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Joseph L. Koenigsknecht

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Janet E. Alleman

Major professor
Dr. Janet E. Alleman

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PARENTS' DECISION TO CHOOSE NONRESIDENTIAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS THROUGH A SCHOOL CHOICE PROGRAM

By

Joseph L. Koenigsknecht

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ABSTRACT

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PARENTS' DECISION
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The researcher's purpose in this study was to describe and explain parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education. Twenty families who participated in a public school choice program were given semi-structured interviews to determine to what extent, and in what combinations, the issues of free will, educational reform, school quality/characteristics, and family/personal needs were reflected in their choice decision. The choice process that families followed also was examined, along with how the decision to choose a nonresidential public school by families with high schoolers compared to the decision by families with elementary students.

Of the four construct areas examined regarding school of choice (free will, educational reform, school program/characteristics, and family/personal needs), the school program/characteristics and the family/personal needs areas were most often reflected in the parents' decision to participate in a school choice program. Parents' decision to change schools more often was brought about by their dissatisfaction or

concerns with their residential school than it was by their attraction to the nonresidential (receiving) school. In general, the decision to participate in school choice was related to very real and personal issues directly concerning the child or the family circumstances, such as wanting a safe school or not wanting to move the child to a new school midyear. In fact, families were more likely to change schools under a school choice program because of safety and discipline issues rather than issues of instructional quality. In this study, parents of both elementary and high-school-age students cited lack of a safe environment in the residential school as a major factor in and reason for changing schools. However, whereas the parents of elementary students then focused on school quality issues such as wanting good teachers or better school programs, the parents of high schoolers focused more on convenience issues or those related to the extracurricular activities available to their children. Finally, the parents in this study who participated in school choice did not regret their decision to do so.

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even though they were not always sure why I had to "go to the office to work" rather than remain home to spend time with them.

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

> Ten years ago, school choice was little more than a twinkle in the eyes of a hand full of civil libertarians. Concerned by what they saw as a monopoly state system of education, they argued that American public schools were robbing citizens of their right to choose their children's education. (Cookson, 1994, p. 1)

By the late 1980s, however, school choice had become one of the hottest educational reform ideas on the policy horizon (Coleman, 1992). As of late 1996, some kind of choice legislation had been introduced in 43 states (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). In 1996, the Michigan legislature included a choice plan that allowed families in Michigan to send their children to nonresidential schools that offered such plans. In this study, a nonresidential school was defined as a public school chosen by parents that is outside of their residential school district. Although the plan is still in its early stages of implementation, the number of public school districts in Michigan opting to offer choice plans is continuing to increase.

The discussions, and at times arguments, regarding school choice generally have centered on two fronts. One platform for discussion suggests that choice is a basic constitutional and inherent right and is grounded in the belief that one should have the freedom to choose. In a world in which consumption and choice are

considered essential for the good life, the idea that children are required to attend a particular public school in their neighborhood seems anachronistic, even reactionary (Cookson, 1994). When, for instance, a poll conducted by Phi Delta Kappan (Elam, 1990) asked parents whether or not they favored or opposed allowing students and their parents to choose among public schools regardless of where they lived, roughly 62% of all respondents were in favor. Eighty-one percent of nonpublic-school parents were in favor. Advocates have argued that it is an issue of the right or freedom to choose. The American system assumes only limited areas into which government may intrude, and outside of these areas, individuals are left to their own choices (Seeley, 1985).

A second aspect of choice that has generated much debate and discussion is the issue of educational reform. Some have suggested that the public schools are failing and that only through radical reform efforts, such as school choice and/or vouchers, will the public school system improve (Nathan, 1989). "Parents care deeply that their children receive a high-quality education and master the knowledge and skills needed to lead productive and rewarding lives. Not all of our schools are fulfilling this mission for all of our students" (American Association of School Administrators, 1996, p. 47). Choice advocates have argued that, by expanding the free-market approach through choice plans for parents and students, reform and improvement of public education will follow (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Although the majority of the discussion and, to a large extent, the research has centered on the issues of free will and educational reform, perhaps less abstract and, some might argue, more compelling reasons for studying and perhaps

supporting choice are based on two additional agendas. This researcher's position is that although the philosophical arguments for choice as a principle of free will may have merit, and that the less abstract arguments for choice as a vehicle for educational reform are worthy of discussion, there are two additional agendas concerning choice that offer perhaps the clearest meaning to the true choice advocate--the parent who "chooses." These agendas tend to be based not on philosophical principles or on political debate, but on the individual families' need to respond to their own personal needs when making decisions about their children's education. If one accepts the basic premise that, given the opportunity, parents generally will make decisions resulting in what they believe is best for their children, then the decision to choose a nonresidential school is not likely to be anchored in complexity. It may simply be about families wanting what they believe is best for their children. These agendas are both based, in large measure, on the family's viewpoint regarding the quality and characteristics of the local school and on the family's personal needs. The support for school choice by the family may hinge on the degree to which they are satisfied with the quality and the characteristics of their local schools.

Background of the Problem

The Issue of Free Will

To understand and appreciate the roots of the school choice issue, one must remember one of the tenets upon which this country was founded--that of free will and the right to choose one's own destiny. In fact, even before the drafters of the

Constitution did, indeed, attempt to ensure a range of freedoms for American citizens, mainly through the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the English writer/ philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) was vigorously arguing for the right of individual freedom. Locke asserted that the will is the power of an individual to think about his or her own actions and to make his or her own choices (Garforth, 1964). According to Locke, if one is able to think about his or her actions and is able to prefer one action over another, that individual has will, a form of power or control. Locke would add that freedom is also a power--the power to do or not to do any particular thing in terms of what one wills. People should and must have both powers, according to Locke. For Locke, people must be able to think of their own options and choose their own course of action. That concept of individual freedom and the ability to choose one's own course of action was a foundation upon which the drafters of the Constitution established this nation. Ironically, many of today's "liberals" might well argue against school choice. Today's liberals might view choice as an option available only to the conservative or affluent seeking to escape the poor neighborhoods of some urban communities.

The idea of school choice, whereby parents have the opportunity to choose the educational setting for their children, has its roots in the early days of the United States. Adam Smith (1776/1952), when he wrote The Wealth of Nations in the late 1700s, suggested that the government should give money directly to parents, in the form of vouchers, to purchase educational services for their children. Vouchers, a form of choice, could stimulate the schools by encouraging positive changes and creativity in a competitive environment. This **consumer sovereignty** would allow

parents to be consumers of education, having ultimate control and authority over the kind of education their children would receive. Parents would be at least as capable of making good educational choices for their children as the government if they were given the power and the opportunity to do so (Smith, 1776/1952).

A more recent advocate of school choice and the consumer-sovereignty issue is economist Milton Friedman. In the mid-1900s, Friedman proposed a voucher system, a form of choice, in an essay on the importance of freedom in American society. Although he failed to provide specific details of its implementation, Friedman's argument centered on the inefficiencies of public schools, the advantages of competition, and, most important, the freedom of choice for parents in selecting schools for their children (Catterall, 1984). Friedman recoined Adam Smith's phrase, "consumer sovereignty," to describe his conservative political message. In his view, the evils of government regulation and monopoly in education were clear. He stressed the advantages of private schools over public schools, and parents' rights to seek the educational values they prefer for their children through vouchers and/or tax credits (Butts, 1989). As Uzzell (1983) wrote in an article in the National Review:

> There are many things wrong with the schools, from overly powerful teachers' unions to look-say methods of reading instruction. But the threat that links them all is government monopoly. It is this monopoly that forces parents to enroll their children in schools that they know are not as good as they used to be, not nearly as good as local private schools, and often brazenly hostile to the parents' religious and moral convictions. (p. 5)

In Friedman's view, there has been an indiscriminate extension of governmental responsibility for education. He agreed that providing a common core

of values and literate citizens for a stable and democratic society is vital. Denationalizing schools and reducing government control would not necessarily jeopardize these values, but it would promote freedom of thought and belief, as well as encourage diversity (LaNoue, 1972).

According to Friedman, if parents were able to make a public expenditure on schooling regardless of where they sent their children, a wide variety of schools would emerge on the scene. Parents could express their views about schools as consumers in a competitive environment by sending their children to schools of their choice (LaNoue, 1972).

Another argument supporting the individual's right to choose is based on the position that school choice helps to provide **equal educational opportunities for all students**. Proponents claim that school choice might help to desegregate schools and also has the advantage of minimizing the loss of a sense of community. The success of magnet schools, a form of choice in large, urban areas, has been cited as evidence of how effective this approach can be.

> It is a matter of fundamental equity to provide every child an equal chance of attending any public school without restrictions based upon residence. The "neighborhood school" is too often a means of locking poor children into schools populated by other poor children. (Nathan, 1989, p. 14)

According to this view, accessibility by the poor through public school choice translates into a critical element of ensuring equity and equal educational opportunity in the schools.

Supporting the argument for equal educational opportunity was John E. Coons, law professor at the University of California at Berkeley. Coons, long a critic

of the public school system, argued that, for him, the reasons for choice are both moral and legal. For Coons (1992), school choice is a matter of simple justice. He asserted, "Our system of tax-supported education has for 150 years provided one of the primary embarrassments to America's image as a just society" (p. 15). Coons and his colleague, Steven D. Sugarman, argued that school choice initiatives must exist and include components that favor the poor. For Coons and Sugarman (1978), choice is an instrument of distributive justice and a medium of expression for the ordinary family. It serves the psychological welfare of the family and is a guarantor of a marketplace of ideas. In sum, school choice is synonymous with liberty and equal opportunity.

Issues of Educational Reform

A second compelling argument for the expansion of school choice is based on the belief that the public schools are failing and are in need of reform. Advocates for choice have argued that choice is a vehicle for reforming a failing school system. They have argued that virtually any educational problem can be solved by choice and that choice produces a number of significant benefits, such as improving student outcomes, revitalizing schools, empowering parents, and reforming education through a free-market system (Paulu, 1989).

On the issue of improving student outcomes, proponents have argued that, with school choice, students' academic performance will improve and so will parental satisfaction. These proponents claim that academic achievement will be enhanced because students will attend schools that cater to their interests and, more

important, meet their needs. Many analysts have assumed that improvement of students' academic performance will be the major payoff of educational choice (Elmore, 1990).

The findings of research have been mixed, but generally they have not supported this assumption (Ogawa & Dutton, 1994). For example, an evaluation of the Milwaukee parental choice program indicated that achievement results did not change appreciably after the first two years (Witt, 1992). Likewise, in the Alum Rock educational voucher project, a comparison of students in alternative programs with their counterparts in regular programs revealed no appreciable or consistent differences in cognitive or affective outcomes (Capell, 1981). Although studies comparing the performance of students in public and private schools have been hotly debated, they have yet to produce conclusive findings. Research on educational choice programs generally has shown that, with few exceptions, the academic performance of students in choice programs does not improve (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1990).

Another argument made by choice advocates is that choice is the vehicle needed to serve as a catalyst for **revitalizing the nation's schools**. It has been assumed that there will be increased motivation and performance/involvement by all of the participants. Students, choice advocates assert, will be more motivated to engage in learning because curriculum and instructional strategies will speak to their interests and needs and because they will have discussed their educational interests and needs with their families (Murnane, 1984). Teachers will be more motivated because they will be directly involved in developing their schools' programs and

because their programs were selected by parents and students (Murnane, 1984). Parents will be more motivated to engage in school-related activities because they chose the school (Bauch, 1992).

It is not possible to draw definite conclusions about the effect of educational choice on the motivation of students and teachers. Researchers simply have not addressed this critical issue (Ogawa & Dutton, 1994). With regard to parental motivation, there is some evidence that parents who participate in educational choice programs tend to be more involved in school-related activities than those who do not participate in such programs. However, it is not clear that choice necessarily motivates parents; rather, it seems that motivated parents choose (Ogawa & Dutton, 1994).

Choice advocates have argued that choice results in an **empowering of parents** (Bauch, 1992). They have suggested that parents who are able to choose among a number of educational options for their children ultimately will become more involved in the educational process. In addition, when given choices, parents are, in fact, empowered; this empowerment is reflected in parents' having greater confidence in their children's schools and accepting responsibility or ownership for what occurs in those schools (Sheane & Bierlein, 1991). As Fliegel (1989) stated when discussing parents' right to choose to enroll their children in magnet schools in Harlem, "Choice gives youngsters, teachers and parents a sense that they own the school because they selected the school and because the school attempts to meet their interests and abilities" (p. 36).

Proponents of choice also have argued that choice is a bold reform initiative, providing schools with a competitive, **free-market mechanism**. They believe choice will force schools to either improve or lose students, whose share of state education dollars will follow them to their new schools. Policy makers who believe in choice see it as the answer to a number of serious educational ailments that exist nationwide.

A report from the Carnegie Foundation (1992) characterized school choice as tearing down the **monopolies of power** that surround the public schools. It stated,

> Transforming parents into education consumers will force the school to shape up or lose customers. It forces teachers and school administrators to improve instruction and toughen standards if they are to retain students, and with them, funding. (p. 16)

Nathan (1989) believed that the free market concept in schools will increase the technical efficiency of schools, thereby saving costs. In his view, schools' productivity will not improve unless prodded by the forces of a free market. He wrote:

> Improvement in effectiveness . . . [is] costly to educators not necessarily in terms of money, but in required institutional, technological, and personal changes. Without the incentives and discipline of the marketplace, the creativity and energy of educators may flow not to increase choice and productivity improvements but to preserve tradition and increase salaries. (p. 27)

The lack of incentive in schools for any real changes demands that there be a catalyst--public school choice in a competitive, free-market system. Changes to increase productivity and efficiency, measured by controlling overall costs, will be unlikely without it (Nathan, 1989).

Two other advocates for choice in a free-market system are political scientists John E. Chubb and Terry E. Moe. Essentially, Chubb and Moe (1990) believed that the natural operations of the markets will drive out bad schools and reward good ones. They maintained that "markets offer an institutional alternative to direct democratic control" (p. 167), adding:

> Without being too literal about it, we think that reformers would do well to entertain the notion that choice is a panacea. . . . Choice is a self-contained reform with its own rationale and justification. It has the capacity *all by itself* to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer in myriad other ways. (p. 217)

School choice is now firmly established as an option for parents and students and has been cited as a vehicle for educational reform.

Two Additional Agendas

Thus far, the researcher has reviewed some of the debate regarding school choice as an issue of free will and as an issue of educational reform. Following discussions with superintendents and other educational professionals, and after conducting a pilot study involving interviews with parents of public school students, this researcher believes there are two additional agendas that need to be developed and added to the discussion and research on school choice. Those two agendas, which will be referred to as "issues of quality and characteristics of schools" and "issues of family/personal needs," may well provide some of the most compelling reasons for allowing and supporting school choice.

In the pilot study with parents, the researcher found that parents who had not opted for choice were generally <u>not</u> unhappy with the choices they were allowed to

make regarding their children's education. In addition, most parents appeared willing to accept the decisions made by the schools regarding their children's basic education. For example, parents were inclined to accept that the schools were in a far better position to make decisions regarding their children's curriculum, schedule, teachers, and general educational experiences while at school. In fact, researchers have indicated that parents are likely to rate their schools favorably when asked to grade them on their overall performance and tend to "trust them" to make appropriate decisions regarding their children's education (Carnegie Foundation, 1992). Likewise, parents believe that the choices they need to make regarding their children often are compatible with what their schools can provide. As a result, most parents, when asked, would be unlikely to seek out or want to participate in choice programs that might remove their children from their local residential schools. This finding is consistent with the statistical data, which have shown that when choice programs are in place, the number of parents or families opting for choice does not represent a significant percentage of the school population (Carnegie Foundation, 1992).

This researcher believes it is important that attempts be made to describe and explain parents' decision to opt for a nonresidential school when given that option through a school choice plan. When parents who did opt for choice were questioned, the initial pilot study seemed to indicate that the parents or family members viewed a number of factors or issues in a very personal manner, as the basis for their decision to choose a nonresidential school. Parents opting for choice often indicated that the basis for their decision to choose a nonresidential school was

related to one of two main issues. Either they expressed concerns regarding the **quality or characteristics of some aspect of their own residential school** or they had strong **personal or family needs** that they thought could best be met through a different school, thus leading them to seek other schooling options for their children.

Parents who indicated dissatisfaction with some aspect of their local schools as the main motive for opting for choice described their concerns with the quality and characteristics of their local schools. For example, they might have been unhappy with the quality of the educational program(s). In some cases, they thought the curriculum was out of date or that the program lacked structure or a defined purpose. Another concern involved the lack of technology or, in some cases, the lack of appropriate learning space. For example, some thought that science labs lacked the proper equipment, lab space, and so on, or that the theater was in disrepair and that other facilities and space were not conducive to today's demands. Others complained of a lack of extracurricular activities or the quality of a particular extracurricular activity, such as a "lousy football program" or a "nice, but ineffective, coach." In general, these issues related to the quality of programs, the number and availability of activities, the content and quality of curriculum, the availability of materials (i.e., computers, lab materials, art supplies, and so on), and the quality of the facilities.

Parents also expressed some concerns about school personnel. When this topic was mentioned, it generally related to a confrontation with a particular school official or unhappiness with a teacher the child might have had while in school. And,

if not a direct confrontation, parents described a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of a teacher, the principal, and/or other school personnel.

Aside from dissatisfaction with their local school, the second set of reasons parents expressed for opting for choice was based on what one could describe as **responding to their individual family or personal needs.** These reasons are generally not directly linked to the educational issues described earlier, such as school quality or school personnel. They may include socioeconomic issues, race, types of other students, location, and/or convenience. For example, some parents indicated that they wanted their children to attend schools that "had children like theirs," usually referring to race or socioeconomic background. Some thought their local schools did not offer/model the values they held to be important and indicated that, in some cases, it was related to "the type of kids at that school." Others simply wanted a school that was more conveniently located as it related to the parents' work schedule and/or the baby-sitting arrangements for the children or their siblings. Responding to these family/personal needs often was the basis for parents' decision to choose nonresidential schools, i.e., to participate in choice programs.

This researcher theorized that it is these **family/personal needs** issues and those based on the **quality/characteristics of the local school** that often drive the choice movement. Although the discussion will continue on whether choice is an issue of free will or a vehicle for reform of the educational system, the researcher believes that family and personal issues and the issue of quality of the local schools and their programs need to be added to the discussion. In fact, it is these added

issues that may well be the most important concerns to families, the real people making the real choices.

Those studies that researchers have conducted in the area of school choice have tended to focus on the results of individual school choice programs, i.e., what, if any, effect a particular choice program might or might not have had on a region or a specific locale (Sauter, 1994). Few attempts have been made to understand or define the meaning of parents' decision to choose a nonresidential school. Is it the abstract notions of free will and the educational reform issues that play themselves out in parents' decision to choose a nonresidential school for their children's education? Or, as this researcher theorized, are the personal/family issues and the families' assessment of the quality of their own local schools also important to the choice discussion? In this study, the researcher's intention is to describe and explain parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education in an attempt to add to the literature on school choice in this area.

The pilot interviews the researcher conducted also yielded some interesting data based on the ages/grade levels of the children. For example, parents interviewed with students in secondary-level programs (grades 9 through 12) tended to cite school programs and availability of extracurricular opportunities as two of the prime factors motivating their decision to choose nonresidential schools for their ninth through twelfth graders. Although only a few families with elementary-age children were interviewed, those parents seemed more concerned with either convenience (proximity to a baby sitter, and so on) or the quality of individual teachers. The researcher believes that the present study can yield important data

that will add to the literature in this area as well. If the reasons for opting for choice vary depending on the grade/age of the children affected, those data or the findings concerning that information might well be of interest to policy makers, educators, and others interested in the research on choice.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The researcher's purpose in this study was to describe and explain parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education. The following questions were designed to provide a framework for this investigation:

1. What are the characteristics of parents who elected to participate in school choice programs?

2. What is the process by which parents decided to choose nonresidential public schools for their children?

3. How were the issues of dissatisfaction with the sending (residential) school and/or the attraction of the receiving (nonresidential) school reflected in the parents' decision to choose?

4. How do the decisions to choose nonresidential public schools by parents with high school students compare with those decisions by parents with elementary students?

5. To what extent are the issues of free will, educational reform, school/ program characteristics, and family/personal needs reflected in parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children?

6. Which of the four issues surrounding choice (free will, educational reform, school quality/characteristics, and family/personal needs) dominated the parents' decision to choose nonresidential schools for their children?

7. Do the data suggest other issues or agendas not previously presented? If so, what are they?

8. What are the overall opinions of parents concerning the school choice option in Michigan?

The questions identified above were designed to guide the researcher as he conducted interviews and made observations in this qualitative study. Analysis of the data that were collected led to a description and explanation of parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children.

Significance of the Study

This qualitative study of parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education is significant for at least two reasons. First and foremost, few researchers on school choice programs have examined parents' decision to send their children to nonresidential schools (Glenn, 1989b) or on the school characteristics that attract parents to a particular school (Rossell, 1985). Therefore, there is a need to interview parents to gain insights into and perspectives concerning their decisions to participate in the choice option. Second, the significance of this study also lies in the information and insights it will provide, which might be helpful to school personnel, boards of education, and policy makers who

face the important task of providing high-quality schools and programs for their constituents.

In this study, the researcher obtained the data directly by interviewing parents who had exercised their right to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education. The researcher's intention was to develop a composite picture of how people view this new phenomenon (Van Maanen, 1988). The parents' actions, feelings, and beliefs were elicited and analyzed through the qualitative research approach. The audience of this study is likely to be varied. Educators need to be aware of all aspects of the school choice movement, including the decisions of parents regarding school choice. Parents and other citizens may find this study useful as they attempt to become informed participants and constituents.

Method

The researcher's purpose in this study was to describe and explain parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education. Because the decision to choose a nonresidential public school had already been made, the opportunity to observe the process (as a participant observer) simply was not available. Thus, it made more sense to have the actual participants, i.e., the parents, reconstruct the act and present their perspective through a personal interview approach. Following a series of personal interviews with parents representing 20 families, the researcher was able to describe and explain parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education.

Parent-interviewees were from the same school district in metropolitan Detroit that has made choice an option for families in the district. Only parents who had opted for nonresidential public schools for their children were selected for interviews. The researcher purposely decided not to interview families who did not choose to participate in choice. It was believed that to do so would take the data and research in a different direction from which the study was intended. Certainly, a related or follow-up study could and might well be necessary, which would include the interviewing of parents who chose not to participate in school choice. The parents were randomly selected from all of those choosing to enroll through the local district's choice plan. To provide for some control against internal threats to validity, such as time and history, parents who had opted for choice plans within the last two years were selected.

Each set of parents to be interviewed was presented with an explanation of the purposes of the study and the areas of questioning. All respondents were asked to sign a consent form. No remuneration of any kind was given to respondents, and all were informed that the researcher would ensure the confidentiality of the informants.

All interviews were guided by the research questions identified above. Because of the nature of a qualitative study, the researcher needed to allow some flexibility regarding the order or phrasing of the questions. In addition to keeping written notes, the researcher tape recorded (with interviewees' permission) the interviews. Any adjustments to or editing of written notes taken at the time of the interviews was done within a few hours of the actual interview in order to maximize

the accuracy of the statements. Statements were verified through a review of the taped session if the researcher later determined it was necessary.

The researcher used the information gained from the interviews to develop a description and explanation of the parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children. Every attempt was made to use and cite only the information that represented the viewpoints and statements of the respondents regarding their decisions about school choices.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined in the context in which they are used in this study:

Choice option. The option that parents are given of having their child(ren) remain in their locally assigned public school or choosing to enroll their child(ren) in another public school outside their local school district.

Elementary level. Generally refers to students in kindergarten through fifth or sixth grade.

Magnet school. A school that draws its students from areas outside their traditional school boundary. Magnet schools usually provide a unique or specialized curriculum or program that is appealing to the student and/or the student's family.

Nonresidential school. The receiving public school or new school chosen by parents outside of their residential school district for their child's education.

Residential school. The local public school that parents have decided not to send their child to when given a choice option.

Secondary level. Generally refers to students in grades 7 through 12 or perhaps grades 6 through 12.

Overview

Chapter I included background information regarding the issues surrounding choice and an explanation of the purpose of the study. The research questions were listed, and the significance of the study was explained. The methodology used in conducting the study was described. Definitions of key terms were given.

Chapter II contains a review of literature related to the study. Pertinent information is discussed on the following topics: legal aspects of choice, political momentum of choice, choice in education, choice factors, and characteristics of parent choosers.

The research design and investigative procedures that were used in conducting the study are described in Chapter III. Included are descriptions of the population, sample selection, data collection and treatment, validity and reliability criteria, and limitations of the study.

The results of the investigation are presented in Chapter IV. This chapter contains a description and explanation of the findings, based on an analysis of the data that were collected. Chapter V contains a discussion of the results pertaining to the research questions, as well as findings from the interviews and related observations. Conclusions drawn from the findings are set forth, as are recommendations for further study. Finally, the researcher's reflections and limitations of the study are presented.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

The researcher's purpose in this study is to describe and explain parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education. This chapter contains a review of literature and research dealing with the topic of school choice. The review is focused on five topics that should provide a context for the research. Those topics are Legal Aspects Regarding Choice, Political Momentum, Choice in Education, Choice Factors, and Characteristics of Parent-Choosers.

Legal Aspects Regarding Choice

A number of legal cases have been handed down by the courts that provide the basis or framework supporting school choice. These cases generally have supported parents' right to make choices regarding educational options for their children. Specifically, there have been four court cases supporting parents' right to choose in educational matters (Alexander & Alexander, 1985). In the case of Meyer v. Nebraska (1923), the courts upheld the right of parents to decide that their children's education included the right to study and be taught in the German language while attending a private school (Alexander & Alexander, 1985). This was a landmark decision because, before this ruling, the state or local school district had the authority to require school attendance and the right to determine that classroom

instruction would be provided only in the English language. The decision on the part of the courts to support parents' right to ask that instruction be provided in a language other than English--in this case, German--was a significant victory in support of parents' rights.

In Pierce v. Society of Sisters (1925) (Alexander & Alexander, 1985), the Supreme Court again ruled the unconstitutionality of an Oregon statute that required all children between the ages of 8 and 16 to attend public schools. The case established that parochial or private education was an appropriate and acceptable alternative to public education, a ruling that again supported parental rights. The court supported the parents' right to choose an education in which quality standards were reasonably established and met. It is significant to the current study of parental choice because the court decision validates the private-interest argument and upheld parents' right to have their children educated in schools other than the local public schools.

In a more recent case, Griswold v. Connecticut (1965), the courts recognized the right of parents to have freedom of choice, claiming it was protected by the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Alexander & Alexander, 1985). The Griswold v. Connecticut case focused on a Connecticut statute that attempted to limit the amount of information provided to married persons on instruction and medical advice regarding conception and birth control. Although this case did not deal with public education issues, it did reflect the court's decision to limit state power in matters of individual choice of its citizenry. In their decision, the Supreme Court cited the Meyers and Pierce decisions, finding that the Connecticut statute

was found to be unconstitutional because the court believed the state was attempting to limit and, in effect, infringe on the rights of families.

Finally, there was the decision of the courts in Wisconsin v. Yoder (1972), in which the states' claim to require Amish children to attend the local public high school was challenged (Alexander & Alexander, 1985). In this case, the Amish argued that the education their children were receiving beyond the local elementary school level conflicted with the values of their religion and contributed to their children's alienation from their God. The courts agreed with the parents' position and, in effect, challenged the *parents patriae* power of the state by supporting the right of parents to determine which school or religious school they might choose for their children's education. In addition, the court's decision supported the Amish's right to have an alternative education to what was then the traditional public school option (Alexander & Alexander, 1985).

Summary

The four court cases cited above demonstrate the shift from state control of children's education to allowing for more parental and individual choice. In essence, it supports the individual family's/parents' freedom to choose when selecting the best educational alternative for children. Although school choice is not mentioned in the Constitution per se, the American system assumes only limited areas into which government may intrude, and outside these areas, one is left to one's own choices (Seeley, 1985). Choosing the school and the content of their children's educational programs is generally believed to be the right of parents and thus outweighs the

state's responsibility to control those decisions as an argument in support of promoting the public good.

Political Momentum

Although the concept of choice in schools has been of interest to educational reformers and to many politicians, it was not, in some respects, until the early 1980s that political attention to the choice issue truly started to gain momentum. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a blue-ribbon panel of educational leaders inside and outside of government, drew renewed attention to the quality of schools when it published its now-famous report, A Nation at Risk. The picture the Commission drew of American education was that the nation's schools were in trouble and that, in many respects, the nation was at risk as a result of this situation. America's once-unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation was being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. The Commission suggested that the educational foundations of American society were being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that was threatening America's very future as a nation and a people. They concluded that the nation needed to reform its educational system for the benefit of all.

The report clearly sounded the alarm--something was wrong. If the nation was failing, they argued, in large measure it was because the schools simply were not doing their job. The alarm raised by the Commission was echoed by other groups, including the Education Commission of the States (1983), the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (1983), and the National Governors Association

(1986). A number of nationally recognized scholars, such as John Goodlad (1984) and Theodore Sizer (1984), also declared American public education to be in desperate need of repair.

In effect, the United States in the 1980s and early 1900s engaged in a new educational debate, one of the more interesting such discussions in the nation's history. This debate can be associated with three successive periods of reform. The first set of reforms stressed the accountability of teachers and students. Forty-five states, for instance, raised their high school graduation requirements. There was a great emphasis on the evaluation of teachers, and some states, like Arkansas, instituted competency tests for teachers (Hess, 1992). The idea that raising teaching standards would lead to greater student learning was simplistic, at best. It is not surprising that, despite the attempts to legislate greater accountability for teachers, students' standardized test scores continued to decline. Accountability alone could not transform schools (Cookson, 1994).

A second era of reform began in 1986, when the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession wrote A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the Twenty-First Century. The report called for restructuring schools through the professionalization of teachers and the empowerment of parents and students. Professionalization of teachers was institutionalized in school-based management innovations in such places as Dade County, Florida, and Rochester, New York. Parent and student empowerment resulted in two forms of policy options: radical decentralization and school choice.

By the end of the 1980s, however, many educational reformers had come to believe that simply changing the internal organization of schools would not result in greater student learning because the very structure of the schools prohibited learning (Cookson, 1994). What was needed was a drastic change in or transformation of the school systems themselves. Some educators and policy makers began to suggest that, to truly change American schools, the so-called state monopoly of education would have to be broken. Thus, the reforms of the 1980s can be characterized as a movement from traditional notions of educational reform (such as improved teaching practices) to more radical notions (revamping the entire system). The conditions and the time were right for a school choice coalition to emerge and challenge the educational establishment (Cookson, 1994).

John E. Coons, law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, believed that school choice is the path needed to cut through educational mediocrity. Coons (1992) had been a critic of the public school system for several decades. For him, school choice was a matter of simple justice. He stated, "Our system of tax-supported education has for 150 years provided one of the primary embarrassments to America's image as a just society" (p. 15). Coons and his colleague, Stephen D. Sugarman (1978), argued, in essence, that school choice initiatives must include voucher components that favor the poor. For Coons, choice is an instrument of distributive justice and a medium of expression for the ordinary family; it serves the psychological welfare of the family, and it is the guarantor of a marketplace of ideas. In sum, school choice is synonymous with liberty. According to Coons, the present system disregards family values because the child, in effect, is removed from the

family's intellectual and moral beliefs by the government when he or she is placed in a public school. Coons believed that choice is a way of overcoming the divisions between family and state. Coons and Sugarman have been at the forefront of the part of the educational reform movement that seeks to disestablish the public school system in the name of freedom. They are current examples of those who adhere to a fundamental belief in individual freedom that goes back to the time of seventeenth-century social philosopher John Locke.

The reform movements of the 1980s had little effect on the overall redesign of American education, and the public school system was battered politically, particularly from the right (Fliegel, 1990a). With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the right gained the political power and platform to wage war against liberal reforms. The new-right conservatives, including some religious leaders and evangelicals, characterized public schools as repositories of secular humanism. They gained informal and formal power in national politics and found support in such places as the U.S. Department of Education. During the 1980s, the Department shifted its emphasis away from public education and moved toward private education and school choice. During that decade, which was dominated by Republican administrations, even the secretaries of education were conservative supporters of school choice, and one, Lamar Alexander, publicly voiced his support of choice without reservation.

In the ongoing efforts to capture the minds, hearts, and votes of Americans, the school choice coalition has been aided by think tanks, interest groups, and individuals who are not based in Washington and do not approach school choice

from a religious or other private-school perspective. One of the most prominent and intellectually respected of these advocacy groups is the Manhattan Institute, which has released several studies about the benefits of school choice for poor, inner-city minority children. The Manhattan Institute is led by some of the country's most prominent banking and corporate executives, university professors, and politicians, as well as public school administrators and labor leaders.

Support for school choice runs far deeper politically than what has been propounded by the Washington establishment or the Manhattan Institute. In states such as Michigan, conservative groups such as the Mackinaw Center have lobbied for school choice plans. There appear to be few, if any, states in which grassroots choice organizers have not had an influence on legislative and political processes.

In some respects, choice made its first major national political breakthrough at the National Governors' Conference in 1986. In their report, Time for Results, the governors said,

> If we first implement choice, true choice among public schools, we unlock the values of competition in the marketplace. Schools that compete for students, teachers and dollars will, by virtue of the environment, make those changes that will allow them to succeed. (Paulu, 1989, p. 14)

Three years later, the White House held a workshop on school choice. President Bush addressed the conference, openly supporting choice.

The governors and their key aides concluded that there was virtually no educational problem that could not be solved by choice and that choice produces at least eight benefits (Paulu, 1989):

1. Choice can bring basic structural changes to schools.
2. Schools of choice recognize individuality.

3. Choice fosters competition and accountability.

4. Choice can improve educational outcomes.

5. Schools of choice can keep potential dropouts in school and draw back those who have already left.

6. Schools of choice increase parents' freedom.

7. Choice plans increase parents' satisfaction with and involvement in the schools.

8. Schools of choice can enhance educational opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged parents.

In his plan for reforming education, called America 2000, President Bush incorporated several provisions for school choice. His plan included a $2 million education certificate support fund and a $30 million fund for creating National School Choice Demonstration Projects.

Then, in 1990, Politics, Markets and America's Schools was published--a book that captured the attention of educators, policy makers, and politicians. The book was written by two political scientists, John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe. Essentially, Chubb and Moe believed that the natural operations of markets would drive out bad schools and reward good ones. They argued that school choice had the potential for reforming education, stating that "choice is a self-contained reform with its own rationale and justification. It has the capacity *all by itself* to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer in myriad other ways" (p. 217). Schools compete for the support of parents and

students, and parents and students are free to choose among schools. The system is built around decentralization, competition, and choice.

School choice is now firmly established as an option for parents and students. It has captured the attention of both politicians and educational reformers, and it is believed that choice can provide a vehicle for reforming education without costing a great deal of money. In addition, it provides an option for consumer-conscious citizens who believe in their right to pick and choose from their options.

Choice in Education

Public School Monopoly

Free choice in education has long been considered a parental right and an expression of family sovereignty in educational matters. Also, for more than 200 years, choice has been considered a means for ending the monopoly of public education. The Wealth of Nations, written by Adam Smith in 1776, exposed the negative consequences of a protected monopoly and its detriment to an individual's freedom of choice. Insulated from competition, public schools, wrote Smith, "have not only corrupted the diligence of public teachers, but have rendered it almost impossible to have any good private ones" (cited in Coons & Sugarman, 1978, p. 18). In recent years, others have criticized public education for its monopolistic characteristics (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Friedman, 1962; Friedman & Friedman, 1979; Holt, 1969).

Lieberman (1989) suggested that as the "single supplier" of educational services, public education produces problems for both the public school organization

and the clients it serves. Considering the problem of the single-supplier status of public education, Lieberman pointed out that employees in a monopolistic organization "are not as likely to be responsive to citizen concerns as service providers who can be replaced from time to time" (p. 43).

At the core of the monopoly argument is the idea that central government should not hinder the freedom of individuals to pursue their interests and values. The central defect of government intervention, according to Friedman (1962), is government's forcing people to act against their own immediate interests and values. He wrote:

> They seek to resolve what is supposed to be a conflict of interest, or a difference in view about interests . . . by forcing people to act against their own interests. These measures are therefore countered by one of the strongest and most creative forces known to man--the attempt by millions of individuals to promote their own interests to live their own lives by their own values. . . . The interests of which I speak are not simply narrow self-regarding interests. On the contrary, they include the whole range of values that men hold dear and for which they are willing to spend their fortunes and sacrifice their lives. (p. 200)

Reform and Choice

The support for parental choice in education as a basic tool for restructuring education and improving public schools has been well documented (Bane & Jencks, 1972; Nathan, 1989a; Raywid, 1989; Zerchykov, 1987). Perpich (1989) argued that

> Choice is the key. Choice has fostered an atmosphere in which everyone is taking a closer look at schools. Educators and education policy makers are taking a fresh approach to what makes a good school. . . . Public school choice is a key strategy to help improve our nation's education system. (p. 3)

Others have reported that choice as an educational innovation is increasingly being supported by research. Raywid (1984) wrote,

> Among the educational innovations introduced during the 1960's, alternatives--or schools of choice--have proven one of the most durable and are increasingly finding support from research. This support may be one reason why schools of choice continue to proliferate. (p. 71)

Some writers have seen choice as a means for reforming public schools, as a way of empowering those who are directly affected by public schools--namely, parents, teachers, and students (Clinchy, 1989; Doyle & Levine, 1989; Mueller, 1987; Urbansky, 1989). The idea of empowering parents, teachers, and students need not necessarily create a conflict situation for public schools (Urbansky, 1989). Empowered teachers, on one hand, will be able to design better teaching and learning environments, and parents will be the recipients of more high-quality options. Clinchy suggested that choice as an empowering of parents and professional staff is a way of truly reforming the traditional system of education, which "holds parents, students, and professional educators hostage" (p. 290). He continued:

> Both parental choice and professional choice, when properly conceived and executed, are necessary because they turn our traditional authoritarian system of public education upside down. And this shake up is genuine change, real reform, true restructuring. (p. 290)

Raywid (1983) contended that reform periods generally focus on a "tightening-up" orientation, which strongly advocates a uniformity among common standards, expectations, and content. The tightening-up philosophy supports the connection between sameness and educational quality. Consequently, Raywid noted that the common curriculum, required of all students, becomes the focus of reform. She distinguished between reforming public education through choice and reforming education through excellence:

> Whereas the alternative idea [choice] holds that the key to educational effectiveness lies in providing different kinds of schools to serve different kinds of youngsters and families, the "excellence" agenda consists of redesigning a single best system for everybody. (p. 684)

Urbansky (1989) suggested that the challenge of educational reform is not simply invigorating the present system of public schools, but "finding new and more effective ways to educate more students" (p. 236). Some proponents of increased school options have contended that choice is a powerful tool for educational change, but not a cure for all of education's ills (Doyle & Levine, 1989; Glenn, 1989b, 1989b; Nathan, 1989a). Others, however, have seen choice as the centerpiece for the reform movement and a panacea for public education because it is unlike any other strategy for restructuring education (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Chubb and Moe wrote, "Choice is a self-contained reform with its own rationale and justification. It has the capacity all by itself to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer in myriad other ways" (p. 14).

No One Best System

A central theme favoring the argument for increased parental choice is the idea that no "one best system" exists to accommodate the diversity of values, students, and teachers. Tyack (1974) traced the early development of the "one best system" and characterized the systematizing of public education as a response to the chaotic growth of urban centers, class discord, and the introduction of organizational and technological advancements in industry.

During the nineteenth century, the transformation of public education from village to urban schools triggered a search for one best system of education for

urban populations. Before the centralization of public schools in the early 1840s, parents freely exercised their right to choose their children's schools. As American culture changed, especially in the postwar era when it was evolving from an agrarian to an industrial society, the urban centers became magnets for those who searched for a better quality of life. The principles of scientific management, which created order in the factories and industries, were also, at that time, introduced into public education. Tyack (1974) described the standardization of the public school system:

> They [educators] were impressed with the order and efficiency of the new technology and forms of organization they saw about them. The division of labor in the factory, the punctuality of the railroad, the chain of command and coordination in modern businesses--these aroused a sense of wonder and excitement in men and women seeking to systematize the schools. (p. 28)

Tyack (1974) argued that effective reform of public education requires a reassessment of our convictions about the possibility of finding the one best system and the value of insulating schools from the community. The one best system that developed at the turn of the century must be reformed, Tyack contended, through shared decision making, increased attention to the distinct learning styles of ethnic groups, and the development of alternatives within the system.

Choice is an alternative to the one-best-system mind-set that is pervasive in public education. It has the potential to increase satisfaction among the consumers of public education and to reduce strife between parents and schools (Elam & Gallup, 1989).

Parental Dissatisfaction

The popularity of choice as a means for accessing better quality education also grew out of parents' increasing dissatisfaction with public schools (Glenn, 1989b; Seeley, 1985). It is common for Americans to search for alternatives to institutions with which they are dissatisfied. This is especially the case in public education (Coons & Sugarman, 1978).

Seeley (1985) indicated that "exit" is a natural reaction to dissatisfaction. He reasoned that choice will receive increasing attention in the public forum because there is growing disaffection with public schools; private school parents are finding it difficult to meet tuition payments; and many public school parents are, for the first time, considering private and parochial schools. Seeley viewed choice as an "end run" around difficult public school problems. He stated,

> Instead of trying to make educational governance more responsive to the voice of parents, students and citizens or to get school bureaucracies to share power or change direction of militant teacher unionism, choice simply allows dissatisfied parents to pick a school better suited to their children's needs and their family's values. (p. 85)

Seeley also suggested that public school officials should examine their role in the exodus of dissatisfied parents.

Choice and Conflict

Some writers have viewed family choice as a means of reducing social conflict (Lieberman, 1989) and increasing community support for public schools (Blank, Baltzell, Chabotar, & Dantler, 1983; Robinson, 1984). Fantini (1973), who maintained that parental choice models should not be limited to the public school

system, believed that choice can help reduce tensions and conflicts, especially in conventional desegregated schools. He thought that public schools of choice increase chances for "developing educational environments that are responsive to the style and culture of the community" (p. 228). His basic idea was that neither students nor parents should think that there is something wrong with them if an educational option does not work.

Fantini (1973) regarded parental choice as a way of bringing harmony to education. When parents are given the right to choose, families with like views of education gravitate toward similar schools and thus bring about harmony. Fantini saw parents (families) as best qualified to decide on which school will best meet the needs of their children, as opposed to the long-standing policy of assigning children to a school based on geographic location.

Lieberman (1989), a supporter of educational vouchers to private schools, argued that family choice was a means of reducing the intense political, religious, economic, and cultural conflicts that characterize education today. According to Lieberman, public schools create too much conflict and, consequently, require excessive amounts of resources for managing the conflict. For this reason, he wrote, "it is better to have their [parents'] disagreements resolved through the market place instead of the political process" (p. 215).

Reitman (1987) suggested that the conventional wisdom that public education can "save the American people from imminent catastrophe" (p. 14) has contributed to a hurtful cultural illusion. He contended that schooling is a "false messiah," and that America's once socially self-reliant society has become too dependent on the

salvational capacity of schooling to solve all of society's problems. Through family choice and preferences in education, the "Education Messiah Complex" that plagues public school perceptions can be eliminated. Reitman stated,

> In short, by opening up significant options for schooling to parents (i.e., not merely options within the prevailing public sector, as Raywid and others have urged), the Education Messiah Complex will be enmeshed because no school can perform the impossible. All that any school can achieve is educational in nature. And that is sufficient. (pp. 16-17)

In a two-year national study of magnet schools, Blank et al. (1983) found that choice can help increase community members' confidence in public education. They reported that effective magnets require community involvement in forms not normally found in public schools, such as planning program designs, writing curriculum, and arranging for special equipment or facilities. Community participation in planning the magnet tended "to decrease opposition and lead to high involvement in implementation" (p. 37). When the magnet delivered according to what was planned and expected, increases in public support for the district were realized.

It has also been argued that the ability of public schools to offer educational choice is a strong defense for public education (Raywid, 1983). Educational choice in the public school system would eliminate the need for policy makers to provide parents with choice through the financial support of private schools.

Benefits of Choice

A number of investigators have suggested that distinct benefits can be derived from providing choice to parents and students (Fizzell, 1987; Fliegel, 1989;

Glenn, 1989b; Seeley, 1985). In Raywid's (1984) synthesis of research on choice, she highlighted these benefits.

Choice heightens parents' investment in what they have chosen and provides a coherent group of like-minded individuals involved in the schools of choice. Raywid (1984) also pointed out that schools of choice produced high levels of satisfaction to both parents and students, which, in turn, generated more positive attitudes toward and support for public schools. With regard to students, Raywid (1989) reported that schools of choice generally have higher levels of student attendance and lower dropout rates. Improved attitudes toward schooling were especially significant among turned-off students. She wrote,

> It is not unusual for successful students in any school to be positively disposed toward their school. What seems unique to schools of choice, however, is the finding of positive attitudes among less successful students. It is an important achievement in two regards: first, in keeping the door open to permit future success, and second in helping assure positive behavior prior to the time of success. Thus, the ability of schools of choice to generate a liking for school even among weak students is an important accomplishment. (p. 28)

Raywid (1984) also indicated that teachers receive benefits from teaching in schools of choice. In addition to decreased disciplinary problems and teacher-student conflicts, teachers in schools of choice enjoy high levels of autonomy and control over their programs. Morale is enhanced in this climate of professional autonomy and collegiality.

Increased parental involvement and meaningful partnerships between families and schools are further benefits derived from choice (Nathan, 1989a; Raywid, 1984; Seeley, 1989). Parents are empowered in schools of choice and are required to

enter a different relationship than is now evident in the typical public school. Further, in such schools, parents, teachers, and principals jointly establish and share responsibility for children's academic growth (Mueller, 1987).

Seeley (1985) suggested that partnerships between teachers and parents and between families and schools are a "state of mind more than a description of functions [and] need not always involve active participation" (p. 146). Seeley's premise was that the mere act of choosing creates a partnership or bond that is shared by the teacher, parent, and child.

In his analysis of choice, Seeley (1985) stated that there are three other benefits of choice: student motivation, accountability, and affirmation of one's values. Even though the interaction between choice and motivation is a complex one, choice can improve student motivation by improving the relationship between teachers and students. Choice gives parents and students a substantial voice in educational decisions that previously were subordinated to the group process. Seeley believed that "the need in educational policy is not to enthrone choice as the sole determinant, but to give it its legitimate place and to unleash the power it represents in terms of student motivation and parental trust" (p. 87).

Further, Seeley (1985) indicated that choice provides two predominant ways of holding institutions accountable. Parental choice provides a market accountability through which dissatisfaction is measured by parents' taking their business elsewhere. Choice, on the other hand, provides a kind of political accountability through which attempts are made to change the institution when parents are

dissatisfied. Seeley cited four reasons that prevent parents from exercising their options:

1. The parents are not aware that there is a problem.
2. They do not think it is their responsibility to evaluate either their child's or the school's performance.
3. They know that the child is not learning satisfactorily but assume the problem is with the child.
4. They are aware that the problem may be with the school but feel they have no other option. (p. 88)

Finally, Seeley (1985) and Glenn (1989b) pointed out that choice is an affirmation of one's values and an accommodation of the pluralistic values in American society. The act of selection gives the choosers an interest in the school they choose.

Choice and Values

Coons (1990) contended that the common curriculum found in public schools today was designed in the nineteenth century for the purpose of standardizing a culture and serving as a "truth function" through a common set of values. He argued that the truth function of the common curriculum has outlived its usefulness because today "there are too many versions of reality and of the good life" (p. 36). In addition, he suggested that institutions, and public schools in particular, have failed to adapt sufficiently to the changing value systems of parents. Consequently, parents have sought alternatives through choice.

Several researchers have seen parents' ability to choose the schools that their children will attend as a mechanism of achieving a positive consensus of shared values in the chosen schools. Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1981) claimed

that schools in which values are agreed upon are more capable of producing cognitive growth than those student bodies formed by administrative assignment. Shared values in the school setting tend to create strong, homogeneous cultures that are linked to the shared mission of the school.

Schools of choice have been compared favorably with private, parochial schools, in part due to the sense of community that they create (Raywid, 1987). In his investigation of parental choice of magnet schools, Amen (1989) found that, like the parochial, nonpublic schools, choice schools create effective learning environments because of their "heightened awareness of communal purpose" (p. 570). In nonchoice schools, Amen concluded, parents' educational values are unlikely to be deeply aroused.

Robinson (1984) asserted that public school systems are capable of providing an educational belief (value) system in the form of a choice school, even though the belief (value) is not closely held by some professional educators in the system. Amen (1989) suggested that parental values are significant and play an important part in the choice process because they are often used as a "primary screening device for determining what information (in choosing a school) is helpful and what is irrelevant" (p. 560).

Choice, Magnets, and Integration

Since their inception in the late 1960s, magnet schools have become the chief tool for desegregating public schools (Amen, 1989) and a relatively uncontroversial method of accomplishing desegregation (Rossell, 1985). Magnet schools exist to

reduce racial isolation and as a voluntary alternative to the mandatory assignment of students (Blank et al., 1983).

Magnet schools were first developed for large urban school districts and were designed with special curricular programming to attract white and minority populations. In a national study of magnet schools, Blank et al. (1983) reported that magnet schools are largely an urban phenomenon and are more numerous in the Northeast, Midwest, and West than elsewhere. Fifty-nine percent of the magnet programs in the study were found to be at the elementary level and featured pedagogical distinctions (fundamental, open, Montessori, and so on). At the high school level, curricular features were emphasized.

In commenting on the politics of urban education, Archbald (1988) suggested that magnet schools may serve multiple functions. He believed that magnet schools reduce conflicts with busing, improve the image of educational quality of larger urban school districts, and retain black and white middle-income parents in urban schools. He also found that magnet schools are more cohesive and consensual organizations than are nonmagnets. He stated,

1. The distinctive specialization and autonomy give staff a clearer sense of purpose.
2. There is greater incentive to prevent "disorder" since adversity affects a school's reputation and ability to compete for students.
3. [There is] a probable self-selection of people (principals, teachers and parents) to magnets above average in their commitment and ability to encourage student discipline and agreement regarding educational goals. (pp. 470-471)

Because attending a magnet school is generally based on parents' free choice, magnets are unlike other desegregation strategies, which were designed

simply to mix the races and achieve an integrated school system. Fantini (1973) believed that integration is more a psychological than a physical state and that the "mere physical mixing is not the same as integration" (p. 229). He saw choice schools as an opportunity to develop integrated education in which students from diversified backgrounds would share a common focus and "gain a new sense of connection in the process" (p. 229).

Many researchers have proposed that the traditional role of the magnet school as a desegregation strategy may be changing (Glenn, 1989b; McCurdy, 1985). McCurdy reported that the benefits that magnets offer, namely, diversity of choices, renewed parental involvement, and concern for the quality of education, not only exceed their intended purpose of integration, but also entice other districts to embrace the idea of alternative schools.

Charles Glenn (1989b), Director of the Massachusetts Bureau of Educational Equity, saw choice as a mechanism for promoting equity and integration in public schools. However, he noted that the benefits of parental choice exceed the aims of race and class integration and make sense on their own merit. He cited pedagogical and cultural reasons for making choice available to parents:

1. Students learn more if we take account of their different needs and strengths; they think and work in different ways.
2. Schools with a clear educational mission, a coherent approach to instruction, are more effective.
3. Teachers with freedom to make professional decisions--and accountability for results--bring more energy and creativity to the classroom.
4. Students and their parents are more committed to the educational mission of schools that they have chosen. (p. 49)

In the Blank et al. (1983) study, which coincided with the release of the U.S. Department of Education's report, A Nation at Risk, the researchers reported that a new trend was emerging with magnet schools. Whereas magnets offer an alternative to involuntary desegregation and forced busing, "the concept has attained its own popularity, due to the combination of urban school district needs and the interest of parents, students, and communities in education innovation" (p. 13).

Raywid (1985) wrote that there has been an apparent shift in orientation of magnet schools, a maturation of the concept. She summarized that maturation in the following way:

> As the magnet idea has matured and additional concerns have shaped public discussion, a shift has gradually occurred in magnet school orientation--or more properly, an expansion has taken place, from an exclusive preoccupation with effecting desegregation to including "an emphasis on providing quality education or educational options for the district" (Fleming et al., 1982). Shifts in emphasis have paralleled the discovery that magnets are somewhat less effective in desegregating schools than has been hoped, but a great deal more effective in improving educational quality, and simultaneously, school image and support. (pp. 449-450)

Summary

Free choice in education is deeply rooted in the American value system and has been a cause championed by many people for more than 200 years. Early proponents of choice in educational matters frequently cited the monopolistic nature of public education as detrimental to parental choice as well as the ability (or desire) of public schools to improve education. More recently, Friedman and Friedman (1979) and others have proposed various plans that would create a free-market atmosphere among public schools. Fantini (1973) and others have argued that

plans to expand choice should be explored, but only within the context of public schools.

The restructuring of public education through school choice frequently has been mentioned in the literature. Many writers have suggested that empowerment of parents, teachers, and students should be the focus of the reform movement. Others have suggested that public schools should emulate private schools in relation to site-based management and school autonomy (Chubb & Moe, 1990). The common theme that appears in the divergent views on choice as a tool for restructuring public education and as a method for introducing competition into the educational marketplace is the failure of one best system to meet the diverse values and needs of education consumers. Researchers such as Tyack (1974) have argued that there is increasing dissatisfaction among parents regarding the one best system.

The benefits of choice have found support in the literature, particularly in the more recent studies of choice. In addition to reducing the social conflicts that appear to cause dissatisfaction in parents (i.e., what to teach, how to teach it, and a value system), choice offers other benefits not generally found in the typical public school system. Low dropout rates, increased student achievement, parental involvement, and a consensus of school culture (ethos/climate) are some of these benefits. Generally, these benefits are accrued because of the desire of students, teachers, and parents to be a part of the chosen school. A sense of community and a shared value system contribute to the uniqueness of schools of choice, which resemble an environment usually found in nonpublic parochial and private schools (Gratiot, 1979).

Magnet schools have become the most popular strategy for desegregating schools. However, some researchers and writers have indicated that a new trend is emerging from the magnet concept (Blank et al., 1983). Whereas racial integration was once the primary focus of the magnet-school concept, this goal has been overshadowed by the ability of magnets to accomplish more than "mere physical mixing" of the races (Fantini, 1973). The emerging form is a school of choice that combines the goal of an integrated education with a common-value focus for students from diverse backgrounds.

Choice Factors

The literature on the factors affecting parents' decisions about schools for their children is somewhat limited (Williams, Hancher, & Hutner, 1983). Rossell (1985) pointed out that there have been few comparative analyses of the school characteristics that are attractive to parents and students. In his analysis of choice in six industrialized nations, Glenn (1989a) reported that there has been little empirical research on the reasons parents make decisions about a school for their children. Because schools of choice have not been the tradition in public schooling, and they have a relatively short history, the evidence available regarding choice is limited (Raywid, 1989).

Parents consider various factors when deciding where their children will attend school. The literature in this area indicated that many factors are considered and become part of the parents' decision. The major factors that parents consider when making their choice are reviewed in this section.

Parental decisions regarding the choice of a school generally are not idiosyncratic (Uchitelle & Nault, 1977) and involve many factors, which would suggest a process rather than an event (Amen, 1989; Bridges & Blackman, 1978). Scott (1983) suggested that the factors involved in parents' choice of schools do not simply reflect locally available options, but rather are associated with value conflicts and issues in the past and present status of education. Religious, social, and racial differences contribute to conflicts concerning the structure of public education. Scott found that school choice decisions involved the parents' educational values, the individual needs of their children, their beliefs concerning how children are motivated to learn, and a desire to become part of a school community of like-minded parents and teachers.

In a study of choice in an affluent suburban community in Ohio, Oakley (1985) confirmed the earlier findings of Bridges and Blackman (1978), who discovered that parents continued to evaluate their choice after it had been made. Lower academic standards, unmet student needs, unresponsiveness of the school to parental concerns, declining discipline, and increased nonpublic school costs are factors that would cause parents to seek a second or third school option.

Uchitelle and Nault (1977) contended that the processes of selecting a school were generally similar among parents who actively sought a school option, whereas the factors used in the selection process varied greatly. They also found that "in some cases the parents begin the search process with a predetermined set of choice factors, while other parents appear to develop criteria during exposure to the schools" (p. 23).

sidency

Some researchers have considered one's choice of residence to be a nificant factor in the choice of a school. Williams et al. (1983) and Maddaus 87) explained that the choice of school is generally made when parents buy a use or choose a residence within the attendance area of a desired school. In a ational survey of households regarding choice and tuition tax credits, Williams et l. (1983) found that, in all demographic areas sampled in the study, parents were generally more likely to think about schools when deciding where to live than when enrolling their children in particular schools.

Maddaus (1987) concurred with these findings and speculated that the choice concept has rarely been implemented because most affluent families already have exercised choice among public schools through their selection of housing. For such families, he explained, various plans for public school choice are not needed. Maddaus concluded that school enrollment opportunities should be made available to poor minorities who lack the financial resources to choose a school based on selection of residence. Other earlier researchers also confirmed residency as a predominant factor in school choice (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Sonnenfeld, 1973).

Proximity

Several researchers have found geographic location or proximity to be a factor in school choice. In a study of parental choice in Coquitiam, British Columbia, Cogan (1979) found that low-socioeconomic-status (SES) parents chose a school based on its location and its cost (distance, transportation, and choice of

neighborhood), whereas high-SES parents considered the adequacy of the school environment, the school program, and the child's personality. Scott (1983) indicated that location was a powerful determinant of parental choice, especially when it involved young children. However, proximity was less of a concern at the high school level and was found to diminish in importance for elementary school choosers when the bus stop was "closer to the home and [did] not require crossing busy streets" (Archbald, 1988, p. 249).

When given a choice between neighborhood schools and high-quality magnet schools, black families were less likely to consider proximity as a choice factor when the more distant alternative school had a higher percentage of college-educated clients (Archbald, 1988). Rossell (1985) suggested that the distance to a school was a factor in choosing when (a) the district was not under a mandatory desegregation order (i.e., all students were not reassigned) and (b) the neighborhood concept was intact.

In a study of the Alum Rock Voucher Demonstration Project in San Jose, California, Bridges and Blackman (1978) found that geographic location was a primary consideration for parents who were enabled to choose a school. However, proximity diminished as a strong factor when parents had a choice among "highly differentiated alternatives" (p. xiv).

Cost

School cost, which includes tuition, transportation, and other associated costs, is also a factor in school choice. In a study of a proposed tuition-aid program

in British Columbia, Kamin and Erickson (1981) identified a strong relationship among family income, tuition aid, and school choice. Of the high-, middle-, and low-income groups in their survey, 61.3% of the total sample indicated they would consider nonpublic alternatives if the present level of tuition aid was increased. However, a lower proportion of the high-income group indicated that they would reconsider their school choice, given the increased aid. Williams et al. (1983) supported the findings of the Kamin and Erickson study and the significance of costs as a choice factor. In the Williams et al. study, nearly 75% of the parents choosing public schools and 50% of parents with children in private schools considered school cost. The researchers concluded that "financial considerations are a major reason preventing public school parents from enrolling their children in private schools. On the other hand, private [school] parents do not perceive the cost as a major factor influencing their choice of a school" (p. 1).

ncome and Education

Williams et al. (1983) also reported that "household income and respondents' education did have substantial direct and indirect effects on the choice of schools" p. 40). In two other studies, researchers found that the high educational and ocioeconomic levels of families were related to the active search behavior of arents (Oakley, 1985; Uchitelle & Nault, 1977). However, the Oakley study was typical to the extent that it was conducted in a socially homogeneous and conomically affluent community. Uchitelle and Nault conceded that the "parents tudied in this research were not fully representative of American school users"

p. 34) because they were well-educated (located near a private university) and were n a high socioeconomic range.

In an earlier study of why parents chose nonpublic schools, no differences vere found between public and nonpublic choosers in terms of occupational and ncome levels (Gratiot, 1979). Gratiot reported that when public and private school choosers were compared, no significant differences were found between the two groups with regard to higher occupational and income levels, maternal employment, and parental history of nonpublic school attendance.

Household Size and Siblings

Neither the size of the household nor the number of children in a family has been found to be related to the choice of a public or a private school (Williams et al., 1983). In more recent studies that considered factors of income and educational level, the idea of "time poor" and "time rich" parents was reported to be associated with constraining or enabling the choice process (Gerritz, 1987; Wright, 1986).

Gerritz (1987) speculated that time is a constrained resource for families and greatly influences parents' ability to make good choices. He found that the families that are most affected by the time constraint are single-parent families and those with multiple siblings. He established that family size and marital status had a strong influence on school choice for elementary-aged students. Gerritz explained that

> Searching for an alternate school, arranging for admission, providing transportation, and participating in school activities [such] as classroom volunteering and parent-teacher conferences all place additional time demands on families. Since single-parent families and families with several children are the most "time poor," children in these families do not have equal access to high quality schools. (p. 178)

Wright (1986) found that participation and involvement in a school-within-a-school magnet arrangement were higher for white middle-class parents "because they had greater control over their time than Hispanic parents" (p. 99). Similarly, Cogan (1979) found that low-SES parents could not afford to invest time in gathering information and may have been less able to seek information as a consequence of their lower level of education.

The socioeconomic level of the adults in a household was investigated as it related to parental preference in academic programming and educational preferences (Rossell, 1985). White parents who selected alternative schools in black neighborhoods tended to be of a higher social class and preferred more child-centered, nontraditional instructional styles. Blacks who volunteered for alternative schools also tended to possess higher SES status. However, they also tended to have the educational preferences of working-class parents--traditional adult-centered teaching styles that stressed conformity to standards as well as obedience to authority (Rossell, 1985).

Race or Ethnicity

Race or ethnicity as a choice factor has been studied widely, but with varying findings. In a study of parental choice, Uchitelle and Nault (1977) found that more than half of the parents, both white and black, chose schools in which "the less favorable racial make-up was present" (p. 30). In the majority of cases in that study, parents chose the more integrated school (white families, 67%; black families, 88%).

In his analysis of the Milwaukee Magnet Program, Archbald (1988) found that, given a choice of a neighborhood school or a magnet school, educated (four-year college) white families were active choosers of alternatives, whereas uneducated whites (less than a four-year college) sought the neighborhood schools. He further found that inner-city blacks were underrepresented in alternatives for two reasons. First, blacks were reluctant to enroll in specialty schools because of perceived "requirements" or high expectations. Archbald called this "dis-ease, or uncomfortableness in interaction with articulate, well-educated whites in meetings and other kinds of school projects" (p. 210). Second, blacks perceived the low-income white neighborhood schools as unfriendly and less tolerant of ethnicity. Further, blacks viewed neighborhood schools located in residential areas with a high percentage of college-educated families as more racially tolerant and the children in those schools as desirable classmates for their own children.

Social Class

In her review of the literature on magnet schools, Rossell (1985) reported that social class was related to values and attitudes toward education and desegregation. In general, she found that the higher the social class, the greater the racial tolerance and support for integration. Bridges and Blackman (1979) reported that ethnicity, social class, child affiliation, and proximity were the most important factors for parents when choosing a school for their child.

Metz (1987) suggested that parents' ideas about good education are more diverse and less tightly tied to class status and race at the elementary level than at

the high school level. An elementary magnet school with a reputation as a caring place for children "may draw from all walks of life as well as all races" (p. 4). Metz also argued that parents choose as whole persons from a variety of complex factors:

> . . . the social acceptability of the school's name, their social ties to other choosing families, the reputation of the neighborhood, transportation processes, their emotional reaction to staff who represent the school, and--once the school is established--the experiences of relatives' and neighbors' children with all aspects of the school. (p. 12)

Veal (1989) found that minority and nonminority parents were influenced by different factors in their selection of a school in a magnet school program. Minority parents in that study considered features such as available transportation, the option to choose their children's programs, test scores, homework policy, and racial balance to be important factors. Factors rated as significant for nonminority parents were the location of the magnet (within the neighborhood) and the fact that their children's friends attended the school. Veal also reported that minority parents found school-related factors to be of greater importance than did nonminority parents, who thought parent-related factors were more important considerations.

Private School Choice

A number of researchers have examined the reasons why parents move their children from a public to a private school. Several have suggested that dissatisfaction with the public school is a significant reason for this move (Gratiot, 1979; Kamin & Erickson, 1981). Williams et al. (1983) found that academics, discipline, and teacher qualities were frequently mentioned factors that were associated with parents' dissatisfaction with public schools. They further suggested

hat religious instruction or value orientation was the only reason cited by parents who transferred their children to a private school but were not dissatisfied with public chooling. On the other hand, parents who transferred their children from private chools to public schools did not base their decisions on some dissatisfaction with rivate schooling, but on financial or logistical reasons. Private school consumers vere also found to be influenced by small class size, student-teacher ratio, liscipline/control, and high-quality teachers (Gratiot, 1979).

Whereas religious instruction was frequently cited in the literature as a primary factor in private school choice, other researchers have found that the academic program of the private school had more influence on parents' choice than did religious orientation (Bauch & Small, 1986). In his study regarding the influences of religion and household income on choice, Gerritz (1987) found support for the patterns currently found in the literature on family choice. High-income Catholic families were less likely than other families to enroll their children in neighborhood public schools. Of these two variables, income and religion, family religious orientation had the smaller influence.

Other Factors

Other researchers of choice factors have suggested a number of less frequently reported criteria in the literature on school choice. Uchitelle and Nault (1977) examined the decision-making process of parents with students entering primary (K-3) and intermediate (4-6) grades. Parents of primary school children, especially kindergartners and first graders, were concerned with the classroom

atmosphere, the principal's philosophy, and the teacher's style and reputation. Parents of students entering intermediate-level classes generally focused on the quality of the curriculum and discipline. The distance to school, schools with racial homogeneity, and achievement test scores were less of a concern for these parents.

Cogan (1979) reported that public and nonpublic school parents who actively searched among school alternatives considered the following factors to be important: curriculum, school atmosphere, quality teachers, principal's attitude, discipline, safety of school travel, and proximity. High-SES parents gave great consideration to the adequacy of the school's social and physical environment, the school program, and their children's personalities. Low-SES parents chose a school based on its location and cost. Cogan's study, however, was limited due to the ethnic and socioeconomic homogeneity of the population and by the limited range and diversity of choices available to the parents.

Williams et al. (1983) identified four school factors that choosing parents reported as influencing their decisions in school choice. In order of importance, they were discipline (86%), staff (86%), academic standards (84%), civic/moral values (70%), and academic courses (65%). In a study of the consumer-choice behavior of parents, Sonnenfeld (1973) suggested that school selection was based on the location of the school, its program, the school environment, and school cost.

In a national survey of 1,500 subjects, Elam (1990) reported what parents considered the most and least important reasons for choosing a school. In rank order, the reasons were (a) quality of the teaching staff; (b) maintenance of student discipline; (c) curriculum (i.e., the courses offered); (d) size of classes; (e) grades or

test scores of the student body; (f) track records of graduates in high school, in college, or on the job; (g) size of school; (h) proximity to home; (i) extracurricular activities such as band/orchestra, theater, and clubs; (j) social and economic background of the student body; (k) racial or ethnic composition of the student body; and (l) the athletic program.

Characteristics of Parent Choosers

The characteristics of parent choosers, as reported in the literature on school choice, are addressed in this section. A secondary issue, which concerns the relationship between parental characteristics and the sources of information that parents seek in the choice process, also is discussed.

Opponents of the school choice concept have argued that low-SES parents are not competent to choose a school for their children. This argument presumes that only high-SES parents possess the ability to make sound judgments about their children's educational interests. However, some have argued that poor parents are as quality conscious as wealthier families and are able to make school choices for their children (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Friedman & Friedman, 1979). Others have reasoned that poor, less educated parents are limited only by their financial resources and their general inability to effectively articulate their desire for different schooling alternatives to school officials (Sonnenfeld, 1973). Coons (1990) summarized this position: "Poverty does not destroy the parental capacity to choose well, and the waiting lists at such institutions [private schools] demonstrate that those

who have already chosen are not the only parents who know what they are doing" (p. 36).

In his study of parental choice and magnet schools, Archbald (1988) suggested that "a higher good is served by preserving the right of choice for all families and adhering to principles of individual responsibility" (p. 68). A system of choice, he contended, provides a "win-win" situation for all parents, even those who may not choose well. Although some parents may be less effective in choosing a school, those families would be even less well off in a traditional system where choice is not available.

In general, most of the current research on the characteristics of parents who choose has concentrated on the SES of parents and the types of schools chosen. In their study of parent choosers, Kamin and Erickson (1981) found distinguishable characteristics among the parent groups. These researchers surveyed 993 mostly urban parents with children in 121 public and private schools. They classified parents who had recently enrolled their children in the first grade of an elementary or secondary school as "starters" and parents who had transferred their children from private to public or public to private schools as "movers."

Movers, they discovered, were equally distributed among the working, middle, and upper-middle classes and included a greater proportion of professional or executive fathers and fewer blue-collar fathers. Movers were consistently better educated (post-high school). Starters, on the other hand, were generally working class, with fewer middle and upper class represented, and they were less educated than the movers.

The types of schools patronized by the parents also was linked to distinct parental characteristics. Even though all social classes were represented in the public school sample, public school parents were more likely to be blue collar, working class, public school educated, and not secondary school graduates, but with high incomes.

Independent (nonsectarian) school parents were of high income, high social class, and high occupational status. They possessed a high level of education, were independent-school educated, and came from an upper-middle-class background.

Kamin and Erickson (1981) also discovered that the patrons of non-Catholic, church-related schools tended to be middle income, middle occupational status, and lower middle class. They were likely to have been educated in public schools and not to have graduated from a secondary school.

The type of schooling parents had received was found to be a characteristic that generally influenced their choice. Parents with only public school experience were less likely to choose a private school for their children (Williams et al., 1983), and parents who enrolled their children in independent schools had themselves attended such schools (Kamin & Erickson, 1981). Other studies in the literature on school choice supported these findings (Gerritz, 1987; Gratiot, 1979).

Parents with low education (less than a four-year college) were less likely to participate in inner-city magnet schools because of a perceived loss of control or influence over their children. Parents living in college-educated communities (white and upper-middle income), however, exhibited more risk-taking behaviors with

school selection by enrolling their children in schools located outside of their neighborhoods (Archbald, 1988).

Other researchers have substantiated that some parents give little thought to the school that their children will attend and choose the public schools closest to their homes (Bridges & Blackman, 1978; Kamin & Erickson, 1981; Nault & Uchitelle, 1982; Williams et al., 1983). These parents were found to be less well educated and not well informed about their school choices when compared with those parents who actively pursued school choices.

Kamin and Erickson (1981) classified parent respondents in their study according to how much thought they gave to their school choices. Parents who gave little thought to their choices of schools were designated as "unthinking" and were characterized as

1. Much more likely to send their children to public schools.
2. Much more likely to be members of the working class.
3. More likely to have blue-collar occupations.
4. More likely, if mothers, to be keeping house rather than working outside the home.
5. Less likely to have experienced any post-secondary schooling, or even to have finished secondary schools.
6. More likely to have been educated exclusively in public schools.
7. Less likely to have discussed the choice of a school with someone outside the family.
8. Twice as likely to have let the child influence the choice of a school.
9. More likely to have considered only one school.
10. Far more likely to have sent the child to the school that most of the child's friends attended.
11. More likely to have left the choice of a school to a point near the beginning of the school term.
12. Much more likely to explain their choice in terms of convenience or the child's own preference. (p. 21)

"Thinking" parents, on the other hand, were characterized as attaining a higher social class and more likely to patronize independent schools.

Parents characterized as low income and poorly educated generally have not taken full advantage of school choice when given the opportunity. Gerritz (1987) identified two additional family characteristics of this group of choosers: single parents and families with a number of siblings. He found that children from two-parent households were more likely to attend nonneighborhood schools (39%) than were children from one-parent households. He also found that as the number of children in a family increased, the likelihood of their remaining in the neighborhood school also increased.

Cogan (1979) hypothesized that "active" (wide choice) and "passive" (no choice) parental choice behavior was not "dichotomous but rather [it] moved on a continuum" (p. 16). She reported her inability to find a positive correlation between the degree of choice behavior (active/passive) and the socioeconomic characteristics of the parents because passive-choice parents were represented in all SES classes (low [14%], middle [18%], and high [10%]). However, when only active choice was considered, passive choice decreased as SES increased, and active choice increased along with the parents' SES.

Sources of Information

The sources of information that parents use in the process of making a choice about schools are fairly diverse. Most researchers who have associated information sources with the background characteristics of the choosers generally have

supported the idea that awareness of choice options increases in relationship to parents' income levels, educational levels, occupational status, and educational aspirations for their children (Bridges & Blackman, 1978; Kamin & Erickson, 1981). Others have found that the search behavior of parents was closely related to high educational and socioeconomic levels (Cogan, 1979; Kamin & Erickson, 1981).

Nault and Uchitelle (1982) reasoned that feelings of alienation and limited social networks restrict lower-income parents' access to school information. They reported that

> Lower-income parents may remain less informed about the choices available to them for several reasons, including general feelings of alienation and their limited participation in social networks likely to provide useful school information. . . . If parents are able to transmit educational advantages to their children by careful school selection, designers of choice programs who seek to attenuate the educational advantages of socioeconomic class will need to include mechanisms that will compensate for the advantages of income and education. (p. 97)

Nault and Uchitelle concluded that choice programs must be adjusted to accommodate the factors of income and education.

Bridges and Blackman (1978) described alienation as "powerlessness." They contended that

> More educated people probably tend to have fewer feelings of powerlessness and hence they seek information for its potential control value. . . . This is understandable for it makes no sense to seek information because, by definition, it has no control value. (p. 28)

Archbald (1988) supported the previous findings on the relationship between awareness of school options and low-income status of parents. He found that black low-income parents were less aware of magnet schools than were white low-income parents. He suggested that lower levels of educational attainment, living conditions,

and life styles are factors associated with blacks' lesser knowledge of school alternatives. Black families who actively sought information about alternative schools, Archbald discovered, used an informal communication network that linked the magnet school neighborhoods to the inner-city black families. Cousins and trusted peers who lived in these neighborhoods were consulted as sources of information.

Parents' educational level has been found to be related to the number of sources pursued by those parents (Bridges & Blackman, 1978). Other researchers have reported that parents' tendency to discuss potential choice options outside the immediate family was more frequent at higher social class levels (Kamin & Erickson, 1981).

Cogan (1979) reported that neighbors, friends, and the school principal were the main sources of information parents used in choosing their children's schools. In that study, only 40% of all parents contacted reported that they did not use information to learn about the schools. Instead, they used neighbors and friends as primary sources. Parents who actively pursued sources of information relied on school literature, friends, and neighbors as their main sources of information.

Bridges and Blackman (1978) reported that school publications were used most frequently by parents in gathering school information. They found that the more educated the parents were, the more likely they were to use school publications (30%) or to talk with teachers (22%) as sources of information.

Kamin and Erickson (1981), however, contradicted these findings relative to the use of school literature. They found that the influence of school literature as a

source of information was inversely related to class because "higher status parents are more wary of what schools advertise about themselves" (p. 14).

In a study of a school-within-a-school (SWAS) choice alternative, Livingston (1982) reported that the chief source of information about the SWAS program for interested students was "other SWAS students." Parents in that study used their own children as primary sources of information. Livingston noted, however, that the SWAS program was in a high school setting and that the subjects were high school students.

Parents generally want official as well as unofficial information when making a school choice decision. Of these two sources, insider information or qualitative insights into the nature of the school were "considered the knowledge of greatest worth" (Amen, 1989, p. 557). Nault and Uchitelle (1982) found that parents most frequently talked with friends who were knowledgeable about the schools and visited at least one of the school alternatives available to them.

Summary

There is support in the current literature for the notion that well-educated parents with high SES exemplified active search behavior and consulted with many sources of official and unofficial information when making a choice (Bridges & Blackman, 1978; Cogan, 1979; Uchitelle & Nault, 1977; Williams et al., 1983). Less-educated parents tended to rely on neighbors and friends for information. Official school publications, sources of information for high-SES parents, were supported in

some studies (Bridges & Blackman, 1978; Cogan, 1979) but were unsubstantiated in others (Kamin & Erickson, 1981).

Low-SES parents frequently used unofficial, informal sources of information. In school districts with significant levels of ethnic diversity and well-established school alternatives, black low-SES parents used informal networks of trusted neighbors and family as information sources (Amen, 1989).

Cogan (1979) and Kamin and Erickson (1981) stated that active, thinking parents who aggressively explored school options were generally better educated and had a higher SES. Passive, unthinking parents who gave little thought to school choice were less well educated and informed about their school options. In both studies, however, nonchoosers were represented at all socioeconomic levels.

The type of schooling that parents received (public, independent, or church related) was found to influence their choice of a school. Williams et al. (1983), Cogan (1979), and Kamin and Erickson (1981) found that parents with only public school experience were less likely to choose private schools for their children. Similarly, parents who had attended church-related and independent schools were more likely to choose such schools for their children.

Few researchers have analyzed the relationship between the characteristics of parents and their sources of information. Of the studies that were available, some were limited by the ethnic and socioeconomic homogeneity of the research environment (Cogan, 1979; Uchitelle & Nault, 1977). Nevertheless, these reports provided useful information and directions for future research.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain parents' decision to choose nonresidential schools for their children's education. This chapter contained a review of the literature and research dealing with the topic of school choice. Choice topics were identified and reviewed, all of which helped provide a context for the research. Those topics dealt with some of the legal aspects of parental choice, the political aspects/momentum surrounding choice, choice factors and characteristics of parents involved in choice, and a general review of choice in education. Because this study focused on the parents' perspective and factors motivating them to actually participate in a school choice plan, the literature review focused on the parental-involvement aspects, ranging from the legal basis for choice to SES factors.

CHAPTER III

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The researcher's purpose in this study was to describe and explain parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education. Because this study focused on explaining parents' decision to participate in choice, the rich description gained from one-on-one interviews and the qualitative research method was deemed to be the most appropriate way to address such a purpose. This chapter contains a discussion of the research procedures and methodology used to obtain pertinent information about public school choices in Michigan from the primary customers–the parents and students.

The Population

The population for this study comprised parents of public school students located in the metropolitan Detroit area in Michigan. The reasons for selecting this population were:

1. The parents were the public school choice makers in this process.
2. Parents were the primary decision makers in this process.
3. A relatively high concentration of participants within a single school district and in proximity to the researcher made for ease of data collection.

4. Many of the school districts in this geographical area had elected to participate in a choice program for nonresidential students since the inception of the Michigan choice plan.

The Setting and Sample Selection

In this study, purposeful sampling was used for discovering, understanding, and gaining insights into parental decisions on public school choice (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1980). Participants were interviewed because of their special knowledge about and first-hand experience with school choice (Merriam, 1988).

The sample for this study consisted of families who chose to enroll their children in a public school outside of their normal residential school district. The school district is a suburban district with families of widely varying socioeconomic statuses. The district had just completed its first full year of offering a school choice plan to nonresident families in the area. One hundred eight families participated in the plan, sending a total of 151 children to the school district during the academic year.

The researcher sent the district official a letter (see Appendix A), requesting cooperation with the study. The official was asked to provide a list of parents of current students who had entered the school district under a choice plan, along with the grade levels in which those students were enrolled. The district did supply such a list.

From the 108 families participating in the school choice plan, the researcher selected families to be interviewed for this study. The original list of 108 families

provided to the researcher by the school district was divided into two parts, one with names of families whose children were attending a schools-of-choice high school (grades 9 through 12) and the other with names of families whose children were attending a schools-of-choice grade school (kindergarten through grade 5 or 6). The researcher then used a random-selection process to identify those who might be involved in the research. He contacted 32 families before obtaining the 20 families (10 high school, 10 elementary school) who were willing to participate in the study.

Reasons parents gave for refusing to participate varied. In six cases, the parents simply had no desire to share information regarding their decision to participate in the school choice program, in effect, declining to be interviewed. The researcher was unable to locate four of the families because the phone numbers or addresses provided by the district were incomplete or inaccurate. Two families declined to participate because they thought their stay in the school district under the choice plan had been so short that they could provide little or no information to the researcher. Although the researcher encouraged them to participate, they declined.

In summary, of the 108 families enrolled in the district's choice plan, 32 families were sent letters (see Appendix B) and contacted by telephone to explain the study and ask them to take part in the study. Twenty families agreed to participate in the research. Ten families had children attending a schools-of-choice high school, and the other ten had at least one child enrolled in a schools-of-choice grade school.

Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews, as well as documented and recorded information, provided the data base for this study. According to Patton (1980), qualitative data consist of:

> detailed descriptions of situations, events, people, interactions and observed behaviors; direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts; and excerpts or entire passages of documents, correspondence, records and case histories. . . . These descriptions, quotations, and excerpts are raw data from the empirical world . . . data which provide depth and detail. (p. 67)

In-depth interviews were conducted with parents to obtain their perceptions and insights about school choice and their decision to enroll their children in nonresidential schools. These interviews were the primary source of data. This approach allowed the researcher to elicit information from other people directly through conversations with a purpose (Merriam, 1988). It also enabled the interviewer to gather a special kind of information that had added depth, without sacrificing breadth. According to Patton (1980):

> We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous place and time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world–we have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to enter into the other person's perspective. (p. 79)

A combination of interview formats was used in collecting data. Three types of formats were used so that some standardized questions, some open-ended questions, and some probing questions were asked of all participants. This procedure allowed fresh insights and new information to emerge (Merriam, 1988).

The researcher avoided using a strict regimen of questions that could be limiting and could impose external values, understandings, and definitions on participants (Patton, 1980).

A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C) was used. This guide served as a loosely assembled itinerary of topics used in the planned interview sessions. Some questions were asked during each interview, such as the child's grade level and the parents' involvement in the decision-making process. Other items on the interview guide were available, and were at times useful, as the interview was carried out.

The development of the semi-structured interview guide was premised on the literature on public school choice, advice from university advisors, the researcher's personal experience, and common-sense notions about appropriate topics. The semi-structured interview was pilot tested with three parents of students who had participated in the Michigan choice program. After the pilot test, the researcher refined and modified the interview guide. This process of refining and revising the interview schedule continued after the study began as certain themes, patterns, or perspectives became apparent.

Demographic data also were gathered from the interviewees. This information included such things as their age, gender, marital status, race, socioeconomic status, years of education, number of children, and number of years their child(ren) had attended a nonresidential school.

Parents from the 20 families who agreed to participate in the study were contacted by telephone to set up interview dates, times, and locations. In these

calls, the researcher used an introductory statement similar to that found in Appendix D to establish the interview appointment. The interviews were held in locations that were convenient to the interviewees–places that were relaxing and put the informants at ease, such as their homes or a nearby restaurant/grill. In some cases, interviews were conducted by telephone. Most interviews lasted about 45 minutes to an hour.

The interviews were designed to be open ended and conversational. The researcher gave the interviewees his telephone number and address and told them they could call if they needed to cancel their appointments or if, following their interviews, they thought of additional information they wished to share.

Before each interview was begun, parents were given a brief overview of the researcher's intentions and the purpose behind the study. The researcher answered parents' questions regarding the interview process and how the data might be used. All informants were assured that their names, their children's names, and the names of the schools would not be used in any research report. They were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they could choose not to participate at all, refuse to answer some questions, or discontinue the interview at any time.

Following each interview, the researcher completed an interview assessment form (Appendix E) on which he evaluated the overall interview. Perceptions of the informants, quality of the interviewees' responses, and general observations were recorded. The researcher also took descriptive field notes before, during, and after the interviews. In addition, the interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the informants. With the two parents who preferred not to be recorded, the

researcher relied on descriptive field notes and notes from the interview assessment form.

Participants generally were willing to respond to the interview questions. Not only did they answer all questions, but all but one interviewee appeared genuinely interested in the topic and pleased to have someone interested in them and in their decision to participate in school choice. One parent seemed to be rather disinterested, yet was tolerant of the researcher and willing to respond to all questions. The remaining parents seemed intrigued, both with the process and with the questions. Some were interested in seeking the interviewer's position on a number of the questions or topics discussed. However, the researcher avoided offering his opinions or positions on the topics.

Other sources of information might include informal interviews with school officials, intermediate school district officials, members of the Michigan State Department of Education, university staff, and other students or parents.

Analysis of Data

According to Worthen and Sanders (1987), the purpose of data analysis is to "reduce and synthesize information, to make sense out of it, and to allow inferences about populations" (p. 187). This can best be accomplished by interpreting results of data analysis, value statements, criteria, and standards in order to formulate conclusions, judgments, and recommendations.

The data were analyzed using an induction process of searching for patterns and/or categories as described by Bogdan and Biklen (1982). Analysis included:

1. Exploring and informing impressions from field notes.

2. Identifying themes, as recorded on tapes, memos, or short concept statements.

3. Focusing and concentrating, using working hypotheses as focal points for further observation and documentation.

4. Verifying working hypotheses using confirmation checks to increase the certainty that conclusions are accurate.

5. Generating questions for future study.

Data analysis began as soon as the data-collection process had begun. Analysis consisted of three key activities: reducing the data, displaying the data, and drawing conclusions with verification. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), "Data reduction is the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying and transforming the raw data that appear in written field notes" (p. 79).

The information that was gathered was organized and assembled into a format that permitted the researcher to identify emerging themes, patterns, and conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Drawing conclusions and verifying those conclusions flowed from the analysis activity in this study. The researcher drew conclusions based on the patterns of responses, the meanings provided by the interviewees, and the meanings explained by the interviewees or inferred by the researcher. Final conclusions were not drawn until all data collection and analysis was complete (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

During the interviewing process, the researcher developed and used a preliminary coding of field notes. Categories were clustered after the data revealed

similar themes or characteristics. The ongoing refinement of the coding through expanding, collapsing, and developing the codes continued throughout the study. Miles and Huberman (1994) described this process as follows:

> A code is an abbreviation or symbol applied to a segment of words . . . in order to classify the words. Codes are categories. They usually derive from research questions, hypotheses, key concepts, or important themes. They are retrieval and organizing devices that allow the analyst to spot quickly, pull out, then cluster all the segments relating to particular questions, hypotheses, concepts, or themes. Clustering sets the stage for analysis. (p. 128)

As Miles and Huberman suggested, reflective comments were made in the margins of transcripts after the interview tapes were transcribed.

Miles and Huberman (1994) identified 12 tactics that can be employed for generating meaning from gathered data. These include counting, noting patterns or themes, seeing plausibility, clustering, making metaphors, splitting variables, subsuming particulars into the general, factoring, noting relations between variables, finding intervening variables, building a logical chain of evidence, and achieving conceptual and theoretical coherence. These general analysis strategies were used and yielded meanings in the form of significant themes and patterns regarding school choice.

Validity and Reliability

Several strategies were used to ensure the internal validity of this study regarding how the findings correspond to reality (Merriam, 1988). The strategies included (a) cross-checks of the data by using multiple sources of data, (b) member checks by taking data and interpretations back to the informants to ensure

plausibility, and (c) peer examination by asking colleagues to comment on findings as they emerged.

The importance of external validity or generalizability has been widely disputed among researchers such as Guba and Lincoln (1981) and Cronbach (1975). Merriam (1988) suggested various ways of improving the generalizability of a study. These were incorporated into the design of this research. They included (a) providing a rich, thick description of the data and (b) establishing and describing a typical case and comparing it with others in the same category.

Reliability, or the extent to which the findings can be replicated, also poses a significant problem in qualitative, ethnographic studies. Guba and Lincoln (1981) recognized this and even recommended sidestepping reliability completely in favor of internal validity. As they stated, "Since it is impossible to have internal validity without reliability, a demonstration of internal validity amounts to a simultaneous demonstration of reliability" (p. 32).

Merriam (1981) went on to emphasize the importance of dependability and consistency of results, where, rather than demanding that outsiders get the same results, one strives to have outsiders concur that the results make sense given the data collected (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

The following techniques were used in this study to ensure that the results were reliable and dependable:

1. The investigator's role and position were explained.

2. An audit trail was documented of how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made.

3. Participant corroboration, whereby the interviewer restated participants' positions orally so that they could identify their own experiences and perspectives, was sought to ensure that the investigator's interpretation was, indeed, consistent with the interviewees' experience.

The strength of this research is only as good as the study design and the efforts of the researcher. The qualifications of the researcher are as follows. He has had a moderate amount of training in qualitative research methods, including graduate school coursework at Michigan State University, preparation in interview techniques, and 20 years of administrative experience in Michigan public schools. The researcher's professional work in the area of human resources over the past 15 years has helped him develop skills in interviewing, developing rapport with parents and students, asking pertinent and probing questions, maintaining objectivity, and demonstrating sensitivity and empathy. In addition, the researcher has gained considerable expertise concerning the topic of school choice through extensive review of the literature and active involvement in state, regional, and national organizations that have included the study of choice. He also has conducted pilot interviews with parents on the topic of school choice.

Researcher bias must be avoided to the greatest extent possible in any study of this nature. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested several approaches, which were used in this study, to avoid bias on the part of the researcher. These include:

1. Making sure that the study mandate is clear to all informants.
2. Conducting the interviews in a congenial and relaxed environment.

3. Keeping the research questions firmly in mind and focused during the interviews.

4. Attempting to appear nonjudgmental and objective during the interview process.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by the following conditions, which are generally viewed as being beyond the researcher's control:

1. The study was limited to the amount of information/literature that had been published before the study began.

2. The study was limited by the amount of cooperation the researcher received from the Michigan State Department of Education, the school district, and the parents.

3. The study was limited by the ability and cooperativeness of the informants--parents--who were interviewed.

4. The study was limited by the expertise and skill of the interviewer in collecting and analyzing the information from the interviews.

5. The study was limited by the size of the sample.

6. Presentation of the findings was limited to reporting emerging themes and/or patterns for further study.

7. The study also was limited to examining decisions regarding choice by only those parents who elected to opt for choice and send their children to nonresidential schools.

8. The study sample included only those parents who elected to send their children to nonresidential public schools in a selected district in the metropolitan Detroit area that offered a choice plan.

The kinds of data that were obtained in this ethnographic study justify this approach, even with the limitations identified above.

Summary

In this study, the researcher sought to describe and explain selected parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education. This chapter dealt with the procedures used in conducting this qualitative study. Included were a description of the population, the setting and sample selection, data-collection procedures, data-analysis treatments, and validity and reliability. Limitations of the study also were set forth.

The findings are presented in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

The researcher's purpose in this study was to describe and explain parents' decision to choose nonresidential schools for their children's education. In this chapter, the researcher presents and analyzes the findings relating to the research questions. In the presentation of findings, each research question is restated, followed by the results regarding that question.

One task of the qualitative researcher is to organize and present the data in a manageable fashion (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As a result, not all of the data gathered in the interviews are presented in this chapter, in order to prevent redundancy or irrelevance. Rather, the researcher selected representative quotations, statements, or examples to serve as the case study findings. All data selected for case study are representative of the patterns found in the investigation. When exceptions to these patterns existed, data reflecting those exceptions also were noted.

The findings presented in the following pages contain a number of excerpts from the interviews conducted for this study. Quotations that are used were chosen to illustrate and substantiate the themes that were introduced and developed during

the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). To ensure complete confidentiality of the participants, the following precautions were taken in presenting the findings:

1. The names of parents, children, and schools were changed.

2. The specific locations of the schools and families were changed or omitted.

4. Names of parents' employers and/or precise job titles were excluded.

To enhance clarity and understanding, the researcher edited some quotations for grammar and conciseness. Italicized words within quotations indicate emphasis by the interviewee or the interviewer.

Research Question 1

What are the characteristics of parents who elect to participate in school choice programs?

Background information on each of the 20 families who participated in the school choice program and were interviewed for this study is presented below.

The Arnett family. At the time of the study, Jason was a ninth grader and the oldest of three children. His father, Ronald, was an architect, and his mother, Geraldine, was an interior designer. Their annual family income was about $100,000. The family was building a new home in Wicksville and decided they wanted Jason, who was going into ninth grade, to start high school in Wicksville rather than having to switch schools during the middle of the year, when they anticipated moving. As a result, they enrolled Jason in Wicksville under the school choice program while still residing in their current home, which was outside the district boundaries. The two younger Arnett children had been attending and would

continue to attend a Catholic grade school in a neighboring community. Jason had attended the same parochial school through eighth grade.

The Bowman family. Arthur was a twelfth grader attending Wicksville Mann High School under the school choice program. His parents were divorced, and for the past two and a half years, Arthur had lived with his father in the Wicksville School District. Arthur chose to move back in with his mother in November, but he wanted to finish high school at Wicksville Mann, where he was a senior. The school choice option allowed him to remain and finish at Wicksville; otherwise, he would have had to attend Rockford High School for the remainder of his senior year. According to his mother, Arthur was active in sports, and that was a major factor in his decision to remain at Wicksville. The mother, Lori Bowman, was working as a counter clerk at a bowling center, although she held an associates degree. Arthus was the oldest of four children. His siblings, ages 8, 11, and 13, all lived with their mother and attended Rockford schools.

The Brennahan family. There were three children in the Brennahan family: Jay, a third grader; J.J., a fourth grader; and Tessie, a seventh grader. All three children were enrolled in the school choice program. Mr. and Mrs. Brennahan were the children's grandparents and currently were the guardians for the three children. Grandmother Brennahan stated that her daughter (the children's mother) recently had had a nervous breakdown, necessitating that the children be placed in the grandparents' custody. The mother was divorced from the children's father and currently was unmarried. When the children were placed in the grandparents' custody, they were attending schools in Parkwood, their residential district. Although

the grandparents also resided in the Parkwood district, they wanted the children out of those schools and signed them up in Wicksville under the school choice plan. Grandmother Brennahan was disabled, and her husband worked part time. They did not indicate their income.

The Budson family. Jason and Kimberly Budson were recently married. Their child, Jason, a second grader, was Kimberly's son from a previous marriage. The family lived in the Parkwood School District, where Jason had attended both kindergarten and first grade. He now was attending school in Wicksville under the school choice plan. The father worked in construction, and the mother currently was not working. They listed their family income as approximately $50,000 per year.

The Denby family. Charles, age six, attended first grade in the Wicksville district under the school choice program. He was an only child. Audrey Denby was a divorced, single parent with a degree in nursing. She was currently employed as a nurse, with a yearly income of about $35,000 to $40,000. Following her recent divorce, Audrey and Charles moved to an apartment outside of Wicksville, where Charles was enrolled in school. Rather than move Charles into their new residential school district, Parkwood, Audrey chose to keep him enrolled in Wicksville under the school choice program.

The Douglas family. Russ, a 10-year-old fourth grader, was the son of Patrick and Susan Douglas. Patrick Douglas was a college graduate with a bachelor's degree; he worked in advertising. Susan Douglas was an office supervisor. The parents had a combined income of $75,000 to $90,000 per year. They had three children, ages 10, 19, and 20 years. They recently moved to a neighboring school

district from Wicksville, where Russ was attending fourth grade. They chose to keep Russ in Wicksville under the choice plan so that he could finish out the school year. He would enroll in his new residential school district, the Clayberg district, in the fall.

The Gables family. The Gables family had two children enrolled under the school choice plan. Dale, age 16, was a tenth grader attending Wicksville Kingston High School. Karl, age 13, was a seventh grader at Pearce Middle School. Kirk Gables was disabled and on Social Security disability income. Laurie Gables did tutoring for part-time income and also shared a paper route with her sons. Laurie Gables had also done home schooling with her children in the past. Recently, the Gables family had returned to the Parkwood area from Missouri, where Kirk had been employed before giving up his job due to his disability. Rather than enroll Dale and Karl in the Parkwood schools, their residential district, the Gableses chose to place them in Wicksville, under the school choice plan.

The Gunderson family. The Gunderson family had two sons, Chris, a third grader, and Jay, a fifth grader. Both of the boys attended the Wicksville schools under the choice program. Kevin Gunderson was a divorced, single parent who was currently employed in the construction industry. His income was approximately $50,000 annually. The family recently had moved from a public school district approximately 30 miles away. Rather than enroll the children in the Parkwood schools, the residential district, Kevin Gunderson chose to send the children to Wicksville under the school choice plan.

The Hecker family. Brenda Hecker was a divorced, single parent. She was a secretary with a yearly income between $22,000 and $28,000. Brenda also

received alimony from her ex-husband. Following her divorce, Brenda and her daughter, Kristin, relocated to the Clayberg area. Kristin was enrolled in the school choice program to complete her senior year in the Wicksville School District.

The Janson family. Patricia Janson, mother of Jimmy Brown, recently had divorced Jimmy's father and married Ron Janson. Patricia was a secretary, and Ron was an engineer. They had a combined annual income of approximately $85,000. Before Patricia and Ron married, Jimmy was a freshman in the Wicksville School District. After her remarriage, Patricia and Jimmy moved to Ron's house, located in Almada Hills. Jimmy completed his freshman year in the Wicksville schools and began his sophomore year in the Avondale schools.

The Jessman family. Wendy Jessman was a divorced, single parent with three sons: Matthew, a sixth grader; Jonathan, a fifth grader; and Ardis, a third grader. They lived in the Parkwood School District, where the children had been attending a local Catholic grade school. Matthew, the oldest, had been held back one year and also had some medical problems. Due to conflicts with the local Catholic school and Wendy's refusal to send her children to school in Parkwood, her residential district, she elected to enroll the children in Wicksville under the school choice program. Wendy worked as a waitress, making about $15,000 a year; she also received some child support.

The McDonald family. Doug and Rebecca McDonald had five children, ranging in age from 4 to 19. The oldest son had already graduated from high school, and the youngest had not yet started kindergarten. Two of the children were enrolled in a Wicksville elementary school, under the school choice program. The

second-oldest son, Doug, was a sophomore at Wicksville Mann High School. The McDonalds owned and operated a storage-rental complex and lived in the Parkwood School District. The children had been enrolled in a local Catholic school, rather than attending the public residential school in Parkwood. At the time of the study, all were attending Wicksville schools under the school choice plan.

The Meldman family. The Meldmans had one daughter who was still in school. Julie, a tenth grader, was enrolled at Wicksville Mann High School under the school choice program. Both of the Meldmans were high school graduates. Randy worked in a local auto shop, and Sandra was between jobs. The parents indicated that Julie would normally have been attending the Parkwood schools, but because her grades had severely slipped when she was a ninth grader in Parkwood, and because they were concerned about the kids with whom she was "hanging out," they moved her to Wicksville under the school choice plan. Sandra Meldman indicated that, if and when she found a good job, they hoped to move to Wicksville and out of the Parkwood area.

The Naguchi family. Sonya and Richard Naguchi had two children--a son, Nathan, age 12, and a daughter, Amy, age 5. Sonya had completed two years of college; a housewife, she did seasonal work as a salesclerk in one of the local department stores. Richard held a bachelor of arts degree and currently managed a tire-repair shop. The family income ranged between $40,000 and $50,000 annually. Nathan, a sixth grader, attended Wicksville under the school choice plan. The family had moved to the Holly School District during the school year and decided to allow Nathan to finish sixth grade at Wicksville rather than changing him

during the school year. He would start middle school in Holly in the fall. Amy, a kindergartner, had switched schools during the school year when the family moved and was attending school in Holly.

The Nunnally family. The Nunnallys were parents of three high-school-age children: David, grade 9; Samuel, grade 10; and Allison, grade 12. Bill Nunnally was an insurance claims adjuster; Rosemary was a housewife, part-time bookkeeper, and volunteer. Their household income was approximately $60,000 to $65,000 annually. The family had moved to Handover during the school year but chose to allow Allison to finish her senior year at Wicksville so that she could graduate with her class. Samuel, who was actively involved in sports, wanted to remain in Wicksville and did so, but only until the end of the first semester. David was attending school in Handover, their residential school district.

The Palmer family. The Palmers had two children--Angela, a first grader, and a preschool-age son. Mark Palmer was a sales representative for a computer company, and Melissa Palmer worked in a dental office. The family income was between $65,000 and $75,000 per year. Angela had attended kindergarten at a Catholic school near their home in the Parkwood School District. However, the Palmers decided they wanted to send her to a public school, but not in Parkwood. Thus, they enrolled Angela in the Wicksville schools under the school choice program.

The Prince family. The Prince family consisted of Jessie, a single mother, and her son, Kevin, a kindergartner. Jessie recently had been divorced and moved to Parkwood from the Wicksville area. She had decided to enroll Kevin in the

Wicksville schools under the school choice program, rather than start him in kindergarten in the Parkwood schools. She had decided to do so because of the poor reputation of the Parkwood schools and because her friend and baby-sitter lived in Wicksville. In addition, the grandparents, who also served as baby-sitters, lived in the Wicksville area. Jessie worked as a hairdresser and also sold jewelry part time; her yearly income was about $20,000, and she also receive child support for Kevin.

The Ramirez family. Luis and Raquel Ramirez and their daughter, Lucy, lived in the Parkwood School District. Lucy, age 15 and a tenth grader, was enrolled in Wicksville under the school choice program. The Ramirez family had lived in Parkwood for the past three years, having moved to the United States from Puerto Rico, their native country. Luis was partially disabled and was drawing Social Security. Raquel worked full time in a small factory in a neighboring community. Their older daughter recently had graduated from the Parkwood schools and was attending community college. The parents indicated a strong concern about the quality and safety of the Parkwood schools for their daughter. As a result, they had chosen to move Lucy to the neighboring school district.

The Rogers family. Callie Rogers was the mother of a twelfth-grade daughter, Sharon Coleman. Callie had been divorced twice and was Sharon's custodial parent. Sharon had been living with her mother in Wicksville, where she attended Wicksville Mann High School. Callie planned to move back to her hometown, Weston, over the summer. Because Sharon wanted to finish her senior

year at Wicksville Mann, she had decided to live with her father, who resided in the Parkwood area, and continue at Wicksville under the school choice plan. The mother was currently unemployed, and the father's income and occupation were not indicated.

The Walter family. Karl and Sherry Walter were the parents of two children. The oldest, Jimmy, a third grader, was enrolled in Wicksville under the school choice plan. The Walters also had a four-year-old daughter. Karl was a production-department supervisor for a newspaper, and Sherry worked part time as a newspaper delivery person. The family income was between $65,000 and $75,000 annually. The Walters had recently moved from the Langley area, where Jimmy had attended the Langley Public Schools, into what they thought was the Wicksville district. However, when they went to enroll their son in school, they discovered that their home was actually in the Parkwood district. Because the Walters did not want to send their children to the Parkwood schools, they enrolled their son in Wicksville under the school choice plan.

Family Backgrounds

All of the parents in the study were asked a number of questions designed to elicit background information regarding their families. Table 4.1 provides basic family information, such as the parents' names, their marital status, the names and grade levels of the children enrolled under the school choice program, and the highest educational level attained by the parent or parents within the household. As

Table 4.1: Summary of family data.

Family	Parents' Names	Children/Grade Enrolled in Under School Choice Plan	Highest Educational Level of Parents
Arnett	Ronald/Geraldine	Jason, 9th grade	M=C; F=C
Bowman	Lori (divorced)	Arthur, 12th grade	M=A
Brennahan	Grandmother Sarah/ Grandfather	Jay, 3rd grade J.J., 4th grade Tessie, 7th grade	M=D
Budson	Jason/Kimberly	Jason Matushin, 2nd grade	M=H, F=H
Denby	Audrey (divorced)	Charles, 1st grade	M=C
Douglas	Patrick/Susan	Russ, 4th grade	M=H, F=C
Gables	Kirk/Laurie	Dale, 10th grade Karl, 7th grade	M=H, F=C
Gunderson	Kevin (divorced)	Cris, 3rd grade Jay, 5th grade	F=H
Hecker	Brenda (divorced)	Kristin Fox, 12th grade	M=H
Janson	Ron/Patricia	Jimmy Brown, 9th grade	M=H, F=C
Jessman	Wendy (divorced)	Matthew, 6th grade Jonathan, 5th grade Ardis, 3rd grade	M=H
McDonald	Doug/Rebecca	Matthew, 1st grade Doug, 10th grade Dennis, 3rd grade	M=H, F=H
Meldman	Randy/Sandra	Julie, 10th grade	M=H, F=H
Naguchi	Richard/Sonya	Nathan, 6th grade Amy, kindergarten	M=A, F =C
Nunnally	Bill/Rosemary	David, 9th grade Samuel, 10th grade Allison, 12th grade	M=H, F=C
Palmer	Mark/Melissa	Angela, 1st grade	M=A, F=C
Prince	Jessie (divorced)	Kevin, kindergarten	M=H
Ramirez	Luis/Raquel	Lucy, 10th grade	M=D, F=D
Rogers	Callie (divorced)	Sharon Coleman, 12th grade	M=H
Walter	Karl/Sherry	Jimmy, 3rd grade	M=H, F=C

Key: M = Mother
F = Father
H = High school graduate
C = College degree
A = Associate degree
D = Did not complete high school

shown in Table 4.1, 31 children were represented in the 20 families interviewed for this study.

The highest educational level of at least one parent in each household is summarized in Table 4.2. This information was gathered to see whether there were any overall patterns in the data. Researchers have indicated that parents' educational level may be a factor in the family's willingness or desire to participate in school choice (Archbald, 1988). For example, it has been suggested that less educated parents are not as likely as better educated parents to be aware of the possibility or see the benefits of enrolling their children in nonresidential schools under choice (Sonnenfeld, 1973).

Table 4.2: Highest educational level of parents, by household.

Educational Level	No. of Households	Percent
No high school graduate	2	10
High school graduate	8	40
Some college or associate's degree	1	5
College graduate	9	45
Postcollege graduate	0	0
Total	20	100

In this study, educational levels varied across the 20 families. In two families (10% of those interviewed), no parents had finished high school. In eight (40%) of the families, at least one parent had earned a high school diploma. And in ten (50%) of the families, at least one parent had at least some college education or a college degree.

Educational-level census data from 1996 indicated that approximately 69% of Michigan's adult population were high school graduates and that 15.8% had completed four or more years of college (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Thus, the figures in Table 4.2 indicate that the parents involved in this study were slightly better educated than the average parent in Michigan, with approximately 50% of the parents having either a college degree or at least some college education.

Head-of-Household Data

In 12 of the 20 families who were interviewed, both parents lived in the same household. Even though some of those 12 families were second marriages, 60% of the families in the study were considered two-parent households. Seven of the families had a divorced single parent who was head of the household. Of the seven, six were single mothers; the seventh (the Gunderson family) was a single father. Overall, these data did not reveal any unusual patterns; rather, they reflected the overall demographic information provided to the researcher by the school district involved in the study. All of the family situation data are contained in Table 4.3.

Researchers on this topic have suggested that two-parent households are more likely to have their children attend nonneighborhood schools (39%) than are one-parent households (Gerritz, 1987). Cogan (1979) hypothesized that, in a single-parent household, the parent often lacks the time or ability to make the effort necessary to seek out schooling options, especially if those options take the child out of his or her residential area. It becomes a matter of time and energy. Analysis of the data in this study did not reveal any unusual patterns in this regard because the majority of households (70%) were two-parent/guardian households.

Table 4.3: Family background information.

Family	Children's Grade Level Under Choice Plan	Parent Interviewed	Family Situation	Race	Income Level	Private School Involvement?
Arnett	High school	Both	Both parents in home	Caucasian	$90,001 & over	Yes
Bowman	High school	Mother	Mother only	Caucasian	$0-$15,000	No
Brennahan	Elementary school	Grandparent	Grandparents only	Caucasian	$0-$15,000	No
Budson	Elementary school	Mother	Both parents in home	Caucasian	$45,001-$60,000	No
Denby	Elementary school	Mother	Mother only	Caucasian	$30,001-$45,000	No
Douglas	Elementary school	Mother	Both parents in home	Caucasian	$75,001-$90,000	No
Gables	Middle/high school	Mother	Both parents in home	Caucasian	$15,001-$30,000	No
Gunderson	Elementary school	Father	Father only	African American	$45,001-$60,000	No
Hecker	High school	Mother	Mother only	Caucasian	$15,001-$30,000	No
Janson	High school	Mother	Both parents in home	Caucasian	$75,001-$90,000	No
Jessman	Elementary school	Mother	Mother only	Caucasian	$15,001-$30,000	Yes
McDonald	Elementary/high school	Both	Both parents in home	Caucasian	$60,001-$75,000	Yes
Meldman	High school	Mother	Both parents in home	Caucasian	$30,001-$45,000	No
Naguchi	Elementary school	Mother	Both parents in home	Caucasian	$45,001-$60,000	No
Nunnally	High school	Mother	Both parents in home	Caucasian	$60,001-$75,000	No
Palmer	Elementary school	Both	Both parents in home	Caucasian	$60,001-$75,000	Yes
Prince	Elementary school	Mother	Mother only	Caucasian	$15,001-$30,000	No
Ramirez	High school	Mother	Both parents in home	Hispanic	$15,001-$30,000	No
Rogers	High school	Mother	Mother only	Caucasian	$0-$15,000	No
Walter	Elementary school	Mother	Both parents in home	Caucasian	$60,001-$75,000	No

Race

Ninety percent of the families interviewed were Caucasian (see Table 4.3). Although specific ethnic or national-heritage background was not specified, 18 families identified their households as Caucasian. In the Ramirez family, both parents were Hispanic, having moved to the United States from Puerto Rico. In addition, the Gunderson family was African American. These numbers were not surprising to the researcher because the school district of choice under investigation is predominantly Caucasian. The racial composition of the Wicksville schools is approximately 94% Caucasians, with 6% African Americans and other minorities. Although the racial breakdown of parents in this study corresponded to the racial distribution of families who normally attend Wicksville schools, it should be pointed out that the largest percentage of families (nearly all Caucasians) who were interviewed came from the same public school district, which was in a predominantly African American community.

Although the researcher was concerned that these percentages could be construed to suggest that this was the white-flight phenomenon often associated with large urban districts, the information gained from the interviews did not tend to support that concern. Certainly, on the surface and based on the percentages, it appeared that it could be an issue of white flight. However, the review of the data indicated that only three, or approximately 15%, of the families interviewed associated their decision to move, in part, to the racial make-up of the district they were leaving. Of those three families, two (the Brennahans and the McDonalds) made fairly strong references to their concern that their children would be safer and better off with children "like ours," referring to race. The three families represented

only three of the ten families who came from the Parkwood Schools, the predominantly African American school district.

Family Income Level

The family income levels of the families involved in this study are shown in Tables 4.3 and 4.4. As shown in Table 4.4, approximately 40% (eight) of the families had incomes below $30,000. Three of those families had incomes of less than $15,000 annually, and the other five had incomes between $15,001 and $30,000. By most people's standards, those eight families would generally be considered to be in the lower income level, depending on the sizes of their households. Eleven families (55%) had incomes between $30,001 and $90,000, often viewed to be in the lower-middle to upper-middle income range. Only one family, the Arnetts, had an income above $90,000; their combined income was actually more than $100,000.

Table 4.4: Summary of family income levels.

Income Level	Frequency	Percent
$0-$15,000	3	15
$15,001-$30,000	5	25
$30,001-$45,000	2	10
$45,001-$60,000	3	15
$60,001-$75,000	4	20
$75,001-$90,000	2	10
More than $90,001	1	5
Total	20	100

The data in this section do not support some researchers' contention that only the more affluent can afford to, or choose to, participate in school choice (Sonnenfeld, 1973). As 40% of the families in the study had annual incomes less than $30,000, this would suggest that income level was not a major determinant of whether one's family participated in school choice. Further, every family indicated that, although they had needed to overcome some barriers to participating in school choice, they would make the same decision again and somehow come up with the resources needed to make the change possible. This point is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Private School Involvement

The families in this study had had minimal involvement with private schools (see Table 4.3). Only four families had any current or recent involvement with private or parochial schools. In all of those cases, the child who was enrolled in a school choice plan or a sibling of that child was, or had been, enrolled in a parochial school. Approximately 80% of the families in this study had no recent or current involvement with either private or parochial schools. Only one family, the Palmers, made any reference to their child's involvement in a Catholic school. In their case, they chose to change schools because they were not Catholic and felt uncomfortable having their daughter remain in the Catholic school system beyond first grade.

Overall, the data indicated that there was little connection between families' involvement in private/parochial schools and their participation in school choice. The researcher did not ask parents whether they, themselves, had ever attended private

or parochial schools. Some researchers have suggested that parents who have had private/parochial school involvement are more likely than those without such involvement to participate in school choice options for their children (Kamin & Erickson, 1981).

Summary

In summarizing the findings in this section, it does not appear that a typical family could be identified in this study. Three commonalities were evidenced by the majority of participants. First, 90% of families involved in this study were Caucasian. Another commonality was the lack of private or parochial school involvement--in the vast majority of families (at least 80%), children had not been involved in such schools. The third common factor was that 50% of the families came from the same district, the Parkwood School District. Other than those three common characteristics, the rest of the data were rather mixed.

Twelve of the families, or slightly more than half, had a dual-parent household; however, some of those were second or even third marriages. It appears that approximately half of the families were either single-parent households or households involving a second or third marriage. Income level was also varied. Although eight families were at or near the poverty level, 11 families fell within the lower- to upper-middle income levels. Only one family had what would be considered an upper-level income. Educational level was also rather varied. In two families, the parents had not graduated from high school; however, those parents talked to the researcher about the importance of education and said they had

decided to participate in school choice programs to help their children obtain a basic education.

Research Question 2

What is the process by which parents decided to choose nonresidential public schools for their children?

Parents were asked a number of questions related to the decision-making process they had used when deciding to send their children to nonresidential public schools under a school choice plan. The sources of information that parents used to learn about and understand school choice, the process they followed or actions they took to gain additional information, and the length of time involved in making a decision were all identified in this study. This section contains the data related to the decision-making process parents used in selecting nonresidential public schools for their children.

The Information-Gathering Process

Most families learned about the school choice program through one of three main sources of information. Six families (30%) obtained their information on school choice through the news media or an advertisement placed in a local newspaper. Eight families (40%) received their information from friends, neighbors, or relatives--in other words, an acquaintance who shared information with them about schools of choice. Six families (30%) received the information from their local school or from someone they knew in the district administration office.

Table 4.5 indicates how the families first learned about school choice for their children and the main sources of information regarding the school choice program.

Table 4.5: Process of gathering information on school choice.

Family	How family first learned about school choice for their children	Main sources of additional information (primary source in **bold type**)	First people/offices contacted for more information	Did schools provide adequate information?	How long did the process take?
Arnett	School ad in local paper	**Child's counselor/ teacher**; district administration office	District administration office	Yes	15-45 days
Bowman	Child's counselor/ teacher	**Child's principal/ secretary**	Child's counselor/ teacher	Yes	7-15 days
Brennahan	News media, newspaper articles, radio info	**New (nonresidential) school**	New (nonresidential) school	No	15-45 days
Budson	Friends/neighbors	**News media, newspaper articles, radio info**; friends/neighbors	New (nonresidential) school	Yes	15-45 days
Denby	Child's counselor/ teacher	**District administration office**; child's principal/ secretary	Child's principal/ secretary	Yes	15-45 days
Douglas	Child's counselor/ teacher	**Child's counselor/ teacher**; child's principal/ secretary	Child's principal/ secretary	Yes	15-45 days
Gables	News media, newspaper articles, radio info	**District administration office**	District administration office	No	7-15 days

Table 4.5: Continued.

Family	How family first learned about school choice for their children	Main sources of additional information (primary source in **bold type**)	First people/offices contacted for more information	Did schools provide adequate information?	How long did the process take?
Gunderson	Family or relative	**District administration office**	District administration office	Yes	15-45 days
Hecker	Friends/neighbors	**Child's counselor/ teacher**; district administration office	Child's counselor/ teacher	Yes	15-45 days
Janson	Friends/neighbors	**Child's counselor/ teacher**; child's principal/secretary	Child's principal/ secretary	No	45 days or longer
Jessman	Friends/neighbors	**District administration office**	District administration office	Yes	45 days or longer
McDonald	News media, newspaper articles, radio info	**District administration office**, new (nonresi-dential) school	District administration office	No	45 days or longer
Meldman	Friends/neighbors	**District administration office**	District administration office	No	15-45 days
Naguchi	Child's principal/ secretary	**District administration office**; child's principal/ secretary	Child's principal/ secretary	Yes	15-45 days

Table 4.5: Continued.

Family	How family first learned about school choice for their children	Main sources of additional information (primary source in **bold type**)	First people/offices contacted for more information	Did schools provide adequate information?	How long did the process take?
Nunnally	Child's counselor/ teacher	**Child's counselor/ teacher**; district administration office	Child's counselor/teacher	Yes	15-45 days
Palmer	News media, newspaper articles, radio info	**District administration office**; new (nonresi-dential) school	District administration office	Yes	15-45 days
Prince	Friends/neighbors	**District administration office**	District administration office	Yes	15-45 days
Ramirez	News media, newspaper articles, radio info	**New (nonresi-dential) school**; District administration office	District administration office	Yes	7-15 days
Rogers	Child's counselor/ teacher	**Child's principal/ secretary**; child's counselor/teacher; district administration office	Child's counselor/ teacher	Yes	15-45 days
Walter	Friends/neighbors	**District administration office**	District administration office	Yes	7-15 days

It was not unusual for information regarding school choice to be spread by word of mouth. Although a family might initially have learned of the school choice program from the media, such as an article in the newspaper, they often were quick to share that information with, or seek additional information from family members and/or neighbors. Sarah Brennahan, grandmother of three children enrolled in the choice program, described it this way:

> When it came [information on schools of choice] out in the paper, I jumped on it right away. The daughter of the man across the street was going to Parkwood schools. He didn't want his daughter going there [where her grandchildren attended also] either. Other families down the street are still having their children go there. I don't know if they were aware of schools of choice. Once I knew it was available, I didn't hesitate to let my friends and family know.

Patricia Janson, mother of Jimmy, described how she found out about schools of choice:

> We had a friend of ours who enrolled their child in Wicksville under the schools of choice plan, so we knew about it from her experiences. We were looking at getting married and knew we would be moving to Almada Hills. I was concerned about Jimmy, especially because he is kind of quiet and I think he was a little afraid to move to a new school in the middle of the year. I was concerned that the move may not be best for Jimmy, especially in the spring. Knowing about it from my friend who knew about school choice really helped us not only find out about it but [learn] how to handle the whole process with our son.

Wendy Jessman, who had three children enrolled in the choice program, described it this way: "My neighbor down the street told me that Wicksville was opening their doors. She did the same thing. Their kids were going to Refuge [parochial school] too, and they put them in Wicksville. I was glad to learn about the program."

In total, nearly 40% of the families in this study relied on family, friends, or neighbors for information on school choice. The sharing of information by word of mouth was apparent.

Sources of Additional Information

Once parents learned that school choice was an option for their children, they followed up by seeking additional information from a number of sources. As shown in Table 4.5, the dominant source of information was the receiving or "nonresidential" school district's administration office. According to the research, more than half of the parents relied on the administrative office of the receiving school district as the main source of information; in fact, this was their primary source of information about school choice. It should be noted that seven of the families in this study were already enrolled in the Wicksville schools. They had all moved outside of the school district, or their children were going to be moving to live with the other parent during the school year. These families used the school choice option to allow their children to finish the school year in Wicksville.

For parents whose children were already enrolled in the Wicksville schools and who ended up using the school choice option to allow their children to remain in school there rather than having to relocate to their new residential school district, often their first and main source of information was the child's teacher, counselor, or principal. For example, when the Nunnallys were asked how they first learned about the public school choice program, they responded:

> One of the counselors at the high school told us about schools of choice and that the law would now allow us to keep our kids in Wicksville under a school choice plan. We really have no problem with the Handover schools [which was to be their new residential school district] and thought that they would

also be good schools, but when Sam and Allison asked if they couldn't stay in Wicksville to finish out the school year and we found out from the counselor that they could under school choice, we thought, "Why not?"

Audrey Denby described it this way:

> When I was getting my divorce, I knew Charles would be going to the Parkwood schools. When I was talking to the teacher about our move, the teacher told me to check out the choice law--the schools of choice program--that would let me pick Wicksville so that I could keep Charles in the Wicksville schools. To me, that sounded a whole lot better than having to send Charles to not only a new school, but the Parkwood schools. The choice was easy for us.

Callie Rogers, whose twelfth grader had hoped to finish school in Wicksville, described how she had found out about the program:

> One of Sharon's counselors at Mann High School told her she could stay at Wicksville under a new program so that she could graduate with all her friends. Sharon did not want to move to Weston with me, and she definitely did not want to go to Parkwood High School if she lived with her dad for her senior year. When we found out she might be able to live with her dad and drive 15 or 20 minutes and remain at Mann, we felt that was a good plan. Needless to say, Sharon was ecstatic knowing she would be able to stay and finish out her high school at Mann. Thank God the counselor knew about the program and told us all about it.

Another interview question concerned whether the schools provided adequate information on school choice. The data in Table 4.5 indicate that 15 (75%) of the families thought the schools did, indeed, provide adequate information regarding the school choice program. Only a few of the families indicated concern that the schools did not provide adequate information. For example, the McDonalds described it this way:

> When we first started calling to get information, no one seemed to be able to give us answers to our questions. They didn't know anything and I didn't know anything. Basically, you muddle through as you go and hope you'll figure it all out later. They tried to be helpful and informative, but at the same time they only had a certain number of slots and they were overwhelmed with the number of calls and people who wanted into it. There was no way they could help everybody. Then we got lucky. We got some lady who just liked

us for some reason, and she kept calling us back and letting us know the progress.

Length of Time Involved

Another concern was how long the entire school choice enrollment process took. In other words, once the family heard about school choice, how long did it take to get the necessary information, register their children, and learn that their children were, indeed, accepted/enrolled under the choice program? In 13 (65%) of the families, it took from two to six weeks once they learned about the school choice plan to get their children fully enrolled in the program. It took four of the families (20%) fewer than three weeks and three (15%) of the families more than six weeks to enroll their children under a school choice plan (see Table 4.5).

Participants in Decision Making

In examining the family decision-making process, the researcher also gathered information regarding which family member was the main participant in both gathering information and making the final decision on whether they would, indeed, participate in the school choice program. As the data in Table 4.6 indicate, the main participant in seeking out information was generally the mother. In more than 60% of the families who were interviewed, the mother was the main participant in both gathering information on schools of choice and making the final decision to participate in the school choice program.

Parents were asked to describe the role their children had played in the decision. Ninety percent of the families with high school students indicated that their children had been centrally involved in the decision to participate in the school

Table 4.6: Family decision process.

Family	Main participants in gathering & seeking information on choice and the enrollment process	Did child have much say in the final decision?	Grade level of student(s)	Was there a family meeting to discuss the options?	Who made the final decision?	What would have happened if the student wanted to attend a different school or remain at the local school?
Arnett	Both parents	Yes	High school	Yes	Joint decision of student/parent(s)	Parents to decide despite student opinion
Bowman	Mother	Yes	High school	Yes	Student	Student decision would be accepted
Brennahan	Mother	No	Elementary school	Yes	Both parents	Parents to decide despite student opinion
Budson	Mother	No	Elementary school	No	Mother	Parent to decide despite student opinion
Denby	Mother	No	Elementary school	Yes	Mother	Parent to decide despite student opinion
Douglas	Both parents	Yes	Elementary school	Yes	Both parents	Parents to decide despite student opinion
Gables	Both parents, student	Yes	Middle school/ high school	Yes	Joint decision of student/parent(s)	Student opinion considered & other options explored
Gunderson	Father	No	Elementary school	No	Father	Parent to decide despite student opinion
Hecker	Mother	Yes	High school	Yes	Joint decision of student/parent(s)	Student opinion considered & other options explored
Janson	Mother	Yes	High school	Yes	Joint decision of student/parent(s)	Student opinion considered & other options explored

Table 4.6: Continued.

Family	Main participants in gathering & seeking information on choice and the enrollment process	Did child have much say in the final decision?	Grade level of student(s)	Was there a family meeting to discuss the options?	Who made the final decision?	What would have happened if the student wanted to attend a different school or remain at the local school?
Jessman	Mother	Yes	Elementary school	Yes	Mother	Parent to decide despite student opinion
McDonald	Both parents	Yes	Elementary/high school	Yes	Both parents	Parents to decide despite student opinion
Meldman	Mother	No	High school	Yes	Mother	Parent to decide despite student opinion
Naguchi	Mother	No	Elementary school	Yes	Both	Student opinion considered & other options explored
Nunnally	Mother, student	Yes	High school	Yes	Joint decision of student/parent(s)	Student opinion considered & other options explored
Palmer	Both parents	No	Elementary school	Yes	Both parents	Parents to decide despite student opinion
Prince	Mother	No	Elementary school	No	Mother	Parent to decide despite student opinion
Ramirez	Mother	Yes	High school	Yes	Mother	Parent to decide despite student opinion
Rogers	Mother	Yes	High school	Yes	Joint decision of student/parent(s)	Student decision would be accepted
Walter	Both parents	No	Elementary school	No	Both parents	Parents to decide despite student opinion

choice program. In fact, a number of those families said that, not only had their children been involved in the decision process, but the students actually were given the final say about the decision. For example, Lori Bowman indicated that the final decision had rested with her twelfth-grade son. "It was entirely up to Arthur. I had decided that whatever he wanted, we would work out." With elementary students, including the child in the decision process was a much different matter. As shown in Table 4.6, elementary-grade students had little involvement in and little say about the decision to participate in school choice. In only two of the ten families in this group had the elementary-school child been involved in the decision. And in both of those cases, the parents indicated that it clearly had been their final decision regarding whether to enroll their children in the school choice program.

When asked whether there had been some sort of a family meeting to discuss the options, nearly all of the parents indicated that a family meeting or discussion had indeed taken place before they made a decision. In only four cases, all of them parents of elementary-school-age children, did parents indicate that there had been little family discussion regarding the school choice decision. In those cases, parents thought that this decision, like many others involving their children, was clearly one to be made by the parents as part of their rights and responsibilities. For example, when asked whether a family meeting had been held to discuss the options or whether the students had any say in the final decision, Kevin Gunderson, the single male head of household, responded:

> As far as I am concerned, as the parent and head of the household, it is my decision. Although I informed my children of what was happening, they were

> really not involved in the decision and there was no meeting to discuss our feelings. It was my call. I simply told them what was going to happen.

In the case of the Walter family's decision regarding their third grader, Jimmy, Sherry Walter responded to the family-discussion question as follows: "Carl and I decided what was best for Jimmy, so I suppose you could call that a meeting. Did we ask Jimmy what he wanted? No; that was our decision." When asked whether Jimmy had had any say in the final decision, her response was an emphatic:

> No! That was Carl's and my decision. Jimmy wanted to stay in Langley where we lived, but once we knew Carl had a chance to get this new job, it was our decision about where we would live and where Jimmy would go to school. We did think about sending Jimmy to a private school but decided that was a lot of money and not necessary once we knew he could go to Wicksville. If we could not have gotten Jimmy into Wicksville, we would have probably found a house somewhere else.

When parents were asked specifically who had made the final decision about whether their children would be enrolled in the Wicksville schools under a choice plan, parents from six families (all of whom had high-school-age children) indicated that the decision had truly been made jointly by the parents and the students. Two families indicated that the decision had been left entirely up to the student. An example of how these two families approached the decision was reflected in the statement made by Amy Rogers, the parent of twelfth-grader Sharon Coleman. When asked what would have happened if her daughter had wanted to try to attend a different school or remain at a local school, she responded, "It depends on what the reasons were. We would certainly want to consider Sharon's feelings since the decision affects her. She was 17 at the time, nearly 18 years old, and I just thought she had a right to be a part of that decision." When asked whether there had been

a family meeting to discuss the options, Amy Rogers responded, "Yes, but it was really Sharon's choice. Basically, Sharon and I talked it over and we agreed it was her decision, one we could both live with."

Summary of the Information-Gathering and Decision-Making Process

In examining the findings regarding the information-gathering process and who had been involved in the decision to participate in school choice, a number of things became evident. First, families discovered information regarding school choice in a variety of ways. Approximately one-third of the families gained that information from a newspaper article or an advertisement placed in the newspaper. Another third of the families first heard about school choice from family members, friends, or neighbors. The remaining third received the information through contacts with their local schools. When focusing on the quality and type of information available to them, most parents indicated they thought the schools had provided the necessary information regarding school choice. In general, obtaining that information, processing the application, and enrolling in a school choice program lasted anywhere from two to six weeks. With regard to the decision-making process itself, there were differences in how the decision was made and who had been involved in the decision, depending on whether the children involved were in elementary school or high school. The high-school-age students played a far greater role in both exploring options and making the decision to participate in school choice. In all but two of the elementary cases, there was little, if any, involvement of the students. As might be expected, the final decision about whether a family

would participate in school choice rested with the parents, although six of the families said they thought their high-school-age children needed to be central to the decision process. Only two of the families indicated that, in the end, it was a decision the students could make on their own.

Research Question 3

How were the issues of dissatisfaction with the sending (residential) school and/or the attraction of the receiving (nonresidential) school reflected in the families' decision to choose?

In addressing this research question, it was important to understand the families' attitudes and opinions regarding the schools involved in this decision process. Therefore, the researcher asked the parents to:

1. Describe some of the characteristics or qualities of a good school.
2. Describe qualities of both the sending (residential) school and the receiving (nonresidential) school that were part of their decision to participate in school choice.
3. Grade these schools, thereby allowing the researcher to draw some comparisons and look for patterns as part of the study.
4. Identify reasons for participating in a school choice program, a critical feature of this study.

Parents' Descriptions of a Good School

Parents were asked, "How would you describe a good school? For example, if you walked into a school, how would you have a sense if it is a good school or not?" To the extent possible, the researcher did not suggest characteristics of good

schools, hoping that those qualities would come from the parents. In responding to this question, the parents identified 13 characteristics or descriptors in describing a good school. A number of those characteristics/descriptors were mentioned by several parents. The results of how the parents described a good school, broken down by family, are shown in Table 4.7.

Parents' number-one response when asked to describe a good school was the school's needing to have "a caring and/or effective teaching staff." Without prompting, 90% of the families identified that characteristic as an important aspect of a good school. The second and third highest responses were the school's needing to have "a safe environment for all students" and "good discipline and organization." The next highest responses, in order, were "strong principal and/or school leaders," "good/current textbooks and good technology," and "good kids/ families." Responses mentioning some of these frequently identified characteristics came from parents such as Patricia Janson, the mother of a ninth grader, Jimmy Brown, who said:

> First of all, the school has to have good teachers, teachers who really care about kids and are able to teach in a way that helps them to learn. In addition, a good school has good order. I don't want to say they have all kinds of rules, but they have enough rules and good discipline to keep the school orderly and safe for all students. If there are problems, the school administration at a good school takes care of problems. They get on top of it. They don't ignore the problem, and they cause the problems to either go away or somehow get control of the problems. Good schools also have good technology, which is going to be so important for kids as we go into the next century. Jimmy has kind of a knack for computers, so we are obviously interested in seeing the schools provide him with a good understanding of the use of computers and also use computers as part of their training at school.

Table 4.7: Parents' descriptions of a good school.

Family	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Arnett	x		x		x		x		x				x
Bowman	x		x						x				
Brennahan	x	x	x	x	x				x	x			
Budson	x	x	x	x		x					x		
Denby	x	x	x					x				x	
Douglas	x			x				x					
Gables	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x		x	
Gunderson	x	x						x					
Hecker			x		x		x		x				x
Janson	x	x	x	x	x	x		x					
Jessman	x				x	x	x		x	x			
McDonald	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		
Meldman	x	x			x	x							
Naguchi	x					x		x	x				
Nunnally	x	x	x	x			x		x				
Palmer	x	x		x	x		x	x				x	
Prince	x	x	x			x							
Ramirez	x	x	x	x		x		x		x			
Rogers	x						x		x				
Walter		x		x	x	x	x	x			x		
Frequency	18	13	12	10	10	10	9	9	9	4	3	3	2
% of Families	90	65	60	50	50	50	45	45	45	20	15	15	10

Key:
1 = Caring and/or effective teaching staff
2 = Safe environment for all students
3 = Good discipline/organization
4 = Strong principal and/or school leaders
5 = Good/current textbooks & good technology
6 = Good kids/families
7 = Strong educational program with high standards
8 = Clean buildings/good condition
9 = Good after-school programs with high standards
10= Good special ed program
11= Good parent involvement & community support
12= Small class size
13= Will prepare students for college

Another family, the Palmers, described it this way:

> Any school should look and feel like it is a good place for kids. We want Angela to have good teachers who really care about her as a person and teachers who know how to teach children to read, to do math, to think, and how to be a good person. We would like the school to have a good principal who is in charge and makes the building run in a positive way. The building should be clean, look nice, have good-size rooms, and have lots of equipment to use. Also, it should be a school where class size is not too large, where students get the attention they deserve from teachers.

Although nearly all respondents (90%) agreed on wanting a caring and effective teaching staff, the next two highest responses centered on children's safety in the schools, as well as good discipline and organization. At least 60% of the families identified those two characteristics as important qualities for a good school.

Kimberly Budson described the safety issue this way:

> Good schools have good kids--families that are involved and care about their kids, not like in Parkwood. And they are safe for everyone. Everyone has to know that it is a safe place. That's why we left Parkwood. They don't do a good job of teaching, and it is not safe or a good place for kids. There are fights all the time, drugs, guns, and no one does anything about it. We got fed up.

Another parent, Audrey Denby, commented:

> It has to look and feel like it is a good place for kids--safe, friendly, colorful. And the teachers and other staff must be friendly and be professional. That's why we left the school we did. They are not safe for kids. And I don't think Charles would be taught well there. They may have some nice and good teachers, but their classes are too big and there are too many problems. Teachers can't teach. They are too busy solving other problems--fights and things.

In summary, safety and discipline were very important to parents. As Table 4.7 indicates, three out of the four top responses centered on a "safe environment," "good discipline and organization," and a "strong principal and/or school leaders who took care of problems." Although the number-one quality was caring and effective

teachers, safety and good discipline also tended to dominate. The four least frequently mentioned responses were in areas associated with the quality of schools or school programs: good special education programs, small class size, good parent involvement, or preparation of students for college.

Parents' Descriptions of the Sending (Residential) Schools

After parents had a chance to describe some of the characteristics of good schools, they were asked to describe their residential schools. Most frequently cited characteristics of the residential schools, the schools they were leaving, tended to center on safety and discipline: "school unsafe for students/staff"; "too many fights, poor discipline"; "kids and staff don't care"; and "types of kids/families." The number-one characteristic of their residential schools, as described by parents, was that the school was "unsafe for students and staff." Fifty percent of the parents interviewed identified that as a characteristic of their resident school (see Table 4.8).

As shown in the table, few of the responses had anything to do with the quality of the school as it relates to the curriculum, materials, or even the quality of the teaching staff. As interviews with parents took place, it became increasingly evident to the researcher that the safety of their children was often the leading factor in parents' decision to participate in school choice. The McDonalds described the resident school as being unsafe, saying that even the teachers in that school expressed that sentiment. Specifically,

> I have talked to teachers who work at these schools, and the teachers wouldn't even send their own kids there. They have their own kids in parochial schools. They are afraid. Each day they are basically surviving the

system and getting through their day's job rather than actually teaching any of the kids. There are very few kids who even have the desire. They are just trying to keep the peace and not get shot.

Table 4.8: Characteristics parents used to describe their residential schools, in rank order.

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
School unsafe for students/staff	10	50
Too many fights, poor discipline	8	40
Kids and staff don't care	8	40
Types of kids/families, i.e., race, poor, rough, mean, etc.	8	40
Too many reports of drugs/weapons	7	35
School has poor teachers	7	35
School lacks good equipment/technology	5	25
Curriculum/materials out of date	4	20
School lacks extra programs/offerings	3	15
School has good teachers/staff	2	10
Good programs/curriculum	2	10
Class size too large	1	5
Building old, run-down	1	5
No response	8	40

When talking about their decision to enroll Jimmy under a choice program, Sherry Walter also emphasized the safety concern:

> We did not want Jimmy to go to the Parkwood schools. Everyone we talked to told us that the schools there are not safe. My sister told us about all the fights, knives, drugs, and all the kinds of things that are going on in those schools. They are not safe for kids. No way was Jimmy going to school there.

The issue of safe schools surfaced repeatedly in this study. When the data were analyzed further, it was discovered that all seven families who cited serious concerns about safety and discipline in schools as their primary reason for participating in school choice (see Table 4.13) came from the same school district. That district has developed a reputation (whether accurate or not) as being unsafe for students and lacking in discipline. Certainly, these families' concern for the safety of their children was reflected in their description of a "good school."

Parents' Descriptions of the Receiving (Nonresidential) Schools

Parents also were asked to describe the receiving (nonresidential) schools. These responses tended to be far more positive than those regarding the residential schools and focused on features such as the school staff, climate of the school facilities, and so on. For example, Laurie Gables, the mother of Karl and Dale (high schoolers), described their nonresidential school this way:

> We are very happy with the program at Kingston. Teachers are in tune with what they want to teach. I thought they did their job well. When I went for conferences, they seemed to know who my daughter was and what her strong points were, what her weak points were, and they had practical points to offer me. There seemed to be a lot of good teachers there. That has been very refreshing and very important to us.

When asked whether she thought the receiving school was a good one, Melissa Palmer, mother of Angela, a first grader, responded:

> The principal and staff are really nice to Angela and to us. Angela really likes her teacher, and we really like her. The principal, Mrs. A, knows all of the kids at the school and is always available. The school is nice. The classes are fairly small. I think Angela's class has about 21 students in it. And maybe most important, Angela has a really nice teacher.

The characteristics of the nonresidential schools, as described by the parents, are summarized in Table 4.9. In analyzing this information, the first thing that stands out is the fact that the descriptions of the nonresidential schools were very different from those of the residential schools. Whereas 12 of the 14 characteristics parents used to describe the residential schools were negative (see Table 4.8), the descriptions of the nonresidential (receiving) schools were nearly the complete opposite. The six most frequently mentioned characteristics of the nonresidential schools were all positive descriptors (see Table 4.9). Although parents continued to express the importance of the safety issue, once they thought it had been addressed they preferred to focus on other issues. As Jessie Prince put it:

> Our new school is such a nice place for Kevin. The teachers are wonderful, the rooms and building beautiful. In Parkwood [his former school], I was worried more about Kevin's just being safe--free from fights, guns, stuff like that. I don't worry about that anymore. It's like two different worlds. So now Kevin can enjoy school, and I [as his mother] can think about learning, not whether Kevin will get caught in some violence.

Table 4.9: Characteristics parents used to describe their nonresidential schools, in rank order.

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
School has good teachers/staff	9	45
Positive school climate, caring, etc.	8	40
Good facilities	6	30
Good programs/curriculum	5	25
Good equipment/technology	5	25
Strong extracurricular offerings	4	20
School has poor teachers	3	15
Building old, run-down	1	5
Too many fights, poor discipline	1	5
No response	2	10

Grading the Schools

After parents were finished describing their schools, they were asked to assign a letter grade to both the residential school and the nonresidential school. Those grades are identified in Tables 4.10 (nonresidential school grades) and 4.11 (residential school grades). As is evident in the tables, the distribution of grades for the residential schools varied, with a large number of grades (8 or 40%) ranging from D to E. All eight of those families' residential schools were in the Parkwood district. In contrast, when rating the nonresidential schools, all 20 families gave them grades from A to C. In fact, 90% of the families gave their nonresidential schools an A or a B. That is a meaningful difference from the grades assigned to the resident schools.

Table 4.10: Parents' grades for their residential schools.

Grade	Frequency	Percent
A	0	0
A/B	1	5
B	5	25
B/C	2	10
C	1	5
C/D	0	0
D	1	5
D/E	1	5
E	6	30
No grade	3	15
Total	20	100

Table 4.11: Parents' grades for their nonresidential schools.

Grade	Frequency	Percent
A	2	10
A/B	7	35
B	9	45
B/C	1	5
C	1	5
C/D	0	0
D	0	0
D/E	0	0
E	0	0
No grade	0	0
Total	20	100

The grades each family gave to both their residential and nonresidential schools are compared in Table 4.12. All three of the families whose children had attended parochial schools lived in the Parkwood district. In fact, those parents indicated that one of the reasons their children had been enrolled in parochial schools was to avoid their attending Parkwood schools. In all, 12 families came from the same residential district. Most of the grades given to Parkwood ranged from C to E, with the vast majority of those being in the D to E range. The results indicated that the majority of parents saw school choice as an opportunity to leave a district of either poor quality or unsafe conditions and to escape to a district that represented much the opposite in terms of quality and safety features. Audrey Denby, the mother of Charles, described it this way:

Table 4.12: Comparison of parents' grades for the nonresidential school and the residential school.

Family	Nonresidential School Grade	Residential School Grade	
Arnett	B	B	OLL (Catholic school)
Bowman	B	B	Rockford
Brennahan	A	E	Parkwood
Budson	A/B	E	Parkwood
Denby	B	E	Parkwood
Douglas	B	?	Henderson
Gables	C	C	Parkwood
Gunderson	B/C	B/C	Chippewa Valley
Hecker	A/B	A/B	Clayberg
Janson	B	B+	Avondale
Jessman	A/B	B/C	Refuge
McDonald	B	D	Parkwood
Meldman	A/B	F	Parkwood
Naguchi	B	?	Holly
Nunnally	B	B	Handover
Palmer	A/B	B	Refuge
Prince	A/B	E	Parkwood
Ramirez	A	Z	Parkwood (lowest grade possible)
Rogers	A/B	?	Weston
Walter	B	D/E	Parkwood

Note: All three families whose children had attended parochial schools lived in the Parkwood district. Twelve families came from the same residential district (Parkwood).

> I would give Parkwood schools an E. I never even sent Charles there, but I heard all of the terrible stories and I just knew it wouldn't be good enough. I was a nurse at Parkwood Hospital, and I've heard the stories and seen too many crazy kids and families. The schools there are a failure. No way would I send Charles there. If I graded Wicksville, my son's new school, I would say I would give them a B . . . a solid B. I think they could be better, but usually they do a nice job. I know it is safe there, and Charles likes it there, too.

When Raquel Ramirez was asked to give a letter grade to her residential school, which was in the Parkwood district, she responded:

> A grade? I would give them a Z . . . the lowest grade. I want to know what is going on at school, and I am always there. Everybody--the teacher, the department of education, from the little one to the big one. They should put them all together, blend them, put them on plants or flowers. They should just put them in the trash and put real people there.

Her disgust and unhappiness with Parkwood, their residential district, were both obvious and emphatic. When asked to give a grade to their new school in Wicksville, Raquel responded this way: "I'd give them at A+! Everybody was nice. It was like a gift. Everyone was smiling, and they were so nice."

Parents' Reasons for Participating in School Choice Programs

When parents were asked to identify the reasons why they ultimately had decided to participate in school choice programs, again their responses varied. Some parents, like the McDonalds, gave seven reasons they had decided to participate in schools of choice, whereas the Douglases gave only one reason. Some of the reasons parents gave for participating in a school choice plan are discussed in this section. In addition, reasons given by parents with elementary students are compared with those given by parents of high school students.

First, families were asked to cite their primary reason for deciding to participate in school choice plans, as well as any other reasons they thought were worth mentioning (see Table 4.13). Parents were urged to provide all the reasons they could think of as they recalled their decision to enroll in a school choice program.

In Table 4.14, the reasons parents identified are listed in rank order, according to frequency of mention. As expected, based on the data presented thus far, the number-one reason, cited by 60% of parents, for wanting to participate in school choice was that they thought their residential school district was unsafe. The poor quality of the residential school district was a reason given by 55% of the families interviewed. The number-three response, provided by 40% of the families, centered on concerns regarding the "quality of the families and kids" who were present at their residential school. The quality or types of families or students at the school turned out to be an important issue to a number of families. For some, the issue was race; for others, it was the rough quality of the family members; and for others, perhaps it was both.

For example, Sarah Brennahan, the grandmother of three elementary students of whom she had custody, described it this way:

> My daughter has complained about the black children at the school. They would show my granddaughter their p_____ and stuff like that. Nothing was ever done. That is disrespectful to the kid that is doing the act and for my granddaughter. When she made a visit to the junior high school where she was going to be going to school, she was totally depressed. She went there as a visitor and the comment was made to her by some of the students, "Oh, we're really going to like you." The black children said that to her, and it totally scared her to death.

Table 4.13: Reasons parents gave for participating in school choice plans (primary reason in bold print).

Family	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Arnett	**X**		x		x								
Bowman		x		**X**		x							
Brennahan		x					x	**X**					
Budson							**X**	x		x			x
Denby							**X**	x		x			
Douglas		**X**											
Gables								**X**					
Gunderson							**X**	x		x			x
Hecker		**X**		x									
Janson		**X**											
Jessman						x	**X**	x		x			
McDonald			x		x		x	**X**		x		x	x
Meldman							x	**X**		x			x
Naguchi		**X**											
Nunnally		**X**		x									
Palmer			x				x	x	**X**				
Prince			x				x	**X**		x	x		
Ramirez						x	x	**X**				x	x
Rogers		**X**											
Walter							x	**X**		x		x	

Key:
1 = Moving into the school district, but not until after school starts
2 = Moving out of the school district, but wanted child to finish school year
3 = Save on private school tuition costs
4 = Child involved in athletics/co-curricular activities
5 = All schools should be open to all children--issue of parents' rights
6 = Particular needs of my child, i.e., special programs, etc.
7 = Poor quality of residential school district
8 = Residential district unsafe, i.e., weapons, drugs, fights, lack of discipline
9 = Religious reasons
10 = Quality of families/kids
11 = Convenience reasons such as day care or job
12 = High quality of nonresidential district
13 = Poor disciplinary climate

Table 4.14: Rank order of reasons parents gave for participating in school choice plans.

Rank	Reason	Frequency	Percent
1	Residential district unsafe, i.e., weapons, drugs, fights, lack of discipline	12	60
2	Poor quality of residential school district	11	55
3	Quality of families/kids	8	40
4	Moving out of the school district, but wanted child to finish school year	8	40
5	Poor disciplinary climate	5	25
6	Save on private school tuition costs	4	20
7	Child involved in athletics/co-curricular activities	3	15
8	Particular needs of my child, i.e., special programs, etc.	3	15
9	High quality of nonresidential district	3	15
10	All schools should be open to all children--issue of parents' rights	2	10
11	Moving into the school district, but not until after school starts	1	5
12	Religious reasons	1	5
13	Convenience reasons such as day care or job	1	5

When Laurie Gables, the mother of a tenth-grade girl who would ordinarily have attended school in Parkwood, their residential school district, was asked why they had chosen to participate in schools of choice, she responded without hesitation:

> Two major reasons: She's a girl and she's white. I know that sounds prejudiced. I am not a prejudiced person, I don't think. But I do know that it is very dangerous for females who are white to go to that school. It was a safety issue. It didn't have anything to do with whether Northern taught better than Kingston. It was a safety issue. I was afraid to send her there. My sister sent her kids there, and they did whatever they could to get them into the Clayberg schools before they moved to Clayberg. My brother's kids go there [the Parkwood schools], and just listening to them scared the daylights out of me. I grew up in the Parkwood area, and I was away for about 20 years. It is a different place now. I just didn't feel it would be the right decision to send Dale to that school.

One of the reasons 40% of the families identified for participating in schools of choice had nothing to do with the quality of the schools or the other educational issues per se. These families had ended up participating in school choice programs simply because they were moving out of the district but wanted their children to finish the school year in what was to become their nonresidential district. In other words, they had been living in the district of the school of choice, the Wicksville School District. During the course of the year, the family had moved to another school district, and they were reluctant to move their children during the middle of the year. School choice provided them with a way to let their children finish the school year or, if they were seniors, to finish their high school career in their present school. Brenda Hecker, mother of high school senior Kristin Fox, described it this way:

> We chose to keep Kristin in the Wicksville schools so that she could finish her high school career with the school and classmates that she had been a part of through her entire high school experience. It really would have been very unfair to have to move her. We knew she was already upset with the divorce. She is a good kid. She has a good attitude, very mature and responsible. We knew that although the drive and distance would make it a little difficult for her to drive from Clayberg, it wasn't too bad. Her father agreed to provide her with a car that was really quite reliable and that made it easy as well. When we found out from her counselor that she could stay in Wicksville under the schools of choice plan, there was really nothing more to consider.

Lori Bowman, mother of Arthur, a twelfth grader, described her decision to have Arthur finish his senior year at Wicksville this way: "It was the middle of his senior year. He had his friends and his sports, and I didn't want to pull him out." The Nunnallys, parents of three high schoolers, described the decision to have their children finish the school year in Wicksville this way:

> Once we knew we were going to buy our house in Handover, we knew that moving our children to a different school was inevitable and was going to be somewhat difficult. Like I said, once we knew the kids could finish out the year in Wicksville, and although it would be easier to move them at the time, we wanted to let our kids stay if that is what they wanted to do. It wasn't always the most convenient, but it was the easiest for the kids to let them finish out the year. To us it just made more sense to let them finish school before we moved them. Allison and Sam both wanted to stay in Wicksville, and we felt we needed to respect their decision. It is tough for kids to have to move away from their friends or go to a whole new school and start over, especially when you are 16, 17, or 18 years old.

When asked to identify only their primary reason for participating in school choice plans, 7 out of the 20 (35%) families cited reasons having to do with safety (see Table 4.15). They indicated that the residential school district was simply unsafe for their children and viewed that as the number-one reason to enroll them in another district. The primary reason given by 30% of the families was that,

although they were moving to another district, they wanted their children to finish the school year in the old district. To change schools during the middle of the school year might create additional stress or discomfort for their children. Twenty percent of the families were concerned about the poor quality of their residential school district. By and large, families citing the belief that the residential district was unsafe or the poor quality of the residential district were leaving the Parkwood schools. Wicksville was one of the few school districts in the area, and the closest to Parkwood, that had a school choice plan. As shown in Table 4.12, 12 of the 20 families in the study were leaving the Parkwood area. Eleven of those families cited the residential district being unsafe or the poor quality of the district as their primary reason for wanting to move.

Table 4.15: Primary reasons families gave for participating in school choice plans, in rank order.

Rank	Reason	Frequency	Percent
1	Residential district unsafe	7	35
2	Moving out of district, but wanted child to finish school year	6	30
3	Poor quality of residential school district	4	20
4	Moving into the school district, but not until after school starts	1	5
5	Child involved in athletics/co-curricular activities	1	5
6	Religious reasons	1	5

In summarizing the results presented in this section, a number of points become evident:

1. When parents were asked to describe a "good school," three of the top four responses dealt with safety issues and good discipline. The only other top response was a desire to see a "caring and effective teaching staff." The responses in this section helped the researcher understand the mind-set of the parents participating in this study.

2. When grading their own residential schools, most parents gave the schools low marks (D's and E's), often describing unsafe conditions, lack of discipline, and types of kids/families as reasons for their poor grades. The low grades parents assigned to their residential schools reinforced and helped explain the types of descriptors parents used in characterizing a "good school." The characteristics they used to describe a good school were some of the ones they thought did not exist in their residential schools.

3. When describing the nonresidential schools, parents gave much higher grades (generally A's and B's), citing good teachers and positive school climate as major factors. In this study, parents placed little emphasis on the safety/discipline issue when rating their new schools. Once that issue had been addressed, parents focused on school-quality issues that related more directly to classroom teaching, curriculum, and technology. Analysis and follow-up discussions with parents on this issue indicated that once parents believed that the basic-need issue had been resolved, such as being assured by school personnel that their children would be

safe and free from negative factors like drugs and/or weapons, the parents could shift their attention to their children's education.

4. Most of the very low marks (D's and E's) given by parents to their residential schools were from those who lived in the Parkwood district. This finding was not surprising in light of parents' earlier assessments of that school district.

5. When parents identified their reasons for changing schools under a choice plan, the number-one reason given was that they believed their residential district was unsafe (see Table 4.14). The next two highest responses concerned the quality of the district and/or its families and children.

6. Forty percent of the families ended up using school choice as a vehicle for allowing their children to finish the school year at their old school rather than relocating them due to a family move, i.e., buying a new house, remarriage, and so on. This family/personal needs issue was not anticipated but turned out to be a major reason for the parents' decision to participate in school choice plans.

7. Finally, the data indicated that, other than the issue of moving midyear, families participating in choice tended to do so to "escape" a poor district (often described as unsafe), rather than to move their children from an average or good district to a better one. The strong concern parents had with their residential district--that is, dissatisfaction with the local district's ability to provide a safe environment and/or a high-quality school experience--was the motivating factor that caused most families to participate in school choice plans.

Research Question 4

How do the decisions to choose nonresidential public schools by families with high school students compare with those decisions by families with elementary students?

The data also revealed some interesting information when the reasons for participating in school choice plans were compared between families with elementary-age children and those with high-school-age children. The responses of parents of elementary-age students regarding why they participated in school choice are summarized in Table 4.16. The two top responses were given by 9 (82%) of the 11 families of elementary school students. They cited both concern about the poor quality of the residential school and concern about the lack of a safe environment as reasons for changing schools. Only one other reason, the quality of the families/kids at the residential school was identified by a majority of parents (64%) as a reason for changing schools. The top three reasons listed clearly were the dominant choices.

The fact that today's parents of elementary-grade students listed their concern for safety as one of the top reasons for deciding to participate in choice certainly appears to indicate a shift in parents' perceptions regarding school safety. It may be a local issue. Of the nine families citing safety as a concern, eight were either residents of, or were scheduled to move to, the Parkwood schools, the district that had (as the data indicate) a serious public-image problem and a reputation as an undisciplined, unsafe, and poor-quality district. Audrey Denby, mother of a first grader, described the situation this way:

You must realize that you don't send your kids to the Parkwood schools unless you have to. They are not safe, and they do a poor job of teaching kids. If they were like Wicksville, Buchanan or West Buchanan [neighboring schools], it would be different. I'd have no problem with Charles going there. But I can't send him [to the Parkwood schools]. I'd be scared all the time for what he would face.

Table 4.16: Reasons that parents of **elementary school students** gave for participating in school choice plans, in rank order.

Rank	Reason	Frequency	Percent
1	Poor quality of residential school district	9	82
2	Residential district unsafe, i.e., weapons, drugs, fights, lack of discipline	9	82
3	Quality of families/kids	7	64
4	Moving out of the school district, but wanted child to finish school year	3	27
5	Save on private school tuition costs	3	27
6	Poor disciplinary climate	3	27
7	High quality of nonresidential district	2	18
8	All schools should be open to all children--issue of parents' rights	1	9
9	Particular needs of my child, i.e., special programs, etc.	1	9
10	Religious reasons	1	9
11	Convenience reasons such as day care or job	1	9
12	Moving into the school district, but not until after school starts	0	0
13	Child involved in athletics/co-curricular activities	0	0

Wendy Jessman, when speaking of her decision not to send her three elementary-grade sons to Parkwood, described her decision as follows:

> Even if my boys wanted to go to Parkwood [residential school], I would have said no. It's hard to explain. I don't want to sound like a bigot. The Parkwood schools are very, very rough. From the stories that I have heard and my neighbors saw, little kids are beating up kids and taking their lunches, and my kids had never seen any of that. One kid was suspended for body-slamming another kid, and that kid had to go to the hospital. There is always pushing and shoving. It's not a good place for kids to have to face that.

Some of the reasons parents of secondary students gave for participating in school choice were similar to those of the parents of elementary students (see Table 4.17). However, the secondary students' parents had a different number-one reason. That reason related to the family's decision to move to a new home. Fifty percent of the families indicated that they were using school choice as a means of keeping their children in the Wicksville schools so they would not have to uproot them during the school year. That is not an issue of school quality, but rather of convenience.

The second highest response given by parents of high-school-age students dealt with the safety issue and the concern that the residential school had problems with weapons, drugs, fights, and/or gangs. In this study, 40% of the families (families like the Heckers, Jansons, Nunnallys, and Rogerses) cited this reason as a factor in their decisions to move their children from their residential schools.

In summary, parents of both elementary and secondary school students cited the lack of a safe environment in the residential school as a major reason for changing schools. Although that may be a local issue, because many of these

families had left the same district (the Parkwood schools), it is nonetheless a major factor. However, whereas the elementary students' parents then focused on school-quality issues such as wanting good teachers or better school programs, the parents of high schoolers focused more on convenience issues related to the family's move to a new home.

Table 4.17: Reasons that parents of **high school students** gave for participating in school choice plans, in rank order.

Rank	Reason	Frequency	Percent
1	Moving out of the school district, but wanted child to finish school year	5	50
2	Residential district unsafe, i.e., weapons, drugs, fights, lack of discipline	4	40
3	Child involved in athletics/co-curricular activities	3	30
4	Poor quality of residential school district	3	30
5	Poor discipline climate	3	30
6	Save on private school tuition costs	2	20
7	All schools should be open to all children--issue of parents' rights	2	20
8	Particular needs of my child, i.e., special programs, etc.	2	20
9	Quality of families/kids	2	20
10	High quality of nonresidential district	2	20
11	Moving into the school district, but not until after school starts	1	10
12	Religious reasons	0	0
13	Convenience reasons such as day care or job	0	0

Research Question 5

To what extent are the issues of free will, educational reform, school quality/characteristics, and family/personal needs reflected in families' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children?

In Chapter I, the researcher described four major issues surrounding the topic of school choice. Those issues were free will, educational reform, school quality/ characteristics, and family/personal needs. To assess parents' understanding of these issues and to obtain some measure of the degree to which the issues were important to their participation in school choice, parents were asked to respond to a number of statements that were woven into the interviews (see Table 4.18). Under each issue there were three statements with which parents were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement. Parents were then asked to indicate the extent to which the message of the statement had been a factor in their decision to participate in school choice. For example, under the topic of free will, parents were asked to respond to the following statement: "School choice is an issue of freedom. it is a basic right that we have as citizens." Parents were asked to give the statement a rating of 1 (Strongly Agree) through 5 (Strongly Disagree). They were then asked to indicate to what extent that statement's message might be viewed as a factor in their decision to participate in school choice. They were asked to respond as follows: (1) A Strong Factor, (2) A Possible Factor, (3) Not Sure, (4) Not Likely a Factor, and (5) Definitely Not a Factor. Parents also were asked to explain their responses. It was not enough simply to provide a numerical response; they were asked to explain their rating of the statement. The ratings of these statements and the degree to which parents thought the message in the statement was a factor in

Table 4.18: Interview survey.

STATEMENT	AGREE (—) DISAGREE	FACTOR IN DECISION
FREE WILL ISSUE		
1. School choice is an issue of freedom. It is a basic right that we, as citizens, have.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. As consumers, we should be able to choose whatever school/program we think is best for our children.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. Every person has a right to equal opportunity, and school choice helps guarantee that.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
EDUCATIONAL REFORM ISSUES		
1. Schools will improve and students will learn more with school choice in place.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. Parents will be more involved and have more confidence in their schools under choice.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. Bad schools will go out of business and good schools will add more students.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
SCHOOL QUALITY/CHARACTERISTICS		
1. Quality of educational programs, including personnel, is key to school success.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. The safety of the children and the control of discipline, weapons, drugs are critical in schools.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. The quality of the facilities, the technology, and condition of buildings affect education of children.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
FAMILY/PERSONAL NEEDS		
1. The type of kids/families at the school affects the quality of school.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. Families' personal needs/ circumstances are a critical factor in their right to participate in a school of choice program	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. The school needs to reflect/support the values of my family and beliefs we hold important.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:

KEY:

AGREE (---) DISAGREE
1 = Strongly Agree
2 = Agree
3 = Not Sure
4 = Disagree
5 = Strongly Disagree

FACTOR IN DECISION
1 = A Strong Factor
2 = A Possible Factor
3 = Not Sure
4 = Not Likely a Factor
5 = Definitely Not a Factor

their decision to participate in a school choice program are described in the following pages.

Parents' Responses to the Free Will Statements

Statements designed to ascertain parents' beliefs regarding school choice as an issue of free will centered on three main topics: The first statement suggested that school choice is an issue of freedom, a basic right that we have as citizens. The second statement dealt with consumer sovereignty, suggesting that, as consumers, parents should be able to choose whatever school or program they think would be best for their children. The third statement in the free will section concerned the equal opportunity issue, suggesting that every person has a right to an equal opportunity in schooling, and school choice helps to guarantee that right. As the totals at the bottom of Table 4.19 illustrate, the majority of parents (63%) strongly agreed or agreed, in general, with the three free will statements. Twenty-eight percent of the families were not sure how to respond to the statements. Only 8% of the families disagreed, and none of them strongly disagreed with the free will statements.

However, when comparing the parents' philosophical agreement or disagreement with the statements in the second part of the questioning, which was "To what extent would you say this statement was a factor in your decision to participate in schools of choice?," the totals indicate that only 30% of parents thought that the issue of free will had played a role in their decision to participate in a school choice program. Thirty-three percent indicated that they were uncertain whether it was much of a factor. More than 37%, the largest percentage, indicated that the

Table 4.19: Response summaries for free will statements.

STATEMENT: School choice is an issue of freedom. It is a basic right that we, as citizens, have.	AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	1	6	9	4	0	0	2	7	10	1
Percent	5	30	45	20	0	0	10	35	50	4
STATEMENT: As consumers, we should be able to choose whatever school/program we think is best for our child(ren).	AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	4	12	3	1	0	2	10	5	2	1
Percent	20	60	15	5	0	10	50	25	10	5
STATEMENT: Every person has a right to equal opportunity, and school choice helps guarantee that.	AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	3	12	5	0	0	0	4	8	4	4
Percent	15	60	25	0	0	0	20	40	20	20
Total Frequency	8	30	17	5	0	2	16	20	16	6
Average Percent	13	50	28	8	0	3	27	33	27	10

KEY:

AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE	FACTOR IN DECISION
1 = Strongly Agree	1 = A Strong Factor
2 = Agree	2 = A Possible Factor
3 = Not Sure	3 = Not Sure
4 = Disagree	4 = Not Likely a Factor
5 = Strongly Disagree	5 = Definitely Not a Factor

free will issue was "not likely" or "definitely not a factor" in their decision to participate in school choice. It appears, then, that although the majority of parents tended to agree with the free will issues and the statements that supported the free will arguments for school choice, in reality free will tended not to be a major factor in their decisions to participate in school choice plans.

A few families did feel strongly about some of the free will issues. The McDonalds were the most vocal and adamant about this issue:

> I think it should be every parent's right to send their children to any school they want. That's what our country was founded on . . . the right as free choosing citizens . . . in a country of freedoms . . . to be able to do and be whatever we want, as long as it doesn't hurt anybody. Choosing the schools for our kids is just one of the freedoms we ought to enjoy. If it's not in the Constitution or, better yet, the Bill of Rights, it ought to be. If we can worship any God of our choosing, we should certainly be able to choose what schools our kids go to.

The McDonalds were 1 of 16 families who either agreed or strongly agreed philosophically with the consumer-sovereignty statement. Eighty percent of the families agreed with the statement, "As consumers we should be able to choose whatever school or program is best for our children." Audrey Denby echoed the rest of the parents when she stated:

> I am glad I had the option to keep Charles in the Wicksville schools. If not, I am not sure what I would have done. Obviously, I am glad it is available. A parent or family should be able to send their children to the very best schools they can find. Some may not care, but I do. So, it would be great if I could send him anywhere of my choice and also not have to worry about things like busing, but that's probably too much to ask.

When discussing the consumer-sovereignty issue, Melissa Palmer responded:

> Mark and I really think parents should be able to send their child wherever they want. We believe that vouchers is something that should be available to every parent. I am not saying we would send our child to a Catholic school, but we would certainly consider a private school like Redmond, Eastbrooke or Country Day if we could get them in and it doesn't cost as much as it does now. Or, if we could have a voucher and send Angela to Buchanan, West Buchanan or Wilson Lake, or any other school district around us, we would consider that.

Along the same lines, Sherry Walter asserted:

> I think parents should be able to send their kids to whatever school they want. When we lived in Langley, there was no way I would have sent Jimmy to their junior high or high schools. I would have wanted to choose another school. We weren't too far from Waverly School when we lived in Langley. That is where we would have wanted Jimmy to go. Some schools like Waverly, and even here in Wicksville, have some things that schools in Langley and Parkwood just don't have: nicer buildings, better books, more computers. Some schools even have counselors. Why can't parents choose to send their children wherever they think would be the best place for their kids?

It should be noted that, when asked whether consumer sovereignty was a factor in their decision to participate in school choice, 60% of the parents indicated that it had been an important factor. This was the one free will statement that appeared to carry over into parents' "action" to choose. The same cannot be said for the third free will statement, which dealt with equal opportunity.

About 75% of the parents expressed either strong agreement or agreement with the statement concerning equal opportunity. However, only 20% of the parents thought this had been a motivating factor when enrolling their children in a school choice plan. Perhaps Wendy Jessman, the mother of three elementary students, described it best:

> Open up all the school districts. Kids, whether they are poor, rich, or in the middle, should all have the same opportunity. Even though the state is giving a grant for my kids to go to Wicksville, all schools should open up--Buchanan, Farmington Hills. Parkwood is a prime example. It is a poor city. The quality

> of their schools is low; the teaching is low. The kids are not given a chance. All kids should have a good opportunity to get the best education they can. It is discriminating that Buchanan has all the rich people and they don't open their doors.

However, when pressed on this issue and the degree to which it had been a factor when she was enrolling her three elementary-age children in Wicksville under the school choice plan, she responded: "Well, as I think about it, I'm not sure I was really thinking "equal rights" or "equal opportunities" when changing schools. I just wanted my kids out of Refuge [the local parochial school] and somewhere other than the Parkwood schools."

In summary, the responses to the statements dealing with the free will issues indicated that the vast majority of parents tended to agree philosophically with the statements; in fact, some were adamant in saying how strongly they felt about the issues. However, the reality was, when asked to what extent the free will issue had played a part in the decision to enroll their children in a school choice program, the vast majority of parents admitted it had not been a major factor.

Parents' Responses to the Educational Reform Statements

Parents' responses to the statements relating to choice as an issue of educational reform also varied. However, as shown in Table 4.20, choice as an issue of educational reform did not have as much interest or support as did some of the other areas. For example, when asked whether they agreed with the statement that "Schools will improve and students will learn more with school choice, only one parent (5%) expressed agreement with the statement. About 65% of the parents

Table 4.20: Response summaries for educational reform statements.

STATEMENT: Schools will improve and students will learn more with school choice in place.	AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	0	1	13	5	1	0	2	3	9	6
Percent	0	5	65	25	5	0	10	15	45	30
STATEMENT: Parents will be more involved and have more confidence in their schools under choice.	AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	0	6	12	2	0	0	2	6	8	4
Percent	0	30	60	10	0	0	10	30	40	20
STATEMENT: Bad schools will go out of business and good schools will add more students.	AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	0	1	7	7	5	0	0	5	8	7
Percent	0	5	35	35	25	0	0	25	40	35
Total Frequency	0	8	32	14	6	0	4	14	25	17
Average Percent	0	13	53	23	10	0	7	23	42	28

KEY:

AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE	FACTOR IN DECISION
1 = Strongly Agree	1 = A Strong Factor
2 = Agree	2 = A Possible Factor
3 = Not Sure	3 = Not Sure
4 = Disagree	4 = Not Likely a Factor
5 = Strongly Disagree	5 = Definitely Not a Factor

had no strong opinion either way on that issue; they had not given it much thought. As Brenda Hecker, mother of a twelfth grader, put it:

> I guess I have never really thought about it. The school choice plan was certainly a good plan for us since it helped solve our problem and allowed Kristin to finish at her home school. I don't know about the school's ability to get better or worse under schools of choice. I happen to think schools of choice is good and that parents should send their kids anywhere they want, so maybe it will help schools stay more competitive. I don't really know.

Other families, including the Palmers, did not think that choice would make a difference in improving schools:

> The one school we think needs to improve tremendously is Parkwood. They have so many changes to make. I don't know if they will ever be able to be the kind of schools that kids should be able to go to, until they do something about the drugs, the fighting, the weapons, and making it a safe place. I don't think schools of choice or anything will help them.

Similarly, when families were asked to respond to and then comment on the other two educational reform statements--regarding parents' increased involvement in schools and whether they thought bad schools would go out of business as a result of school choice programs--there was little support for either of the statements. In fact, when asked whether they thought bad schools would go out of business and good schools would add more students as a result of choice, 60% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. They did not believe that school choice would have a major influence on improving bad schools or increasing parental involvement. When responding to that statement, Laurie Gables claimed that:

> I think that Parkwood should make some changes because they can't afford to lose a lot of students. My mother has lived in the Parkwood district all her life, and from what she knows about the Parkwood schools, she says because Parkwood has become such a large rental place, the system is

suffering. They are just not getting the dollars or the kinds of families that they are going to need to get better. I don't know that choice will change that.

When parents were asked whether any of the educational reform issues had been a factor in their decision to participate in school choice, again the vast majority indicated that this issue had not been a major factor in their decision. The totals in Table 4.20 show that 70% of the families indicated that the contents of the three educational reform statements had not been factors in their decision. Of the remaining 30% of families, 23% responded that they were not sure. Only 7% of the parents indicated that issues related to educational reform might have been a factor in their decision. No families indicated that this was a strong factor in their decision.

In summary, parents tended not to agree with the statements dealing with educational reform. Further, they had not considered some of these educational reform issues when deciding to participate in school choice plans.

Parents' Responses to the School Quality/ Characteristics Statements

Parents who were interviewed tended to agree, and in some cases strongly agree, with statements that focused on the quality and characteristics of schools (see Table 4.21). All of the families agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the quality of educational programs, including personnel, is key to school success. Perhaps not surprisingly, the statement that safety of the children and the control of discipline, weapons, and drugs in schools are critical in schools garnered 100% agreement. This result was consistent with the data presented earlier regarding school safety and school discipline. Ninety percent of the parents agreed

Table 4.21: Response summaries for school quality/characteristics statements.

STATEMENT: Quality of educational programs, including personnel, is key to school success and my decision to choose.	AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	7	13	0	0	0	6	8	3	3	0
Percent	35	65	0	0	0	30	40	15	15	0
STATEMENT: The safety of the children and the control of discipline, weapons, drugs are critical in schools.	AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	14	6	0	0	0	10	4	3	3	0
Percent	70	30	0	0	0	50	20	15	15	0
STATEMENT: The quality of the facilities, the technology and the condition of the buildings affect the education of children.	AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	2	16	2	0	0	1	6	8	5	0
Percent	10	80	10	0	0	5	30	40	25	0
Total Frequency	23	35	2	0	0	17	18	14	11	0
Average Percent	38	58	3	0	0	28	30	23	18	0

KEY:

AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE	FACTOR IN DECISION
1 = Strongly Agree	1 = A Strong Factor
2 = Agree	2 = A Possible Factor
3 = Not Sure	3 = Not Sure
4 = Disagree	4 = Not Likely a Factor
5 = Strongly Disagree	5 = Definitely Not a Factor

with the third statement–that the quality of the facilities, the technology, and condition of the buildings affect the education of children. In total, 96% of the families agreed or strongly agreed with the three statements on this issue. Of the four philosophical issue areas, it had the highest percentage of agreement.

Unlike the section dealing with free will, where there was strong agreement with the statements but little indication that the content of the statement had been a factor in their decision, a much higher percentage of parents indicated that school quality/characteristics were a major factor in their decision to participate in school choice. Seventy percent of the parents interviewed indicated that the schools' ability to provide a safe environment and their ability to guarantee quality programs/staff were major factors in their decision to participate in school choice plans. Overall, nearly 60% of the parents indicated that school quality/characteristics were a major issue to them as families when deciding to enroll their children in school choice programs.

Audrey Denby summarized what many of the families thought–that her child's safety and the quality of the educational program were critical factors in her decision to participate in a school choice program. She said,

> Was the safety of my child a factor in my decision? You bet! I just knew I wasn't going to send my son to the Parkwood schools. Since we were already in Wicksville, I decided that, if the law would let me, I would keep him in Wicksville. I also heard that West Buchanan had a schools-of-choice program, but since Charles was already in Wicksville, I decided to stay. The main reason? I wanted my son to be <u>safe</u> and to get a good education. That isn't guaranteed in Parkwood.

As the figures in Table 4.21 indicate, 70% of the families concurred on those two issues.

In summary, parents strongly agreed with the school quality/characteristics statements. Parents believed there is, and should be, a high correlation between good schools and the schools' ability to provide high-quality programs, including competent, caring staff and good facilities and technology. In addition, they believed that the safety of their children and an atmosphere of discipline and order are critical in schools. More important, however, they translated this belief into action. This area dealing with school quality/characteristics had the largest percentage of parents indicating that these issues were major factors in their decisions to switch schools under a choice plan.

Parents' Responses to the Family/
Personal Needs Statements

Parents also were asked to respond to statements that dealt with family/personal needs issues, the fourth area under investigation. Nearly 75% of the parents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the family/personal needs statements (Table 4.22). In addition, nearly 60% of parents indicated that the issues addressed in these statements had been factors in their decision to participate in school choice. For example, 95% of the parents agreed or strongly agreed that the types of kids and families at the school affected the quality of the school. Moreover, 70% of the parents indicated that the types of kids and families at the school had been a major factor in their decision to participate in school choice.

For example, when talking about her decision to remove her son Kevin from the Parkwood schools and enroll him in Wicksville under a school choice plan, Jessie Prince described it this way:

Table 4.22: Response summaries for family/personal needs statements.

STATEMENT: The type of kids/families at the school affects the quality of the school.	AGREE ⟨—⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	6	13	1	0	0	7	7	4	2	0
Percent	30	65	5	0	0	35	35	20	10	0
STATEMENT: The families' personal needs/ circumstances are a critical factor in their right to participate in a schools-of-choice program.	AGREE ⟨—⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	1	10	9	0	0	6	4	9	1	0
Percent	5	50	45	0	0	30	20	45	5	0
STATEMENT: The school needs to reflect/ support the values of my family and beliefs we hold important.	AGREE ⟨—⟩ DISAGREE					FACTOR IN DECISION				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	1	13	6	0	0	0	11	5	4	0
Percent	5	65	30	0	0	0	55	25	20	0
Total Frequency	8	36	16	0	0	13	22	18	7	0
Average Percent	13	60	27	0	0	22	37	30	12	0

KEY:

AGREE ⟨—⟩ DISAGREE	FACTOR IN DECISION
1 = Strongly Agree	1 = A Strong Factor
2 = Agree	2 = A Possible Factor
3 = Not Sure	3 = Not Sure
4 = Disagree	4 = Not Likely a Factor
5 = Strongly Disagree	5 = Definitely Not a Factor

> There was no way I was going to send Kevin to the Parkwood schools. The main reason that I have is that I have a concern about sending him to the school, his safety. Also, there are a lot of blacks and Hispanics, some really tough kids. There are too many kids that fight, have guns and drugs. A lot of them come from black families that are into that kind of thing. I don't want to sound like I am against all blacks, but they are a big part of the problem. The schools in Wicksville are a lot safer, cleaner, and have a lot nicer kids.

Another mother, Wendy Jessman, also reluctantly admitted that the types of kids at the school--in this case based on race--had affected her decision about where her children would attend school. Wendy and her three children lived in a predominantly black school district, although their neighborhood was mainly white. She described the situation this way: "I don't want my sons to be a minority and going to an all-black school and being the only white kids. I don't mind if they are mixed, but I want them mixed equally." Hence, the types of kids at the school, whether based on race or stereotypical attitudes about some families, was a factor in many of these parents' decisions to participate in school choice, according to the study findings.

Parents' decision to participate in school choice because they were moving out of the district and wanted their children to finish the school year in the former district was a major factor for a number of the families. In fact, next to the issue of safety, the second highest reason families gave for participating in choice centered on this issue (see Table 4.16). When given the statement "Families' personal needs or circumstances are a factor in their right to participate in a schools-of-choice program," 55% of the parents agreed with the statement and 50% agreed that the family's personal circumstances had been a factor in their decision to change schools. Most of the latter group were families who were moving to a new house.

For families like the Douglases, the "moving" issue was not only the primary factor in deciding to enroll in a school choice program, it was the only factor. Susan Douglas expressed it this way:

> We just didn't want Russ to have to move during the year. We moved to our new house in Henderson in March. It didn't make sense to pull him out, so we kept him at Haviland [elementary school] under the school choice option, and then we drove him every day. Before this, I really didn't know what school choice was and, truthfully, I didn't really care.

As shown in Table 4.15, 7 of the 20 families had decided to change schools because they were moving to a new house in a different district. This was a major family or personal need circumstance that factored into the decision to participate in a school choice program.

The families' religious beliefs or concerns with costs of private school tuition were other family/personal needs issues affecting the choice process. In the case of the Palmers, the family's concern with religion was a key reason for their decision to participate in school choice. Their daughter, Angela, had attended a local Catholic grade school for kindergarten and first grade. Melissa Palmer explained:

> There were really two main reasons [to enroll under choice]. First, and most important, we are not Catholic. We looked at other private schools like Redmond and Eastbrooke, but the tuition was terribly high. We knew we were not going to send Angela to the Parkwood schools, but we were not sure we wanted to have her stay at a Catholic school beyond kindergarten or first grade. We knew that as she would get into the older grades there would be more emphasis placed on being a Catholic, learning about Mass, communion, confession, and we knew we would have to change schools for her. And the second reason is, we just don't like the Parkwood schools. You must know that their schools are not good at all. And it's not safe there for kids. It's scary, but true.

The Palmers' decision to choose was, indeed, a personal family decision. Although they did not want their child to be in the Parkwood schools for both school quality

and safety reasons, the other major factor in their decision to move centered on their religious beliefs, clearly a family/personal needs issue.

There was a high level of parental agreement with the statement that "The school needs to reflect and support the values of my family and beliefs that we hold important." Seventy percent of the families agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. In 55% of those cases, parents said the need for common family values had indeed been a factor in their decision to relocate to another school. Although the researcher was not surprised that parents agreed with the shared-values concept, the fact that 55% of the families also identified it as a factor in their decision to change schools was significant.

In summary, family circumstances and personal needs often played a significant role in the families' decisions to change schools under a choice plan. As the totals in Table 4.22 indicate, there was strong philosophical agreement (more than 70%) with the statements in this area. Also important was the fact that nearly 60% of the parents believed that their family circumstances or family/personal needs had influenced their decision to participate in school choice. This was second only to the issue of school quality/characteristics.

Research Question 6

Which of the four issues surrounding choice (free will, educational reform, school quality/characteristics, and family/personal needs) dominated the parents' decision to choose nonresidential schools for their children?

The comparison totals for the four areas of discussion regarding school choice are shown in Table 4.23. As pointed out in the preceding sections and

Table 4.23: Comparison of totals for statements, by issue.

	PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION					ACTION DIMENSION				
FREE WILL STATEMENTS	**AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE**					**FACTOR IN DECISION**				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Total Frequency	8	30	17	5	0	2	16	20	16	6
Average Percent	13	50	28	8	0	3	27	33	27	10
EDUCATIONAL REFORM STATEMENTS	**AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE**					**FACTOR IN DECISION**				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Total Frequency	0	8	32	14	6	0	4	14	25	17
Average Percent	0	13	53	23	10	0	7	23	42	28
SCHOOL QUALITY/ CHARACTERISTICS STATEMENTS	**AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE**					**FACTOR IN DECISION**				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Total Frequency	23	35	2	0	0	17	18	14	11	0
Average Percent	38	58	3	0	0	28	30	23	18	0
FAMILY/PERSONAL NEEDS STATEMENTS	**AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE**					**FACTOR IN DECISION**				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Total Frequency	8	36	16	0	0	13	22	18	7	0
Average Percent	13	60	27	0	0	22	37	30	12	0

KEY:

AGREE ⟨---⟩ DISAGREE	FACTOR IN DECISION
1 = Strongly Agree	1 = A Strong Factor
2 = Agree	2 = A Possible Factor
3 = Not Sure	3 = Not Sure
4 = Disagree	4 = Not Likely a Factor
5 = Strongly Disagree	5 = Definitely Not a Factor

summarized in this table, parents tended to agree philosophically with the statements regarding schools and/or schools of choice. Nearly all of the statements dealing with free will, school quality/characteristics, and family/personal needs received support from parents (nearly 78%). Only the statements that focused on educational reform garnered little philosophical support (13% of parents cited agreement or strong agreement).

When parents were asked whether these issues had been a factor in their decision to change schools under a choice program, the school quality/ characteristics area and the family/personal needs area had the highest affirmative responses, and often they had a high degree of overlap. In other words, parents often cited the school safety issue--an issue of school quality--while also expressing concern about the types of kids with whom their children might be attending school. The types of kids their children might hang out with or be influenced by is a family value issue. The two areas were often cited as key factors in parents' decision to change schools.

There was a much stronger correlation between the philosophical dimension and the action dimension in the school quality/characteristics area and the family/personal needs area than in other areas. Conversely, parents indicated that neither the free will area nor the educational reform area had played a major role in causing them to seek out a new school for their children. For parents, the decision to participate in school choice was not anchored in complex issues such as free will or educational reform but, rather, the issues having a more immediate effect on their

children. In other words, parents were taking action (i.e., changing schools through school choice), based on what they thought was best for their children.

In summary, the findings indicated that, of the four areas being studied, two dominated the parents' decision to participate in school choice--the school quality/ characteristics and family/personal needs issues. The school quality/characteristics were philosophically important to all of the parents in the study. Ninety-six percent of them believed strongly in school quality issues, such as the need for good and caring teachers, good discipline, and safe schools. Nearly 60% of the parents also indicated that those issues had been factors in their decision to change schools or enroll their children in nonresidential schools under a choice plan. The school quality/characteristics area was the top "issue area" for parents when factored into their school choice decision.

Following closely behind was the decision to "choose" to participate in school choice in response to a family/personal need. Leading this area was parents' decision to enroll their children in the nonresidential district to avoid having to take them out of school midyear following a move. It was these responses to family/personal needs that made this issue area a close second to the school quality/characteristics issue as a factor affecting their decision to participate in school choice. These two areas surpassed in importance issues such as educational reform or those involved in free will. Although parents often philosophically agreed with the free will issues such as consumer sovereignty or equal opportunity, the data did not indicate that families "acted" by enrolling their children under a choice plan based on this issue. Even less of a factor were the

educational reform issues such as improving student outcomes or putting bad schools out of business. Parents wanted what was best for their children, **now**. The rather distant issues or motivations associated with the educational reform discussion, as well as the free will arguments, did not appear to be immediate or "real" enough to the families who were choosing and, as a result, were identified as less important factors in their decision to participate in schools of choice.

Research Question 7

Do the data suggest other issues or agendas not previously presented? If so, what are they?

The results of this study did not suggest any other major issues or agendas that one might argue contributed significantly to the school choice discussion. All of the reasons given for participating in school choice (see Table 4.14) and the responses given by parents varied across the four agendas cited in the previous section. The school quality/characteristics issues and the family/personal needs issues tended to dominate, but there was some support for the free will and educational reform areas. However, none of the reasons parents gave for participating in school choice, or the explanations and discussions they provided, tended to stray outside of these four areas. Certainly there was a great deal of overlap. For example, some families felt strongly about the free will issue, while in the very next statement they emphasized that their **primary reason** for moving had been associated with some quality or characteristic associated with the school. Although there was much overlap and combination of factors, there did not appear

to be any evidence to suggest that there were additional platforms or agendas to be considered.

Research Question 8

What are the overall opinions of parents concerning the school choice option in Michigan?

As part of this study, the researcher asked parents their opinions regarding the school choice program currently in effect in Michigan. Parents also were asked to identify the barriers or difficulties they faced in making their decision and to provide suggestions for how the program might be improved.

Opinions Regarding School Choice

Overall, parents indicated a high degree of support for the school choice program. Table 4.24 contains summary data in this area. As shown in column 1 of the table, when parents were asked whether they would decide again to participate in school choice, 100% of them indicated they would do so. In fact, most of them made very strong affirmative responses to this question. For example, not only did Mrs. Brennahan, the grandparent of three children, respond affirmatively, she went on to say how important it was to her and her family. When asked whether, given the same circumstances, she would again decide to enroll her grandchildren under a choice plan, Grandmother Brennahan responded,

> Absolutely! I feel it [the school choice option for parents] is great. I never did understand why, when we live in Wicksville, I have to pay taxes to the Parkwood schools and send my grandchildren there. That has baffled me since I found out that my grandchildren had to go to the Parkwood schools. That stuck in my craw.

Table 4.24: Families' reflections regarding the decision to participate in school choice.

Family	Would you make the same decision again if you had the chance?	Were there any barriers that made it difficult to make the decision to participate in school choice?	If there were barriers, what were they?	If there were no public school choice, where would your child have attended school?
Arnett	Yes	No		Private/parochial school
Bowman	Yes	No		Residential/public school
Brennahan	Yes	Yes	Transportation/lack of information	Send to live with a relative or (public)
Budson	Yes	No		Moved to new district or private/parochial school
Denby	Yes	Yes	Transportation	Moved to new district or private/parochial school
Douglas	Yes	Yes	Transportation	Residential/public school
Gables	Yes	No		Home school
Gunderson	Yes	Yes	Transportation, baby-sitting	Moved to new district or private/parochial school
Hecker	Yes	Yes	Transportation	(Public) or moved to new district
Janson	Yes	Yes	Work schedule, transportation	Residential/public school
Jessman	Yes	No		Private/parochial school or (public)
McDonald	Yes	Yes	Transportation	Private/parochial school

Table 4.24: Continued.

Family	Would you make the same decision again if you had the chance?	Were there any barriers that made it difficult to make the decision to participate in school choice?	If there were barriers, what were they?	If there were no public school choice, where would your child have attended school?
Meldman	Yes	No		Send to live with a relative or don't know/ dropped out of school
Naguchi	Yes	No		Residential/public school
Nunnally	Yes	Yes	Distance for traveling by car--son did own driving	Residential/public school
Palmer	Yes	No		Private/parochial school
Prince	Yes	Yes	Transportation, baby-sitter	Private/parochial school
Ramirez	Yes	Yes	Transportation	Home school
Rogers	Yes	Yes	Lack of information/lost paperwork	(Public) or moved to new district
Walter	Yes	No		Moved to new district or private/parochial school

The Budsons also responded with strong sentiment. When asked whether they would decide again to enroll their son under a choice plan, Kimberly Budson responded, "You bet! Absolutely! No way was Jason going to go back to the Parkwood schools." At that point, Kimberly reiterated some of her unpleasant experiences with her local, residential district. Other parents, like Brenda Hecker, echoed the same sentiments. When asked whether she would make the same decision to enroll her daughter under a school choice plan, Brenda responded:

> Absolutely! There is no doubt in our minds that it was a good decision, even though it was a little inconvenient moving while Kristin was still involved in volleyball, and still involved as a cheerleader. I would worry sometimes at night when she would have to drive home from a late-night game and so on, but like I said, she is such a responsible person, sometimes she would bring a friend with her and they would drive back together and then drive in to school the next morning. There were a lot of things we did to try to make it a little easier. There is no doubt in our minds that it was the right decision to make at the time.

Table 4.25 contains a rank ordering of the parents' opinions regarding the school choice program. Seventy-five percent of the parents made statements indicating they were very supportive of the school choice program and glad that choice was an option for their family. Forty percent of the parents believed that all public schools should be open under a choice program; in other words, all schools should be providing a choice plan for all students.

In surveying the parents in this study, there was no doubt that the choice plan was warmly received and, in some cases, had turned out to be, as one parent put it, "an answer to [their] prayers." When asked whether she had any final comments regarding schools of choice, perhaps Rebecca McDonald summarized it best:

> I am glad we did it. We would have done anything to keep the kids out of Parkwood [her neighborhood school]. It's not prejudice or racism; just read the newspaper and look at what walks through the school, the speech, the dress, the attitude, the weapons, the drugs. I don't want that living with me. It is not as visible in Wicksville because they control it.

Her husband added:

> The problem in Parkwood is that more people get away with it. Sixty percent of the student body is involved in some sort of gang. Even if it doesn't happen to my kids, they are witnessing this. This is not what I want them to learn about civilized humanity.

Table 4.25: Rank ordering of parents' opinions regarding the school choice program.

Opinion About School Choice	Frequency	Percent
Very supportive and glad choice was an option for their family	15	75
Believe all public schools should be open under a choice plan	8	40
Good program, but it needs to be improved, more open	3	15
Not a true "choice plan" because some families will never be able to choose due to barriers, i.e., lack of transportation, lack of proper child care, etc.	2	10
Should add private/parochial schools	1	5
Glad it was available, saved tuition	1	5
Helps with equity/equal opportunity	1	5
Will force poor-quality districts to improve	1	5
Good, but need to be more accommodating to nonresident families	1	5
No opinion	1	5

Barriers Parents Faced in Deciding to Send Their Children to Nonresidential Schools

Next, parents were asked to identify any barriers they had faced in deciding to send their children to nonresidential schools and then to provide suggestions for how the program might be improved. Responses regarding barriers for parents are summarized in Table 4.26.

Table 4.26: Barriers to parents' sending their children to nonresidential schools.

Barrier	Frequency	Percent
No barrier	9	45
Transportation	9	45
Lack of good information	2	10
Baby-sitting arrangements	2	10
Work schedule	1	5
Distance to drive	1	5

Nine of the families (45%) indicated that they had faced no real barriers in deciding to participate in school choice. On the other hand, nine other families (45%) responded that the greatest barrier they had faced was the lack of transportation provided by the schools. Raquel Ramirez, whose husband did not drive and who, herself, had to travel to a neighboring town 35 miles away to work, described it this way:

> Transportation is really hard. We have to get up at 5:00 a.m. Lucy [her daughter] has to be ready by 5:30. When it is snowing, she has to get up even earlier. It takes me 10 minutes or more when it is snowing. In the summer, it just takes me a few minutes. It's hard because I have to go from Parkwood to Wicksville, then back to Parkwood; then from Parkwood to Lake Oslow to work [referring to her factory job]. Then I have to come back to pick

> my daughter up, then go back to Lake Oslow to work. My work lets me do it because usually a person can make 400 [referring to her quota] in a day, and I can make nearly 1,000. It's hard. It's really hard. But I'm not going to complain. At least Lucy is in a safe school now, one that I know I can trust.

Mrs. Brennahan, the grandparent in the study, also talked about transportation as being a barrier:

> The transportation issue is very frustrating. In 1992 I had a heart attack. I also have a blood clot that is still there. It was kind of hectic for me until I got into a routine. On snowy days, I was afraid to go out. It would have been better if they had transportation. It takes about ten minutes to get to the schools. If they went to the Parkwood schools, they would be picked up. I didn't have to transport Tessie, but now that they are in the Wicksville schools we have to provide transportation. It wouldn't be so bad if they would provide the transportation. They would only have to pick her up across the railroad tracks. They won't do that.

When speaking to all of the parents, it was clear to the researcher that even though they had, indeed, encountered some barriers, none of them said they would change their minds regarding their decision to participate in school choice. As shown in Table 4.23, all of the parents indicated they would make the same decision again if given the chance. Although some families faced certain challenges, none of these challenges or barriers had changed their minds regarding their decision to participate in a choice plan.

Parents' Opinions About How to Improve Michigan's School Choice Program

The final area of questioning concerned parents' opinions about how to improve Michigan's school choice program. Parents were asked to provide suggestions about how the program could be improved. As the results in Table 4.27 indicate, the most frequently mentioned responses all focused on expanding the

program to open it up to all families, with the option to attend any public school. Three of the top four suggestions dealt with expanding the school choice program. The top response was to open the school choice program to all families in the state. The second highest response was to require all schools to offer a choice plan. The fourth highest response was to let every family choose, based on which school could best provide for their child. The other suggestions varied from providing better information about schools of choice to providing busing or transportation; as indicated earlier, transportation was the greatest barrier faced by most families.

Table 4.27: Families' suggestions on how to improve the school choice program in Michigan.

Suggestion	Frequency	Percent
Open school choice program to all families in state	7	35
Make all schools open; make them offer choice plan	6	30
Provide busing or some form of transportation	6	30
Let every family choose based on what school can best provide for their child	5	25
Provide better/more information about school choice to all families	4	20
No suggestions offered	3	15
More time to enroll in program	2	10
Allow private/parochial schools as choice option	1	5
Don't split up families; allow all in, and place them in the same school if possible	1	5

Another line of questioning, which was intended to confirm parents' resolve regarding school choice, dealt with parents' schooling options should schools of choice not be available. Specifically, parents were asked where their children would

have attended school if there had been no school choice program. Responses are shown in Table 4.28. Of the 20 families in the study, at least nine indicated that they would have sent their children to either private or parochial schools rather than enroll them in their residential public schools. Most indicated that such an option would be expensive, but they were prepared to take that action rather than send their children to the local residential school. Rebecca McDonald voiced perhaps the strongest opinion about their decision if there had been no school choice program:

> The children would all be in a parochial school. The truth of the matter is we were not going to send them to Parkwood at any cost because we wanted to know our kids were going to come home from school. I am virtually terrified of the [Parkwood] school district. A lot of things happen. A lot of kids are brought up . . . just like the Parkwood police said . . . 11 to 13 year olds having no respect for life, no moral structure whatsoever. We were spending $26,000 a year to keep them out of the Parkwood schools. If we had to, we would do it again.

Table 4.28: If there were no school choice, where would your child have attended school?

Choice	Number	Percent
Private/parochial school	9	45
Moved to a new district	6	30
Residential district	5	25
Lied about residency	3	15
Home school	2	10
Don't know	2	10
Would have dropped out of school	1	5

Note: Nine families gave more than one response; for example, four families indicated they would either "move" or consider "private/parochial" schooling.

Thirty percent of the parents said they would simply move to another district if there were no school choice program. Five families said they would either send their children to a parochial school or they would relocate to another district if choice were not available as an option. This part of the research confirmed the strong feelings the parents had regarding the school choice issue. Their 100% support of school choice and their assertions that they would either move or incur the expense to enroll their children in private or parochial schools confirms these parents' convictions about this issue.

In summary, all of the parents indicated that, given the options available to them, they would again participate in a school choice plan. The few barriers that existed, mainly surrounding the issue of transportation, were not enough to dissuade parents from participating in school choice. The suggestions parents provided for improving the program tended to center on expanding the program, making it open to all families, and requiring all districts in the state to provide a choice program. In addition, parents believed that, if transportation were provided, other families would be more likely to enroll in choice programs.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The researcher's purpose in this study was to describe and explain parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education. More specifically, the researcher investigated the extent to which the issues of free will, educational reform, school quality/characteristics, and family/personal needs were reflected in parents' decision to participate in school choice. Also examined was the process by which parents made the decision to choose nonresidential schools for their children. Finally, the researcher studied how the decision to choose a nonresidential public school by families with high school students compared with the decision by families with elementary students.

This chapter contains answers to the eight research questions guiding the study. A summary of the patterns in the findings and conclusions are presented next. Implications for educators and policy makers are discussed, and recommendations for a related study are made. The writer's reflections and limitations of the study are set forth, followed by a closing commentary.

Answers to the Research Questions

Research Question 1

What are the characteristics of parents who elected to participate in school choice programs?

To answer this question, personal information on the 20 families was presented and analyzed. This information included the parents' marital status, the number of parents in the household, the parents' educational level, the families' race/ethnicity, and the family income level. The findings indicated that, for the most part, there was not a "typical" family involved in choice. The only exceptions were as follows:

1. Most of the families participating in choice (90%) were Caucasian.
2. Most of the families (80%) had little or no private or parochial school experience.
3. Approximately half (50%) of the families came from the Parkwood Schools.

Other than these characteristics, the data did not indicate a typical pattern of family data. For example, approximately half of the families were either single-parent households (a by-product of divorce) or two-parent households representing a second or third marriage. The other half of the households were two-parent, first-marriage households. The parents' educational levels varied; about half of the parents had a high school education, and the other half had a college degree or at least some college education. The household incomes of the households also varied, with a distribution of families across all income ranges.

In summary, there was no typical family in this study, other than the fact that they tended to be Caucasian. Because about 94% of the school district of choice in this study was Caucasian, it reflected the racial composition of the families participating in the study. In contrast, the marital status, income range, and educational levels of the participants varied.

Research Question 2

What is the process by which parents decided to choose nonresidential public schools for their children?

The study findings indicated that parents discovered the information regarding school choice in a variety of ways. Approximately one-third of the parents obtained that information from a newspaper article or an advertisement placed in the newspaper. Another third of the parents first heard about school choice from family members, friends, or neighbors. Another third received the information through contacts with their local schools. When focusing on the quality and type of information available to them, most families indicated they thought the schools did a good job of providing information. In general, obtaining that information, completing the application form and having it processed, and enrolling in a school choice program took from two to six weeks.

Regarding the decision-making process itself, there were differences in how the decision was made and who was involved in the decision, depending on whether the children were in elementary school or high school. The high schoolers played a far greater role in both exploring options and making the decision to participate in school choice than did their elementary school counterparts. In only two of the

elementary cases were students involved in the decision. The final decision about whether to participate in school choice almost always rested with the parents, although six of the families indicated that they thought their high schoolers needed to be central to the decision process. Only two of the families thought that, ultimately, it was a decision the students could make on their own.

In summary, families relied on three main sources of information to assist them in making decisions related to school choice: the media, friends and family members, and the schools. The receiving school ended up being the most important source of additional information once families started seeking out more details on choice. Believing that the schools generally provided adequate information, parents indicated that enrollment in a school choice program generally lasted from two to six weeks. Finally, parents of high-school-age students were far more inclined to include these students in the search and decision process, although in nearly every case the parents made the final decision to change their children's schools.

Research Question 3

> How were the issues of dissatisfaction with the sending (residential) school and/or the attraction of the receiving (nonresidential) school reflected in the parents' decision to choose?

In summarizing the major findings for this question, a number of points became evident:

1. When parents were asked to describe "a good school," three of the top four responses dealt with safety issues and good discipline. The remaining top response was a desire to see a "caring and effective teaching staff." The responses

in this section helped the researcher understand the mind-set of the parents participating in this study. Although in studies by Cogan (1979), Elam (1990), and others parents made school choices based almost entirely on school quality issues, the data in this study differed. Although quality of school and staff was the top response, the three closest follow-up responses all concerned issues related to safety and discipline.

2. When grading their own residential schools, most parents gave the schools low marks (D's and E's), often describing the unsafe conditions, lack of discipline, and types of kids/families (suggesting most do not care) as reasons for the poor ratings. The low marks parents assigned to their residential schools reinforced and helped explain the descriptors parents used when describing a good school. Some of the characteristics they used to describe a good school were ones they thought did not exist in their residential schools.

3. When describing the nonresidential schools, parents gave them much higher marks (generally A's and B's), citing good teachers and positive school climate as major factors. Parents' positive assessments of the new nonresidential school setting supported the research suggesting that parents were happier with their school of choice than with their former school. Raywid (1989) pointed out that benefits of choice are a higher level of parental satisfaction, less discontent over issues involving their children's schooling, and an increase in their support for public schools. That certainly was evident when analyzing the results from this study.

In this study, parents placed a high degree of emphasis on safety/discipline issues when rating their new schools. Once the issue of safety had been resolved

in their minds, parents focused on school quality issues that more directly related to classroom teaching, curriculum, and technology. Analysis and follow-up discussion with parents on this issue indicated that once parents thought the basic-need issue had been resolved, such as assurance from the school that their children would be safe and free from negative factors like drugs and/or weapons, they could shift their attention to the children's "education."

4. Most of the very low marks (D's and E's) given by parents to their residential schools were from families who lived in the same school district. This finding was not surprising, in light of parents' earlier assessments of that district.

5. When parents identified their reasons for changing schools under a choice plan; the primary reason was that they believed their residential district was unsafe (Table 4.14). The next two highest responses dealt with concerns about the quality of the district and/or its families and kids. Previous research in this area has had varied results; safety issues were important in some studies, whereas they were hardly mentioned in others. For example, Cogan (1979) found that parents who actively searched for school alternatives reported the top four reasons to be curriculum, school atmosphere, quality of teachers, and the principal's attitude. Further down the list came items such as "safety in the school" and "discipline." Also, in a national survey of 1,500 parents, Elam (1990) reported that respondents considered, in rank order, the following to be key factors when choosing a school: (a) quality of the teaching staff, (b) maintenance of student discipline, (c) curriculum (i.e., the courses offered), and (d) size of classes. Although good discipline was an important factor, it did not dominate the list of concerns. When examining the

decision process of parents changing their children's schools, Uchitelle and Nault (1977) found that the top concerns were (a) classroom atmosphere, (b) the principal's philosophy, and (c) the teacher's style and reputation. Although discipline was identified as a factor in at least one of the studies, this and other safety-related descriptors were not dominant concerns.

6. Forty percent of the families used school choice as a means of allowing their children to finish the school year at the old school rather than relocating the children due to a family move. This family/personal needs issue was not anticipated and was found to be a major reason for parents' decision to participate in school choice plans.

7. Finally, the data indicated that, other than the issue of moving midyear, families participating in choice tended to do so to "escape" a poor district (often described as unsafe) rather than to move their children from an average or good district to a better one. The strong concerns parents had about their residential district—dissatisfaction with the district's ability to provide a safe environment and/or a high-quality school experience—was the factor that motivated most families to participate in school choice plans.

In summary, none of the parents indicated that the primary reason they had decided to participate in choice was that Wicksville (the district of choice) was a superior district that "attracted" them. Wicksville was, however, seen as a safe school district with good teachers and programs. The families leaving another district to enroll in Wicksville did so because of their dissatisfaction and/or concerns with their local schools rather than the attraction of what Wicksville had to offer. This

is not to say that families did not like much of what Wicksville provided (which was mainly a safe, orderly environment); however, it was clear from the interview data that, had the residential schools provided a safe environment, nearly all of the families would have elected to remain in their residential district.

Research Question 4

> How do the decisions to choose nonresidential public schools by parents with high school students compare with those decisions by parents with elementary students?

Although there were some common issues that influenced both parents of elementary students and those of high school students to participate in school choice, there were also some differences. Not surprisingly, one common issue was the school's ability to ensure that the children would have a safe and protected school environment. Parents of students in both age groups said that their children's safety and the school's ability to ensure a safe environment were very important.

Specifically, parents of elementary school children cited three main reasons for participating in choice. These three reasons, cited by nearly two-thirds of the families, were (a) residential district unsafe (82%), (b) overall poor quality of residential district (82%), and (c) quality of families/kids, i.e., gangs and so on (64%). Once parents thought the safety issue had been addressed, they focused their attention on school quality/characteristics. Especially important to them were issues such as "good and caring teachers" and "good curriculum and technology."

Compared to the findings of Uchitelle and Nault (1977), these results are mixed. Those researchers found that parents of primary-grade children (especially those in kindergarten and first grade) cited classroom atmosphere, the principal's philosophy, and the teacher's style and reputation as primary reasons for participating in school choice programs. Although there was less emphasis on school safety, that might well be related to the general perception of the public in the 1970s, when schools' ability to provide a safe environment for students, especially in the lower grades, was not viewed as a serious problem (Uchitelle & Nault, 1977). The fact that today's parents of elementary school children listed their concern for safety as one of the main reasons for participating in school choice appears to indicate a shift in parents' perceptions regarding school safety. Perhaps this is a local issue, though.

Some of the reasons parents of secondary students gave for participating in school choice were similar to those given by parents of elementary students. However, the secondary parents had a different number-one reason; it related to the families' decision to move to a new home. Fifty percent of the families of high schoolers indicated that they were using school choice as a means of keeping their children in the Wicksville schools so as not to uproot them during the school year. That is not a school quality issue, but rather a matter of convenience. The second highest response given by parents of high schoolers dealt with the safety issue and concern that the residential school had a problem with weapons, drugs, fights, and/or gangs. In this study, 40% of the families (such as the Heckers, Jansons, Nunnallys, and Rogerses) cited this reason as a factor in their decision to move their

children from the residential schools. Recent studies regarding factors in secondary school choice have indicated that safety is increasingly cited as a reason for selecting a nonresidential school. That was especially true in studies in which parents selected private or parochial schools (Bauch & Small, 1986). However, using choice simply to avoid making a child change schools midyear because the family is moving appears to be a more recent phenomenon.

In summary, parents of both elementary and secondary students cited the lack of a safe school environment in the residential school as a major reason for changing schools. Although that might have been a local issue, because many of these families had left the same district (the Parkwood schools), it was nonetheless a major factor. However, whereas the parents of elementary pupils then focused on school quality issues such as wanting good teachers or better school programs, the parents of high schoolers focused more on convenience issues or those related to their children's extracurricular activities. The convenience issue often related to not wanting to disrupt the children's schooling midyear due to a family move. Parents wanted to let the children finish the school year with friends or in the school in which they had started the year. Some parents also wanted their children to be able to continue participating in an extracurricular activity or sport (i.e., the Bowmans, Rivards, and others).

Research Question 5

> To what extent are the issues of free will, educational reform, school quality/characteristics, and family/personal needs reflected in parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children?

The findings indicated that the issues of free will, school quality/ characteristics, and family/personal needs all were important in parents' philosophical approach to participating in school choice. More than 70% of the parents involved in this study agreed or strongly agreed with these issues as they reflected on schools and school choice. However, although the respondents tended to value these issues philosophically, the issues were not always motivating factors in parents' decisions actually to participate in school choice. The findings indicated that what motivated parents to participate in school choice were issues of school quality (such as the school's ability to provide quality teachers in a safe environment) and the need to respond to a family or personal issue. Free will issues such as equal opportunity or one's inherent right as a citizen to choose simply did not impel parents to participate in school choice. The quality of a school and/or family/personal needs tended to be the motivating forces in parents' decision to change the schools their children attended.

Only one issue area, educational reform, did not elicit parents' strong concern or philosophical agreement. Parents did not readily relate to, or identify with, the educational reform issues included in this study. The suggestion that school choice would lead to better schools, improved student learning, and/or greater overall parental involvement (school reform issues) was not something the vast majority of parents in this study either thought of or cared about. In addition, it certainly was not a factor in their decision to participate in school choice.

In summary, the issue of free will was one that parents agreed with and valued philosophically. However, the vast majority of respondents admitted that it

tended not to be a factor in their decision to participate in school choice. Educational reform topics were neither strongly considered philosophically nor factors in parents' school choice decision. As one parent put it when commenting on an educational reform issue, "How's that [referring to an educational reform issue] going to keep my daughter safe?"

The two issues that parents both agreed with philosophically and believed were important to them when deciding to choose a new school were school quality/ characteristics and family/personal needs. The majority of parents (approximately 60%) cited these areas as the motivating factors in their decision to participate in school choice.

Research Question 6

> Which of the four issues surrounding choice (free will, educational reform, school quality/characteristics, and family/personal needs) dominated the parents' decision to choose nonresidential schools for their children?

The findings indicated that, of the four areas being studied, two dominated parents' decision to participate in school choice. School quality/characteristics were philosophically important to almost all of the parents in the study. Ninety-six percent of them believed strongly in school quality issues such as the need for good and caring teachers, good discipline, and safe schools. In addition, nearly 60% of the parents indicated that these issues had been factors in their decision to change schools or enroll their children in nonresidential schools under a choice plan. School quality/characteristics was the top issue area for parents, both in how they looked

at schools philosophically and in leading them to the "action" of participating in school choice.

Following closely behind was the decision to participate in school choice in response to a family/personal need. Leading this area was parents' decision to enroll their children in the nonresidential district to avoid having to take the students out of school midyear following a family move. It was these responses concerning family/personal needs that made this issue area as close second to the school quality/characteristics issue as a factor influencing parents' decision to participate in school choice. These two areas took precedence over such issues as educational reform or free will. Although parents often agreed philosophically with the free will issues such as consumer sovereignty and equal opportunity, the data did not indicate that parents "acted" by enrolling their children under a choice plan based on free will issues. Even less of a factor in parents' decision were educational reform issues such as improving student outcomes or putting bad schools out of business. Parents wanted what is best for their children, **now**. The rather distant issues or motivations associated with the educational reform discussion, and those involved in the free will arguments, did not appear to be immediate or real enough to the families who were choosing.

Research Question 7

> Do the data suggest other issues or agendas not previously presented? If so, what are they?

The findings did not indicate other issues or agendas that seemed to have driven parents to participate in school choice. All of the reasons parents in this study

gave for enrolling their children in nonresidential schools fell within the four issues outlined in the study (see Table 4.14). This finding is not inconsistent with results from other studies on choice. Parental decisions regarding the choice of a school are not idiosyncratic (Uchitelle & Nault, 1977) and involve many factors, which would suggest a process rather than an event (Bridges & Blackman, 1978). In fact, Bridges and Blackman found that school choice decisions involved the parents' educational values, individual needs of their children, their beliefs about how children are motivated to learn, and a desire to become part of a school community of like-minded parents and teachers—the shared-value concept. All of this suggests, as the data in this study seemed to corroborate that there is a great deal of overlap of the four issue areas identified.

However, in a number of cases, the impetus causing parents to change schools was not so much the desire to "go to a high-quality school", as it was the desire to "escape" a poor-quality school. Nearly 50% of the parents indicated that school quality issues were major factors in their decision to participate in school choice. At the same time, parents admitted that they were also "getting out of" or "avoiding" a poor-quality school. In most of those cases, it was an issue of escaping from a district that they believed did not provide a safe environment for their children. Although this is technically a school quality issue, it was not an academic or a curricular program that was drawing parents to the nonresidential district, but rather a "condition" (lack of a safe environment for example) they wanted to avoid or escape in their residential district.

In summary, parents did not suggest any new issues or agendas when analyzing their decision to participate in school choice. When the data were examined concerning parents' reasons for participation in choice or issues motivating them to change schools under a choice plan, the reasons or issues all fell under the four constructs delineated in Chapter I.

Research Question 8

What are the overall opinions of parents concerning the school choice option in Michigan?

Overall, the parents in this study indicated a high degree of support for school choice. All of them said that, if given the option, they would repeat their initial decision to participate in a school choice program. In fact, even though a majority of the families cited at least one barrier or challenge to participating in choice, they all insisted they would still make the same decision.

Parents offered some suggestions for improving the program, many of which were connected to the personal barriers they identified. The strongest relationship between perceived barriers and suggestions for improvement was in the area of transportation. Two-thirds of the families who cited the lack of busing as a barrier suggested that addressing that problem would improve the school choice program in Michigan. The other major improvement suggested was to require all public schools in the state to open their doors with a school choice program. The current Michigan school choice guidelines allow local school districts to decide whether they will participate in the state school choice program by opening their schools to nonresident students. Requiring all districts to participate in a choice program and

allowing all families the option to choose were the two most frequently offered suggestions for improvement. The only other suggestion mentioned by more than two families was that the state and local districts need to provide better information about school choice options to all families.

In summary, parents' overall opinions about the school choice option in Michigan were very positive. They urged expanding the program and minimizing potential barriers to families, such as by providing busing or other transportation.

Major Patterns Found in the Findings

The findings presented in the previous section were presented in a format that answered the basic research questions that guided this study. The major patterns found in the findings are as follows:

1. Of the four construct areas presented in discussions regarding school choice (free will, educational reform, school quality/characteristics, and family/personal needs), it was the school quality/characteristics and the family/personal needs areas that were most often reflected in parents' decisions to participate in a school choice program. Although the parents tended to agree philosophically with issues such as consumer sovereignty and the right to choose as basic freedoms (free will arguments), in reality these "beliefs" were not the motivating issues for them as parents in changing schools. It was the school quality/characteristics issue such as the school's ability to provide a safe environment, high-quality teachers or the family/personal needs issues such as

avoiding moving their children midyear that drove parents to the "action" of actually changing schools under a choice plan.

2. Parents' decision to change schools was more often brought about by their dissatisfaction with or concerns about their residential schools than it was their attraction to the nonresidential (receiving) schools. Parents were not attempting to seek out and find schools with superior programs or greater curricular options for their children as much as they were simply trying to get away from their residential district schools, which they viewed as unacceptable.

3. A high percentage of families participating in school choice were doing so because they did not want to make their children change schools during the middle of the year/semester. It was not a quality-of-schools issue, but a response to parents' concern about disrupting their children's school experience midyear because they, as a family, were relocating. By enrolling their children in a school choice program, parents were able to keep the youngsters in the same school through the school year/semester.

4. Although parents often agreed with the philosophical arguments in support of school choice, many of those arguments alone were not major factors in motivating parents to enroll their children under a choice plan. The decision to participate in school choice generally was related to very real and personal issues directly pertaining to their children or their own family circumstances (concern for the safety of the child, the family's relocating midyear, and so on). Generally, the decision was related to what they saw as an issue of "What is best for my child right now?"

5. Among the quality and characteristic issues, the parents were more likely to change schools due to their concern over the school's inability to provide a safe school environment over other issues such as the quality of the teachers or curricular options available to their child. Although the issues are interconnected, parents' concern for their children's safety tended to be a more important factor in causing them to change schools than were other issues. When the decision to change schools did not focus on safety and discipline issues, parents of elementary-age children focused on school quality and value issues, such as wanting good teachers or children with similar values. Parents of high schoolers, on the other hand, focused on convenience issues or extra-curricular activities for their children.

6. Parents who chose to participate in a school choice program did not regret their decision. Not only did they believe the program was a good option for them and their children, they believed it should be expanded to include all public schools in Michigan.

Conclusions

Much of the early literature on school choice was anchored in the argument that school choice is an issue of free will; that all families should be free to choose the best of all educational options when deciding on the schools for their children. In addition, it was argued that school choice would be the vehicle needed to help reform a failing public school system (Nathan, 1989). By expanding the free-market approach through choice plans for parents and students, reform and improvement of public education would follow (Chubb & Moe, 1990). These two issues (free will

and educational reform) generally provided the basis for nearly all of the arguments in support of school choice. The findings of this study suggest that for the parents actually participating in school choice options there are additional issues that need to be considered.

The passage of Public Acts 338 and 339 in the mid-1990s authorized the establishment of public charter schools and other school choice options. These acts were intended to support and ensure that parents could freely choose the best schooling options for their children. Parents, it was believed, would be using school choice as a vehicle for seeking out and finding educational opportunities not otherwise available to their children. The freedom to choose argument would be realized and the impact of school choice would be to reform and improve all schools. That is what advocates of school choice believed, and used as arguments in support of the school choice debate. These goals were often described as being in the best interest of, not only individual parents, but also in the best interest of society in general. The larger public good was at stake. Failing schools would either reform and improve or go out of business while the principles of the free will issues upon which this country was founded would be elevated and reconfirmed (Chubb & Moe, 1990). However, as has been revealed in this study and summarized in the findings, those goals have not been the driving motivators to participate in school choice by those who choose—the parents. The findings of this study tend to show that, although parents may philosophically agree with free choice and reform issues, it is not the larger societal interest/right, but the private self-interest, that is often being met by those who are participating in school choice.

In practice, parents are often using school choice as a vehicle to escape or get away from situations or schools that they believe are not able to guarantee the safety of their children. Others are using the choice system as a matter of convenience or in response to their own personal/family circumstances, i.e. not moving their child midyear following their family's relocation to a home outside the district. While this study included an interviewed population that may be too small to generalize to the entire parent population who move their children under a choice plan, the findings do suggest that there are additional issues that need to be considered beyond the freedom to choose or school reform issues. The quality and characteristics of schools and the families' concern regarding their own personal/family circumstances appear to be key areas of concern for families involved in school choice. As such, those examining the issue of school choice need to view choice beyond the free will or educational reform issues. Although the philosophical arguments for choice as a principle of free will may well have merit, and the less abstract arguments for choice as a vehicle for educational reform are worthy of discussion, it is often the "quality/characteristics of schools" and the "personal and family needs" issues that offer the clearest meaning for the true choice advocate—the parent who "chooses".

Implications for Educators and Policy Makers

As a result of this study, the researcher recommends that educators, parents and policy makers consider the following:

1. There is a general belief or "hope" that if people have the freedom to choose, they will do the right thing. It supports the free will issue and the claim that choice supports a larger, public good. However, in this study, although the freedom goal is realized in that individual families are, indeed, allowed to exercise their free will by choosing, their choosing is satisfying what might be described as rather "selfish" interests. Parents are generally choosing an alternative school for their child for personal or self-interest reasons. People are not participating in school choice programs in response to, or in support of, what has been described as a larger societal goal, such as the improvement of education for all. The parents' decision to choose is a direct response to their desire to satisfy personal, self-interests or goals. Nearly every family in this study participated in a public school choice option to either escape from what they viewed as an "unsafe" school or they "chose" in order to avoid causing their child to have to change schools mid-year because of a family relocation. These are not "public good" issues, nor are they designed to lead to an improved educational system for all. This is not a criticism of their choosing or of the advocates claim that choice is a right of our citizenry. However, the suggestion that participation in a choice program is a response of the "people" to do the right thing as a reflection of a larger societal good such as improving all schools is difficult to support. This is particularly evident in light of nearly every family choosing, and admittedly doing so, based on their self-interest and private motivations.

2. Another issue that this study surfaced and an implication that educators might consider involves what might be described as a "tension" between

the "safety concerns" and the "instructional curricular concerns", both of which are quality and characteristic issues. Parents in this study were very concerned with the safety and welfare of their children while at school. Most parents did not select a nonresidential school based on instructional or curricular issues/needs, but instead to escape a school that they perceived to be unsafe. Schools chosen by parents under a schools of choice plan were generally viewed as safe, orderly places with good discipline. The implications for schools should be obvious. Most parents in this study indicated that if the residential schools had provided a safe, well-disciplined setting, they likely would not have opted to change schools under a school choice plan. While parents want, and certainly hope, for schools that offer high quality instruction and a variety of curricular options, it was more important that the schools be able to ensure that a safe, protected environment be provided. Once the safety issues are addressed, then, and only then, did the instructional and curricular issues become important or of greater concern to the parents/families.

3. And finally, writers and advocates for school choice have often claimed that school choice will lead to reform of education in general and improved educational experiences for all students; that a larger "public good" will have been satisfied. First, they argue that students participating in choice gain an improved education by attending schools which they view as being of higher quality or schools offering greater educational options. Second, these same proponents of choice add that those students who don't choose to change schools under a choice plan also benefit from choice because all schools will be forced to improve in quality/offerings or face going out of business (Chubb & Moe, 1990). In essence, the vision for

choice is that the educational experiences and options will improve for all students. As a result, all students will benefit from choice. There were, however, some recommendations from the parents in this study that, if addressed by the legislature or policy makers, might help this vision for choice be more fully realized.

First, parents suggested that the failure of schools to provide transportation for nonresident students enrolled under choice made it difficult and perhaps impossible for families to participate in school choice. A number of the parents suggested that the law be changed to require schools to provide transportation for all students including nonresident students enrolled under choice plans.

A second recommendation by parents was that the law be changed to "require" all schools to offer school choice plans for nonresident as well as resident students. The current law allows each local public school district to independently decide if they wish to open their doors to nonresident students. Parents in this study indicated that their choice options were limited to only a few neighboring schools offering choice plans. They believed that if all of the school districts in their area were "open" under a choice plan, all students, including their own, may have benefited. To change the law in these two areas, to eliminate these barriers (lack of transportation and the option by local schools to offer choice) would, according to many of the parents in this study, help lead to attainment of that overall vision for choice—an improved education for all children. That societal goal to improve education for all students, often championed by choice advocates, could then be realized. Will providing transportation to any student who chooses and requiring all schools to open their doors under choice legislation lead to an improved education

system? Will schools improve? Will parents feel more empowered and be more involved? Will the larger societal interests and goals be met? The findings in this study do not support these claims. In fact, the findings in this study tend to show that parents were less involved with their child's education after participating in school choice and, in many ways, felt less empowered. In addition, the parents not only were not convinced schools would improve, they admitted they were not sure if they even cared or thought about that aspect of choice. And finally, it needs to be pointed out that it was the personal, private interests that were being met by families choosing. Participation in a school choice option to avoid paying tuition to a private school, to escape a district not viewed to be safe, or to avoid having to cause the student to switch schools mid-year after the family relocated, etc., are responses to "personal or private interests." In the end, even if the barriers are removed and choice is, indeed, available to all, there is no guarantee the result would be improved schools/education for all students; no guarantee that families would be more involved in their child's education or feel a greater empowerment; and certainly, no guarantee that the greater societal good will have been met.

Recommendations for a Related Study

The researcher's purpose in this study was to describe and explain parents' decision to choose nonresidential public schools for their children's education. An appropriate and related study would be to interview families from the Parkwood schools who did not choose to participate in school choice. Such a study might yield some important findings. The Parkwood district has a reputation for having many

problems (concerns regarding safety, lack of proper materials/curriculum, poor teachers/administrators, and so on) that many families believe are not being addressed. In this study, the families who left the Parkwood schools made it clear that they were dissatisfied with the district and were prepared to leave at any cost. All of them said that, even when facing barriers such as lack of busing, additional day care costs, or inconvenient schedules, they believed they needed to leave the Parkwood schools, using the school choice process as the means to do so. Although the researcher did not interview or survey any families who had remained in the Parkwood system, it would be interesting to seek out those who did not choose and to listen to their stories. It may well go back to the free will issue and the question of whether there are families who, indeed, have the "liberty" to choose.

> Concerning liberty and the freedom to choose, Partridge (1973) wrote:
>
> > Many of the assertions frequently made about liberty in recent political thought assume that possession of the means or power to realize preferred objectives is part of what it means to be free. For example, the contention that men who suffer from poverty or have a low level of education cannot really be free, or that they cannot be as free as the well-to-do and the well educated, relies on the assumption that "to be free to do X" includes within its meaning "to be able," "to have the means," and "to have the power" to do X.

Partridge went on to make another related point by citing an often-quoted statement by Bertrand Russell (1940): "Freedom in general may be defined as the absence of obstacles to the realization of desire." The families in this study made it clear that they participated in choice and were prepared to go to great lengths to choose despite any barriers or obstacles they encountered. Do families who do not choose face similar, or perhaps different, obstacles? And if some families overcome those

obstacles, why cannot all families do so? Why can some surmount the hurdle whereas others cannot? Are they simply unaware of the alternatives available to them? There are some interesting stories yet to be heard on this issue, and those stories could well form the basis of an important related study on school choice.

On a related front, one who reads this study may wonder to what extent a deeper prejudice might be at work for families involved in this study. Many of those who choose to attend the Wicksville schools under a choice plan left the Parkwood schools, a predominantly African-American district which was often described as "poor". When questioned regarding their reasons for leaving the Parkwood schools, most parents cited the concern for the "safety of their children" as the primary factor, suggesting that the Parkwood schools simply could not guarantee their child a safe, protected school environment. And although only three of the ten families leaving the Parkwood schools alluded to "race" as a related factor, the reader is left to wonder if race or other deeper prejudices might be at work for the other families as well. That issue was not directly addressed in this study. This researcher's sense, as the interviews were being conducted, was that it was genuinely a concern for "the safety of their children" that moved most parents to opt for choice. Although parents may blame some of that fear on the racial/ethnic make-up of the Parkwood school families, it would be inappropriate, and perhaps a mistake, to conclude that racial prejudice, alone, was the motivating factor causing the ten families to leave the Parkwood schools. This certainly could also be a related study. Not only could that study attempt to describe and explain to what extend some prejudicial attitudes might be at work for those choosing, but the study might also examine to what extent

those who don't choose do so because of any prejudicial attitudes they hold about a potential receiving district. There may be some interesting stories to be heard and described on that front that could well provide the framework for a relevant and related study.

Reflections

Having presented the major findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations, the researcher now shares the following reflections.

The researcher's main purpose in this study was to investigate the extent to which the issues of free will, educational reform, school quality/characteristics, and family/personal needs are reflected in parents' decision to participate in school choice. Although much has already been written in this dissertation about the data and findings regarding this aspect of the study, some additional reflections of the researcher on these topics follow.

All four of the constructs or issue areas (free will, educational reform, school quality/characteristics, and family/personal needs) remain and deserve to be considered when discussing school choice. When the researcher began to review the literature related to school choice, he found that much of it comprised the well-argued points of writers such as Joe Nathan, Mary Ann Raywid, J. Coons, John Chubb, and Terry Moe. These and other writers have eloquently and often persuasively presented their case in support of school choice and contributed to the discussion of what has become a developing educational issue. Much of their

writing focused on school choice as either an issue of free will or an issue of educational reform.

The Issue of Free Will

School choice often has been championed by those who support the individual-freedom doctrine incorporated into the United States Constitution (Smith, 1776/1952). Parents' right to chose what school their children attend and to do so under the banner of consumer sovereignty have long been compelling arguments among school choice advocates (Friedman, 1979). Those arguments were supported in principle by the parents involved in this study. Having the freedom to choose a nonresidential school was a valued right that they acknowledged they were fortunate to have as parents. In fact, every parent agreed philosophically with the interview survey statement that "School choice is an issue of freedom, a basic right that we as citizens and parents have a right to enjoy." They also supported the principle of consumer sovereignty, the right of parents to be consumers of education. As consumers, they as parents had the ultimate control and authority over the kind of education their children would receive through their decision to participate in school choice.

However, nearly every parent also admitted that these free will issues (the individual-freedom doctrine and the principle of consumer sovereignty) were, in truth, not major factors motivating them to change their children's schools. Their decision to participate in school choice, opting for a nonresidential school, was simply not motivated by their philosophical or political views or by their desire to champion

these causes. Did they value the right to choose? Yes. Would they participate in school choice if they felt a need to do so in the future? Yes. But was their decision to choose based on an ideological belief in their right to do so as consumers or people of free will? No. As Laurie Gables put it, "I certainly am glad we had a chance to choose a different school for our children, but if the truth were known, I never really thought about whether I had a right to choose as much as I was just thankful I could."

During the course of this study and following in-depth interviews with parents, it became evident that the families valued the chance they had to exercise their "right" to choose a new school for their children under a school choice plan. The reality is, however, that the parents viewed this "right" as being important to them when—and only when—they actually felt compelled to "choose" because of other motivating factors. For some families, the motivating factors included fear for their children's physical safety while at school or perhaps concern about the quality of the teachers or principal. For others, it was an issue of convenience or comfort; for example, not wanting to move one's child midyear following a family move. Whatever the reason, it was <u>not</u> the cause of freedom that led to their decision to choose. Although nearly every family interviewed, when asked to reflect on it, did agree with the concept of consumer sovereignty, not one could say that had been a factor in their decision to choose.

The same was true of the suggestion that choice helps provide equal educational opportunities for all students, another free will issue (Nathan, 1989). Other writers, such as Coons (1992) and his colleague Sugarman (Coons &

Sugarman, 1978), have argued extensively that school choice is a justice issue, that the option to choose helps ensure that all students will enjoy equal opportunities, and that all can, indeed, choose the school that best ensures those opportunities will be available. The findings in this study did not support the theory that choice enhances equity and educational opportunities for students. The respondents tended to be better educated than most in the state, and they also had annual incomes averaging nearly $45,000. Most of them readily admitted that if school choice had not been available, they still had, or would find, the means to get their children into another school of their choosing.

This researcher did not interview parents who "did not choose." That could well be considered a limitation of the study. After all, had those parents been part of the study (certainly that could be a separate study), the data might well have indicated that there are, indeed, many who would like to choose but simply do not have the resources or the confidence to do so. This is, after all, one of the fallacies of the free will argument, for if a family lacks the information, the resources, or perhaps the support necessary to participate in a school choice process, are they really free to do so? It may well go back to a basic argument regarding the concept of free will. If one lacks the means or power to achieve something, is that person really free to choose? One cannot truly be said to be free to choose some preferred alternative unless he or she has the means or the power to achieve it (Partridge, 1973).

The families in this study "chose" and believed they had the means to choose even if there were no school choice program. That cannot be said of others who, if

given the means, might well opt to choose. The fact that only those who had actually participated in school choice were informants in this study limits the findings to a select group.

The Issue of Educational Reform

The second area of discussion regarding school choice is the suggestion that public schools are failing and in need of reform. Advocates for choice have argued that school choice is a vehicle for reform of a failing school system (Nathan, 1989). School choice, according to those advocates, provides a number of reform benefits, including revitalized schools, empowered parents, and reform of education through a free-market system (Paulu, 1989). For example, Murnane (1984) and Bauch (1992) suggested that there will be increased motivation and performance/ involvement by all participants of choice. Students, they claimed, will be more motivated to engage in learning and parents will be more motivated to engage in school-related activities because they chose the school, all of which will help in the revitalization of schools. Yet the results of this study did not provide evidence to support that assertion. Parents indicated that they had more confidence and trust in the schools they chose, but admitted that they made little, if any, extra effort to engage in school activities or decisions. If anything, parents suggested that they saw less need to get involved because most of them (those leaving the Parkwood schools) thought it was no longer as necessary for them to be involved to ensure the safety of their children, the primary reason for their school involvement before

participating in choice. As a result, they tended not to be as active as they had been in the residential schools.

When asked whether they thought schools had been reformed or in any way been revitalized as a result of choice, nearly every parent responded in the negative. One, Doug McDonald, said he hoped that school choice would cause poor schools to get better or face going out of business. But he followed that statement with the assessment that he thought nothing would really change. That was the general belief of other parents, as well.

Likewise, parents offered no evidence or comments to suggest that schools would be reformed through a competitive, free-market system. When asked about such a possibility, they indicated it was almost too abstract or complicated an issue for them to address. Reforming poor schools was something they neither thought about nor believed they would accomplish through their decision to choose. Advocates such as Nathan (1989) and Chubb and Moe (1990) have rigorously claimed that the competitive, free-market system supported through school choice will, indeed, help to reform schools. Parents in this study simply were not convinced of that occurring and generally had not given it much thought. In fairness, it should be pointed out that this researcher did not examine the rise or fall of schools. Rather, he focused on parents' decision and perspective relative to the school choice plan available to them. Nor did the researcher investigate the short- or long-term effect on schools when parents choose to leave their residential schools under a choice plan. That might well be an important, related topic for future research.

The Issue of School Quality/Characteristics

The third area of discussion surrounding school choice that was examined in this study was school quality/characteristics. The literature indicated that the vast majority of parents of school-age children are generally happy with the local schools their children attend (Carnegie Foundation, 1992). For those participating in school choice plans, choice provided a means of gaining access to better quality education (Glenn, 1989a). For researchers studying the issue of school choice, parents' decision to choose to leave their residential school appears to be the natural reaction to dissatisfaction (Seeley, 1985). Seeley reasons that choice will continue to receive more attention in the public forum because there is increasing dissatisfaction with the public schools. Coons and Sugarman (1978) suggested that it is common for Americans to search for alternatives to institutions with which they are dissatisfied, especially public education. The quality and characteristics of the schools did, indeed, turn out to be an important issue to the families in this study. Nearly all of them agreed philosophically with the belief that it was important that their children's schools be of high quality; this included, among other things, having good personnel, good facilities, good curriculum and materials, and perhaps most important, being a safe and positive place for their children. These requirements were consistent with those cited in other studies, in which parents frequently cited academics, discipline, and teacher qualities as characteristics associated with good schools (Williams, 1983).

This researcher expected that many, if not all, of the families would describe their decision to participate in choice as a desire to seek out better programs or

greater options for their children. In other words, choice would provide them the means to seek out the best schools with the best teachers, the latest technology, the smallest class sizes, the best special education services, or the greatest range of extracurricular offerings. Yet the interviews with parents and the data collected yielded little such evidence. Certainly, a few parents commented that they were pleased with the teachers (the Arnetts and Ramirezes) and others said the principal and staff were "caring." But in nearly every case in which the family participated in school choice in order to leave their residential school, it was not because the Wicksville schools (the schools of choice in this study) **attracted** them as much as it was the powerful need they felt to **escape or avoid** their residential schools. For many of these families, the decision to choose a new school was driven by unhappiness, fear, or **dissatisfaction** with their residential school rather than by the **attraction** or desire to find something better for their children. Dissatisfaction was a far greater motivator for parents to participate in choice than this researcher could have predicted. Although the researcher theorized that the school quality/ characteristics issues and the family/personal needs issues were important to parents, he underestimated the power of the dissatisfaction factor.

To the 20 families in this study, the decision to participate in a school choice program was one that dealt with immediate and tangible needs and their dissatisfaction with the residential school over the attraction of the nonresidential school. When, for example, Doug McDonald said, "I just want my kids to come home" (referring to making it home from school safely and alive), he was saying his immediate need was to know that whatever school his children attended, it needed

to be safe—free of weapons, fights, drugs, and gangs. And, as the data and findings clearly indicated, the safety of the school setting often was the major factor causing parents to opt for nonresidential schools for their children.

The Issue of Family/Personal Needs

A fourth important set of issues considered in this study as parents participated in choice focused on the individual families' needs and on the values they held to be important. Although less seems to have been written on this area, the researcher proposed that the individual circumstances or experiences that families bring to the choice process warrant serious study. In addition, families' value systems are likely to influence their decisions both to participate in choice and to decide on a particular nonresidential school. Two of the writers on this aspect of choice are Bridges and Blackman (1978), who suggested that choice is a process and not simply an event. They believed that parents' decision to choose (private and/or parochial schooling options, in their study) was based on a combination of factors, which generally included both individual family needs and the desire to select a school that somehow matched the family's value structure.

Other researchers have found that school choice decisions involved the parents' educational values, individual needs of children, and the families' desire to become part of a school community of like-minded parents and teachers (Scott, 1983). The results of this study tended to support Scott" findings, although with a slight variation. Whereas in previous studies parents sought other schools whose families had similar educational, curricular, and religious values (Scott, 1983), in the

current study it was found that parents "chose" in order to escape families and students who they believed did not share their value system.

It is interesting that the decision regarding what nonresidential school to select either was based on convenience (proximity issue) or was simply a matter of having few choices. For example, Wendy Jessman, the single parent of three school-age boys, indicated that she had selected the Wicksville schools as her school of choice because she thought she had no other option; no other area district offered a school choice program that would accommodate all three of her sons. The Wicksville schools were the closest ones that offered her a choice option. She admitted that she had not really considered the school quality/characteristics issue as much as she was simply seeking to escape the Parkwood schools and get to a district where her boys could fit in, both racially and socially. In this case, choice did, indeed, allow her to seek out and locate a school that more closely fit what she "valued," children of the same race and similar economic means.

Finally, many parents in this study ended up using the school choice process to avoid having to relocate their children midyear due to a family move. In effect, school choice was a convenient way to solve a personal/family relocation challenge for the child. These findings support the notion that public school choice tends to promote the private interests of the individual or family over the public interests of society (Boyer, 1992). Students/families in this study selected public schools based on convenience or personal/family values. Social relationships, proximity to schools, or the anxiety of changing schools midyear often drove the choice decision. Policy makers hope that choice responds to public interest and societal demands (Chubb

& Moe, 1990). In this study, however, it appears that the private interests of individuals and families dominated the discussions regarding the rationale for participating in choice.

Closing Commentary

Finally, the researcher needs to comment on the power of the interview, the method used to collect the important data used in this study. The very first interview in this study took place in the Bowmans' backyard. It was a sweltering evening in mid-July. When the researcher arrived, Lori Bowman, clad in shorts and a tank top, was drinking a cold can of beer with a neighbor. Because her house was not air-conditioned, she suggested that we conduct the interview in the backyard. If Lori Bowman was embarrassed or uncomfortable under such conditions—meeting with a college researcher working on a study about school choice—she never gave such an indication. The researcher was amazed at her candor, her honesty, and her willingness to talk. She, like nearly every parent interviewed, did not hesitate to tell her story. In fact, like many of the interviewees, she thanked the researcher for listening. These parents wanted the investigator to know that they were glad there was someone who cared and wanted to hear their stories. To each of these families, choice was a welcome option. For some, like the Naguchi family, it was an unexpected surprise, which gave them a chance to let their daughter remain in the school she had attended with her friends all through high school. For others, like the Arnetts, it was a chance to save tuition costs; for still others, like Raquel Ramirez, it was "an answer to [her] prayers." The passion, the relief, and, in many cases, the

feeling of desperation to escape their residential school was evident throughout the interviews. The power of the interview lay in the parents' opportunity to look the researcher in the eye and tell their stories, knowing that someone—perhaps for the first time—was really listening. Maybe someone for the first time was interested in them, in their family, and in their children.

Certainly the qualitative research approach has its limitation. In this study, for example, only 20 families were interviewed, which was a limitation. As is true with any interview, biases on the part of the researcher can contaminate the data, another limitation. However, the emphasis of the informants' responses, the passion with which they described the fear they had for their children's safety, and the relief they felt when they learned their children did not have to be uprooted midyear because of a move, all helped underscore the quality of the data gathered from the one-on-one interviews. Perhaps Raquel Ramirez, more than any other parent, helped the researcher appreciate the qualitative approach and the value of the interview. An immigrant from Puerto Rico, Raquel struggled with English and had little formal education herself. Yet she made it clear that she wanted someone to hear her story. "It is very hard for me," she said. "People don't know, but I want you to know. It [school choice] was an answer to my prayers." Would Raquel Ramirez have responded to a survey or filled out a questionnaire? This researcher doubts it. Yet the information she shared, the story she told, was very powerful and an important part of the data in this study, contributing to the discussion of school choice.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SCHOOL DISTRICT CONTACT LETTER

[Current Date]

Dear :

As a doctoral candidate in educational administration, I am conducting research for a dissertation concerning the parents' decision to choose a non-residential public school for their child's education. I would like your cooperation in allowing me to interview some of the parents of students enrolled in your school district under your choice plan.

To conduct the research, I respectfully request that you send me the **NAMES OF STUDENTS, THEIR GRADE LEVEL AND THE NAMES, ADDRESSES AND PHONE NUMBERS OF PARENTS** of the students who have transferred into your school district under the provisions of your district's choice plan. I will use this list to take a random sampling to obtain twenty (20) parents' names in your district.

These parents will then be mailed an informational letter and contacted by telephone to arrange a semi-structured interview about public school choice. Their names and answers, and the names of your school district, and the names of your students will be strictly confidential and this information will not be used when reporting the data.

I would appreciate it if you could send me the names of students, their grade level and the parents' names, addresses, and phone numbers by May 15, 1997.

If you have any questions about my research study, please feel free to write to me at the address listed above or call me collect. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Joe Koenigsknecht
Assistant Superintendent
West Bloomfield School District

APPENDIX B

PARENT CONTACT LETTER

[Current Date]

Dear :

I am a graduate student at Michigan State University. I am conducting research for a study concerning parents' decision to participate in school choice for their child. As you well know, Michigan now allows local school districts to establish a school choice plan that enables non-residential students to attend their schools.

As a parent of a student who has elected to attend a non-residential school, this study is an opportunity for you to voice your reactions to this law. It may also give ideas for possible improvement or expansion of the program.

In this study, instead of having you answer "yes" or "no" answers to written questions, I would like to meet with you to allow you to personally answer my questions regarding your decision to send your child to a neighboring school district. Any data or information I collect through the interview process will remain anonymous. No names will be used at any time and all information will remain confidential. The interview will last about 45-60 minutes in a place of your choosing – a restaurant, your home, your business, or possibly the school.

I will be calling you in the near future about a possible interview and hope that you will be able to participate in this study. If you have any questions, please feel free to write or call me collect. I can be reached as indicated on the enclosed business card.

Sincerely,

Joe Koenigsknecht
Assistant Superintendent
West Bloomfield School District

APPENDIX C

PARENT TELEPHONE CONTACT

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

Hello, my name is Joe Koenigsknecht. In the past few days, you should have received from me a letter requesting permission to speak with you regarding your decision to enroll your child in _____ School District. As the letter pointed out, I am conducting research as part of a doctoral study at Michigan State University. My research includes interviewing parents like you to get your opinions and thoughts relating to your decision to choose a non-residential school for your child.

It is my understanding that you have at least one child whom you have enrolled in the Wicksville School District under their open enrollment school choice plan. Is this correct? If so, it would be of great help to me if I could meet with you for approximately 45 minutes to one hour and ask you some questions about your decision to switch schools. Any information you share with me will be kept strictly confidential. At no time will I use your name or the name of your child as part of my research. In fact, if there are any questions during my interview with you that you would rather not answer, you will not need to respond. Would you be willing to let me interview you and/or your spouse so I can consider your opinions and decision to switch schools as part of my research?

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. Can we try to identify a time and location where we can meet that is convenient to you. As I indicated to you earlier, we will need approximately 45-60 minutes to complete the interview.

Please let me give you my phone number in case you have any follow-up questions or if you should need to change the date of the interview. Again, thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I look forward to meeting you.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW ASSESSMENT FORM

INTERVIEW ASSESSMENT FORM

Informant _____ Date _____
Time Started _____ Time Ended _____
Time Duration _____ Taped: YES _____ NO _____

1) Informant seemed:

Uninterested	____	____	____	____	____	Interested
Reluctant	____	____	____	____	____	Straightforward
Uninformed	____	____	____	____	____	Knowledgeable

2) Interview seemed:

Hurried	____	____	____	____	____	Comfortably paced
Tense	____	____	____	____	____	Conversational/relaxed

3) Were there any interruptions? If so, specify:

4) Were there questions the informant was unable to answer? If so, specify:

5) Were there questions the informant was unwilling to answer? If so, specify:

6) Did a post-interview contact occur? Explain:

7) Comments/observations (i.e. anything that is very interesting, illuminating/new questions to follow up on, themes, etc.).

Adapted from: Hittman, L.D. The Political Process of Implementing Selected State Standards. Ph.D. diss. University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN: 1990.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL/FORMAT

Date: _____ Time:_____
Location:_____

INTRODUCTION

1. Hello, my name is Joe Koenigsknecht. I am from West Bloomfield, Michigan . . .

   Assistant Superintendent for West Bloomfield Schools
   Doctoral Candidate at Michigan State University
   Lived in Michigan all my life, served as teacher for 7 years, principal for 7 years and assistant superintendent for 14 years
   Have an interest in the role of parents in the school choice process

2. The purpose of this study is . . .

   To get your feelings, as a parent, about the public school choice program.
   To discover the process that you used to arrive at your decision.
   To understand some of the reasons you, and other parents, are choosing to send your child to another public school under a choice plan.
   To obtain information that might be helpful in improving and/or expanding public school choice and schools in general.

3. This study will safeguard your privacy by . . .

   Names and personal information about you and your family will be kept completely anonymous and confidential.
   Only I will have access to the tapes and/or transcripts.
   You can refuse to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

4. I would like to tape record the interview so that . . .

   Notetaking will not interfere with the interview and possibly distract either of us.
   The information from the interviews will be more accurate.
   Is it okay to tape this interview?

FAMILY BACKGROUND

1. Let's begin with some background information about your family.

   A. Parent's Background
   - Gender
   - Marital Status
   - Race
   - Years of education
   - Schools they have attended
   - Private school involvement
   - Post-high school education or training
   - Occupation
   - Family income (optional page to complete if willing)
   - Level of involvement in child's school/education

   B. Children's Background
   - Number of children
   - Ages
   - Grade levels in school
   - School they now attend
   - Schools they have attended in the past
   - Private school involvement
   - School activity participation
   - Special program requirements
   - Unique educational needs
   - Post-high school plans
   - Social profile
   - Academic profile

SCHOOL INFORMATION

1. How would you describe a good school? (Probe: If you walk into a school, how do you know it is good?).

2. What is the name of the sending school?

3. Do you consider the "sending" school a good one? Why or why not?

4. What is the name of the receiving school?

5. Do you consider the "receiving" school a good one? Why or why not?

6. If you could grade these schools (A-F), how would you grade the sending and receiving schools?

7. Were you unhappy about any aspect of your prior school? (programs, teachers, facilities, administrators, students?)

8. How far do you live from the sending school? The receiving school?

THE DECISION PROCESS

1. How did you first learn about the program that allows you public school choice?

Students	Parents
Friends/neighbors	Media, TV, radio, newspapers
School sources	Community sources
Enrollment options hotline	State publications
Enrollment options hotline	State publications
Brochures/fliers	Church sources
Public meetings	Employer
Family member(s)	Other sources

2. When you first began thinking about sending your child to a different school, what action did you take?

   Phoned a school
   Visited a school
   Talked with parents - who?
   Consulted with spouse, child

3. Who did you talk to in the schools?

4. How long was the process? Was it quick or drawn out?

   Days
   Weeks
   Years

THE CHOICE DECISION

1. The most important question is why did you choose to send your child to a different school?

   Neighborhood concept
   Geographic location of the schools
   School climate, norms
   Disciplinary climate
   School appearance, facilities
   Special programming requirements for your child
   Scheduling concerns
   School programs
   Co-curricular programs
   Academic standards/rigor
   Religion
   Athletics
   Racial proportions
   Convenience reasons such as job or day care
   Personal issues
   Transportation issues

2. Can you recall the "critical moment" when you finally decided to change schools for your child? Please describe the moment.

   Talks with school officials
   School visitation
   Conversations with someone - who?
   Crucial factor - what?

3. Do you feel you had enough information from the schools to make an informed decision? Were the schools helpful in providing this information?

4. Did your child have much say in the final decision? In what ways?

5. Did you have a family meeting to discuss the options?

6. If your student wanted to attend a different school or remain at your local school, what would have happened?

INTERVIEW STATEMENTS/SURVEY

1. Please indicate the extent to which you "Agree←→Disagree" with each statement and then please explain your answer.

2. To what extend was the statement (or its message) a factor in your decision to participate in school choice? Again, please explain your response.

STATEMENT	AGREE‹ ›DISAGREE	AGREE‹ ›DISAGREE
FREE WILL STATEMENTS		
1. School Choice is an issue of freedom. It is a basic aright that we, as citizens have.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. As consumers, we should be able to choose whatever school/program we think is best for our child(ren).	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. Every person has a right to equal opportunity and school choice helps guarantee that.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
EDUCATIONAL REFORM ISSUES		
1. Schools will improve students will learn more with school choice in place.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. Parents will be more involved and have more confidence in their schools under choice.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. Bad schools will go out of business and good schools will add more students.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
QUALITY OF CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOLS ISSUES		
1. Quality of educational programs including personnel are key to school success.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. The safety of the children and the control of discipline, weapons, drugs are critical in schools.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. The quality of the facilities, the technology and condition of buildings affect education of children.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
FAMILY/PERSONAL NEED ISSUES		
1. The type of kids/families at the school affects the quality of school.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. The families personal needs/ circumstances are a critical factor in their right to participate in a school of choice program.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. The school needs to reflect/support the values of my family and beliefs we hold important.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:

IMPACTS OF CHOICE

1. Would you make the same decision again if you had the chance?

2. Have you noticed any difference in the schools (sending or receiving) since school choice has been allowed in Michigan?

   More or less responsive to parents, communities
   Allow more or less parent involvement
   Program changes
   Facility changes
   Teacher, staff, personnel changes
   School climate
   Co-curricular offerings
   Discipline policies/practices

3. Were there any barriers that made it difficult to make your decision? If so, what?

   Lack of cooperation from any of the schools

4. Are you more or less involved in your child's school now? If so, in what ways?

5. Are you now more or less satisfied with your child's school?

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

1. If there was not public school choice, where would your child have attended school?

2. If this program could be improved in Michigan or expanded in other states, how would you improve the program?

3. Overall, what is your opinion about public school choice?

4. Do you think school choice should be expanded to include private schools?

5. Are there any final comments that you want to make?

6. Do you have any questions of me?

7. Family income (form available if you choose to complete).

8. If you have some additional information you want to give me, feel free to call me collect.

9. Give business card.

THANK YOU.

APPENDIX F

FAMILY INCOME FORM

FAMILY INCOME FORM

1.	_____	$0	to	$15,000
2.	_____	$15,001	to	$30,000
3.	_____	$30,001	to	$45,000
4.	_____	$45,001	to	$60,000
5.	_____	$60,001	to	$75,000
6.	_____	$75,001	to	$90,000
7.	_____		OVER	$90,001

APPENDIX G

CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

To Whom It May Concern:

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of why parents choose to send their child(ren) to non-residential public schools in the state of Michigan. I will be asking you some questions about your family background, your experiences with school, and your decision to choose a non-resident public school for your child. In addition, I will be asking your opinion about parents' right to choose a non-resident public school for their child.

This interview will take approximately one hour. If we do not complete all of the questions, I would like to have the chance to talk to you again. The total time involved in our interviews should not exceed two (2) hours.

All of the results will be treated with strict confidentiality and your name, the name of your child, or your child's school will not be used in any research report.

Participation is voluntary; you may choose not to participate at all, refuse to answer some questions, or discontinue the interview at any time. There is absolutely no penalty for taking any of these actions.

By signing this form, you:

- indicate that you understand the purposes of this study
- voluntarily agree to participate in this study
- give permission to have the interview tape-recorded

RESPONDENT'S NAME: _____
(Please type or print)

RESPONDENT'S SIGNATURE: _____

DATE OF INTERVIEW: _____

APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW SURVEY

DIRECTIONS:

1. **Ask parents to respond verbally to the 12 statements below by indicating the extent to which they "agree←→disagree" with the statement. They are asked to then explain their answer.**
2. **Ask parents to indicate, "To what extent is the statement (or its message) might have been a factor in their decision to participate in school choice. Please explain.**

STATEMENT	AGREE←→DISAGREE	FACTOR IN DECISION
FREE WILL ISSUE		
1. School Choice is an issue of freedom. It is a basic right that we, as citizens, have.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. As consumers, we should be able to choose whatever school/program we think is best for our child(ren).	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. Every person has a right to equal equal opportunity and school choice helps guarantee that.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain.
EDUCATIONAL REFORM ISSUES		
1. Schools will improve and students will learn more with school choice in place.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. Parents will be more involved and have more confidence in their schools under choice.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. Bad schools will go out of business and good schools will add more students.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
QUALITY OF CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOLS ISSUES		
1.Quality of educational programs including personnel, are key to school success.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. The safety of the children and the control of discipline, weapons, drugs are critical in schools.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. The quality of the facilities, the technology & condition of buildings affect education of children.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
FAMILY/PERSONAL NEED ISSUES		
1. The type of kids/families at the school affects the quality of school.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
2. The families personal needs/circumstances are a critical factor in their right to participate in a school of choice program.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:
3. The school needs to reflect/support the values of my family and beliefs we hold important.	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:	1 2 3 4 5 Explain:

KEY: AGREE ←→ DISAGREE
- 1 = Strongly Agree
- 2 = Agree
- 3 = Not Sure
- 4 = Disagree
- 5 = Strongly Disagree

KEY: FACTOR IN DECISION
- 1 = A Strong Factor
- 2 = A Possible Factor
- 3 = Not Sure
- 4 = Not Likely a Factor
- 5 = Definitely Not a Factor

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