxiety and stress over finding a good school for their children, to anger and frustration over their inability to access the schools they wanted, to resignation that the kinds of schools they want do not exist.

Selecting a school was viewed by many parents as a high stakes decision. In particular, parents spoke of the stress the application process put on them and their children, the amount of time and energy it required, and the need for more capacity at the most popular, higher performing schools. Over two-thirds of focus group participants mentioned not getting accepted to their top choice school at some point in their application process. Parents spoke of the sadness and frustration that came with rejection.

- “I didn’t realize how hard it was for the smaller kids. It is easier for me to get into a university here than it is for my kids to get into a decent school.” (Elementary and high school parent)
- “My child attends [School Name]. I tried to get him out of that school. I applied to five or six schools. I got an email, call, and letter stating that he would be returning to [School Name] because the schools I applied to were not available, even though I applied in the early time frame.” (Elementary school parent)
- “The school year prior to that, there was nothing available so I couldn’t work or anything like that. I stayed home and homeschooled my daughter for a year.” (Elementary school parent)

Parents trying to get siblings into the same school and parents of children with special education needs often described feeling like they had fewer realistic school options that could serve their children. As a result, these parents tended to find the application process particularly stressful.

- “The first school that said they could serve him—because several of the public schools said they wouldn’t—is one of the one’s I applied to and just prayed that I would get pulled in the lottery. Luckily I did, but if I hadn’t, I don’t know where we would be.” (Elementary school special education parent)
- “It has been a process of getting them in through the OneApp process. One child got in and they got separated. The little one got left at [School Name] and the older one got into [School Name].” (Elementary school parent)

Though selecting and enrolling in a school was often stressful, difficult, and frustrating, the process was also often highly rewarding when parents were satisfied with their child’s selected school.

Choice among Limited Options
When asked to name high quality public schools in New Orleans, just one parent said they could not name a single school; most parents rattled off at least a few school names. Notably, parents most frequently named historically high performing schools—many with selective admissions criteria—though a relatively small number of
parents had children attending these schools or had applied to them.

“It’s hard to find a great school. There are not a lot of choices. You settle for the better schools.”

Most focus group participants said that they did not feel there were enough quality school options available to them when selecting their children’s schools.

- “New Orleans just doesn’t have that yet where everybody has that: a simple, good education.” (Elementary school parent)
- “All these schools have bits and pieces of what every parent wants.” (Elementary school parent)
- “The school that I want for my child doesn’t exist.” (Elementary school parent)
- “I went through the list in the Parents’ Guide and realized there wasn’t really a high school I wanted him to go to of my choice.” (High school parent)
- “Great schools are limited. It’s hard to find a great school. There are not a lot of choices. You settle for the better schools.” (Elementary school parent)

While parents wanted the ability to choose a school, the act of choosing among limited options produced a range of emotions. Some parents described feeling stressed and fearful that they would not be able to find a decent school. Parents already in schools also expressed anxiety that they might need to go through the selection process again sometime in the future due to a school closure or dissatisfaction with the school. Some parents in higher performing or selective admissions schools expressed fear that their child might lose their seat due to poor academic performance. For many, the stress and anxiety was coupled with a feeling of powerlessness.

- “I have a four year old starting school in August. I’ve been literally going through this thing where I don’t know if I’m going to be able to get her into a good school and what can I do?” (Elementary school parent)
- “The frustration of having that communication of what’s going on in the application process, just trying to figure out what do I do in the mean time because you don’t want to wait until the last minute, come August you don’t know what’s going on. So it’s really that frustration of not knowing whether or not I should put more work into finding an alternative or should I just be patient.” (Elementary school parent)

Parents who had been waitlisted or were not accepted at their top choice school talked about the anger and disappointment they felt. Some parents had resigned themselves to the school that was not their first choice, while others said they would continue to seek other options.

- “Trying to get them into school here was a very horrible experience to the point that I wouldn’t suggest to anybody to come and try to do what I did. My youngest were three weeks late into the school year because I had so many issues trying to get them into the different schools.” (Elementary and high school parent)
- “I was finally to the roof and I just said somebody is going to let my child into a better school.” (Elementary school parent)
- “You fill out various applications for the schools that you want to go to, but you get a rejection letter telling you where your kid is going. That’s the way it is.” (Elementary school parent)
Several parents described feeling like they did not have a choice at all. These feelings were particularly pronounced for parents who moved to the city mid-year or late in the application process—often because they were returning to New Orleans after relocating due to Hurricane Katrina—as well as for parents whose children required special education services.

- “I feel like we really don’t have an option. Pretty much it’s whatever the system decides is best for your child.” (Elementary school parent)
- “Since we were moving here in August, the RSD’s job was just to find a desk in a building. The idea of finding [special education] services that he needed kinda went out the window.” (Elementary school parent)
- “I moved here July 31. School started maybe two weeks later, and I just had to take what I could get.” (Elementary and high school parent)

Non-transition Grade Transfers

Almost half the focus group participants spoke of making the decision to transfer schools in a non-transition grade because they were unhappy with their children’s school. In addition, some parents had tried to transfer schools but were not accepted into any of their more-preferred options, and other parents spoke of their intention to seek another option in the future. Almost all parents expressed the sentiment that they would not hesitate to change schools if they were dissatisfied with the situation at their current school.

- “She got in trouble for playing with lint on the carpet, because they caught her looking down when she was supposed to be tracking the speaker. She was there until second grade. I took her out. She goes to [School Name] now.” (Elementary school parent)
- “At [School #1], one of the teachers told me to please take him out because they don’t have the programs here for him. That’s why I moved to [School #2].” (Elementary school parent)
- “They were passing out flyers. He was going to [School #1] and it seemed like he wasn’t learning and he was acting up at [School #1]. They said [School #2] is a good school and it’s right across the street from my house. The children that I know that go there seemed to be smart, say they learning something, they take time with children. He was at [School #1] for the second and third grade and now he’s at [School #2] for fourth grade.” (Elementary school parent)
- “So far so good. If it was a problem, I wouldn’t have a problem taking him out. I just want what’s better for him.” (Elementary school parent)

Though student mobility can often have a negative impact on student learning, parents who successfully transferred schools generally reported feeling pleased with the new school.

- “The school they were going to, I didn’t like. There was fighting. I pulled them out and put them in the new school. My son, he failed the LEAP twice at the school. And the new school, it is ok. It’s really nice. They work with him.” (Elementary school parent)
- “Since he’s been in [School Name] his grades, his academics, are way better than they were before.” (Elementary school parent)
System-wide Changes

Although parents were generally supportive of the education reforms and feel that schools today are better than they were before Katrina, many parents remained critical. Some parents participating in the focus groups specifically articulated frustration regarding the influx of new teachers, the continually changing landscape of schools, and the impact of the new decentralized governance structure.

“Although parents were generally supportive of the education reforms and feel that schools today are better than they were before Katrina, many parents remained critical. Some parents participating in the focus groups specifically articulated frustration regarding the influx of new teachers, the continually changing landscape of schools, and the impact of the new decentralized governance structure.”

New Teachers

Parents had strong opinions about the many new teachers in New Orleans. The discussion often took the form of a debate between the value of experience, enthusiasm, traditional teacher training, content knowledge, and teachers’ ability to relate to New Orleans’ students. Some parents were ardently opposed to newer, less experienced teachers in the classroom.

- “They got rid of half of the good teachers that they did have in the school system. The people who knew how to teach, they got rid of them and brought new teachers in. These new teachers, they don’t really know how to educate our kids. My son got held back last year; they tried to keep him back. They don’t teach them what they need to teach them; they teach what they want to teach. They need teachers with more experience.” (Elementary school parent)

- “It’s not that I don’t want the younger teachers; it’s just that I want them paired with a veteran teacher.” (High school parent)

- “It really should be a combination. Most see TFAs [Teach For America teachers] as creative people that don’t see boundaries. The veteran teachers’ strength is not only do they know how to teach our children but they form a relationship with our children.” (Elementary school parent)

- “At [School Name] mostly the whole staff was fresh out of college, and my son did really well there. He started in December and he was reading by the time he moved on to the first grade level. Just because a teacher is a veteran doesn’t mean he’s better than a first year teacher.” (Elementary school parent)

New Schools and School Operators

Some parents also discussed the lack of stability in the system as schools and school operators change relatively often. These parents preferred older, more established schools over those opened after Hurricane Katrina.

- “I wouldn’t have considered any of the new schools for my son. The only schools I’m looking at are schools that were considered schools of excellence prior to the storm. I was not going to put my child, you see these charters popping up and shutting down a couple years later.” (Elementary school parent)

- “Stability, a school that has been there over 10 years, that wasn’t brand new. That was important to me.” (Elementary school parent)
Parents also reported being impacted by the decentralized governance structure, and they discussed their frustration with navigating the post-Katrina school system.

- “There are too many types of schools. It’s confusing. Charters, KIPPs, Recovery.” (High school parent)
- “I’ve had to sit in on board meetings because you don’t know who’s running the schools.” (Elementary school parent)

Conclusion: Parent Satisfaction
Parents generally viewed the reforms that have been implemented post-Katrina as positive and were supportive of school choice. In fact, parents did not hesitate to exercise their right to choose, and nearly half the parents participating in the focus groups used school choice to leave a school because they were dissatisfied. Yet many parents articulated difficulties adjusting to the changes in the public school system. It was clear that some parents had a distrust of the reforms and were reluctant to embrace the changes. Parents felt stressed and anxious about the school selection, application and admissions processes. Most commonly, however, parents expressed frustration with the lack of quality school options. Many parents were able to enroll their child in a school they felt met their needs, but most had to make compromises in choosing that school. It is clear that choice among limited high quality options may not feel like choice at all.
Conclusion and Recommendations

The education reforms undertaken in the wake of Hurricane Katrina were revolutionary. Overnight, parents who had returned to New Orleans came back to a radically different school system where parents could choose any public school in the city and charter schools dominated the public education arena. Unfortunately, limited seats at high quality schools and a complicated application process impede some parents from gaining access to the best schools for their children. New Orleans can and must do better to ensure school choice is an effective and successful policy for reform.

Policymakers and public education stakeholders in New Orleans and across the country have the opportunity to create a school system that provides access to quality school options for all parents and families. Based on our findings, policymakers should prioritize identifying solutions that will:

1. Make it easier for parents to access schools by including all public schools in a single application and more clearly communicating admissions requirements;
2. Help schools and parents meaningfully engage with each other so that parents have a voice in improving their children’s schools;
3. Provide parents with access to relevant and reliable information about schools, including information from the perspectives of other parents;
4. Ensure that students with special education needs are able to receive services at a school of their choice; and,
5. Provide parents with quality school choices close to home by increasing the number of and capacity at quality schools in underserved neighborhoods.

Lastly, it is clear from the focus group discussions that ongoing communication with parents and families about school choice is critical to ensuring a successful program that truly meets the needs of those who use it. The districts must continue to support and improve communication with parents and through parents, recognizing that parents rely most on information from each other.
Appendix A: Public School Organizational Chart, 2012-13 School Year
Appendix B: Participant Information and Demographics

This qualitative study focuses on the experiences of 81 families, representing approximately 132 school-age children, 114 of whom were attending a public school in Orleans Parish. The Cowen Institute research team conducted a total of nine focus groups between June 27 and August 6, 2012.

Participants were recruited through broad outreach across the New Orleans community in an effort to ensure participation reflected the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup of the city. The following tables show the numbers and demographics of the participating parents. The participant demographics are similar to comparative populations.

Table 1: Race/Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Participants</th>
<th>Public School Students in New Orleans</th>
<th>Orleans Parish Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Reported</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>86.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Source: Louisiana Department of Education, Multiple Statistics By SiteCode For Total Reported Public School Students - October 2011.
2Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, RACE, Table B02001.

Table 2: Educational Attainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Participants</th>
<th>Orleans Parish Population 25 &amp; Older</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Reported</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school graduate</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college or associate’s degree</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree or higher</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreported</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, Table S1501.
The participating families represented 14 of the city’s 17 major zip codes, with only the Central Business District and parts of Algiers and New Orleans East excluded. The most heavily represented areas of the city were Uptown/Carrollton, Mid-City, and Gentilly.

Table 3: Zip Code of Residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Reported</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70112</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70113</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70114</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70115</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70116</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70117</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70118</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70119</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70122</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70124</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70125</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70126</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70127</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70128</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70129</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70130</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70131</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in Orleans Parish</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 81 parents who participated in the focus groups represented 132 school-age children. On average, participants had one or two school-age child in their household.

Table 4: Number of School-Age Children per Parent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Reported</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4+</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average 1.66
Because the emphasis of the study was on public school choice, the majority of parents (91 percent) had at least one student enrolled in public school, though the parents represented all school types. Of students enrolled in public schools, the distribution among the different school types generally mirrored the public school population overall, though RSD direct-run schools were underrepresented. High school students also were slightly underrepresented in the focus group sample.

Table 5: School Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students Represented by Focus Group Participants</th>
<th>Public School Students in New Orleans¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Reported</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSD Charter</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSD Direct-Run</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPSB Charter</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPSB Direct-Run</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head Start Preschool</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeschool</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferson Parish</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Source: Louisiana Department of Education, Multiple Statistics By SiteCode For Total Reported Public School Students - October 2011.

Table 6: Grade Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Participants</th>
<th>Public School Students in New Orleans¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Reported</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School (PK-8)</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School (9-12)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreported</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, Table S1501.
Appendix C: Participant Information Survey

Parent Focus Group on School Choice

First name

Zip Code

Number of children in public schools ______ non-public schools ______ not in school ______

Child #1: School Name________________________ Age ______ Grade ________

Child #2: School Name________________________ Age ______ Grade ________

Child #3: School Name________________________ Age ______ Grade ________

Child #4: School Name________________________ Age ______ Grade ________

Child #5: School Name________________________ Age ______ Grade ________

Child #6: School Name________________________ Age ______ Grade ________

Child #7: School Name________________________ Age ______ Grade ________

Do you consider yourself (circle all that apply): What is the highest level of education you have completed (circle one):

Asian

Some High School

African-American

High school graduate

Hispanic

Some college

White

Two-year/Associate's degree

Other

Four-year/Bachelor's degree

Higher than a Bachelor's degree

Please initial here to indicate that you received a $50 gift card (Walmart or Rouses). ________
Appendix D: Facilitator Guide

Opening (5-10 Minutes)

“Hello. My name is INTRODUCE YOURSELF. Today we would like to have a conversation with you about school choice and enrollment. What we are trying to accomplish before we leave here today is to get a better understanding of how public school families are navigating school selection and enrollment in New Orleans. As policymakers and other education stakeholders contemplate school choice both in New Orleans and across the country, our study findings will inform decisions and design of school choice programs and policies. Are there any questions?” Respond to participant questions.

“Let’s go over some rules. First, let’s all turn off our cell phones so we are not interrupted. We will be recording our conversation. Does anyone feel uncomfortable with that? In addition, NAME will be taking notes of the conversation. So, remember that we have one person talking at a time. Please do not interrupt someone when they are talking. You will not be required to talk in turn, so if you have something you would like to add, please feel free to jump into the conversation. Again, I want to remind you that this is voluntary and if at any time you feel uncomfortable answering questions, you are not required to participate.

Also, everything you tell us today will be kept completely confidential. That also means anything you hear today from fellow participants is also confidential. Please respect each other’s privacy. We will summarize the things you tell us and combine it with other focus groups we are conducting. One of my jobs today as the moderator is to make sure we cover all of the issues we planned to discuss. If I ask you questions while you are talking, I’m not being rude; I may ask you to clarify what you are saying so I fully understand your point. Also from time to time, I may ask the group if anyone else has something he/she would like to add; I’m just making sure everyone has a chance to talk. I will try to keep the conversation directed to the topic at hand so that we discuss all of the issues.”

“Just to get us started, let’s have everyone tell us your name (first name only).”

Point to someone to start; randomly select people to demonstrate that people do not talk in sequence.

Questions (90 minutes)

1. How did your kids end up at the schools they are attending/going to attend next year?

2. What were your priorities when selecting a school? What factors did you take into consideration?
   Probes:
   - What does a good [insert factor] look like to you? (E.g. What does a good curriculum look like? What do good teachers look like? What does an academically successful school look like? What would be a good school location for you?)
   - Why is that so important?
• Were there any limiting factors – i.e. things like transportation or child care that you have to take into consideration? How did these things impact your decision?
• How do you/did you find out if a school meets those factors?

3. What sources of information do you or did you use when choosing your child’s school?
Probes:
• Which of those sources do you think are most reliable?
• Which sources were most important in informing your final decision?
• Was enough information available? Too much?
• What were some of the challenges to seeking out information about school options?
• Was there anything you wish you had known but couldn't find?

4. What did the process of researching, selecting and enrolling your child (or children) in school look like?
Probes:
• What were some of the challenges or frustrations you faced? How did you overcome them?
• How many schools did you apply to? How many schools accepted you?
• Did you apply to any non-public (private or parochial) schools?

5. Do you feel happy with the school options that are/were available to you?
• Are you satisfied with the outcome of the school enrollment process?
• If you are not satisfied, will you seek other options next school year?
• Will your kids be attending your top choice school next year?

6. How would you describe a high quality school?
Probes:
• Do you feel that there are enough high quality school options for your child or children in New Orleans?
• What are some examples of high quality schools in New Orleans?
• Where do you find information about high quality schools in New Orleans?

Closing (5 minutes)

“Are there any final questions?”  Respond to questions.

“Thank you for participating in our focus group today. We are excited to learn about what you think. Your responses will be combined with responses from the other groups. Using the information from these groups, we will write a report that describes the factors that parents feel are important when selecting a school for their child, the various types of information parents use, and the sources of their information. Again, your responses will be combined with others and not attributed to you individually. This report will help inform the Recovery School District and the Orleans Parish School Board as they continue to improve the choice and enrollment system and process in New Orleans. This paper will also inform other urban districts that are utilizing an open enrollment, all-choice system. The paper will be available on our website. Thank you for being a part of this work.”
References


ii U.S. Census Bureau, 2009-2011 American Community Survey, Table C14002.


Acknowledgements

The Cowen Institute is very pleased and honored to have received an IMPACT 2011 grant from the Greater New Orleans Foundation (www.GNOF.org), along with key matching funds from Robert and Kikie Priddy, to support this study of school choice in New Orleans.

In addition, we would like to thank our local and national reviewers who applied their expert eyes to the document in its early stages. Your feedback and suggestions were very helpful and improved the quality of this report immensely.

Lastly, and most importantly, we are incredibly grateful to all the parents and families who dedicated their time and openly shared their experiences with us through the focus groups. Your commitment and investment in your children’s education inspired us. We only hope we did your stories justice.