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**School Choice: How and Why Parents
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**SCHOOL CHOICE: HOW AND WHY PARENTS
IN RURAL AREAS SELECT SCHOOLS**

By

Brian L. Metcalf

A Dissertation

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Abstract

SCHOOL CHOICE: HOW AND WHY PARENTS IN RURAL AREAS SELECT SCHOOLS

By

Brian L. Metcalf

While a school of choice policy proposes that parents can select the best school for their child, research has discovered that parents more often settled for mediocrity. For many parents, the pattern of choice behavior suggested that they chose a school that would be simply satisfactory, not exceptional.

One way to learn more about how parents gather information related to the factors that make a school desirable for their child, and about how they approach these significant choices, is to explore the criteria and rationales currently used by the parents. Thus far, few studies have sought information directly from the parents who have made a school choice to identify the rationale and process used in making that choice. However, no research is found that specifically focused on school choice in a rural setting. Therefore, this study seeks to learn directly from the parents how the selection for school of choice works.

This research was conducted in a very small town in Southwest Michigan. The cooperating district, which has been referred to as Durban, has approximately 400 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how and why parents in rural areas select schools for their children to attend. Research in urban areas suggests that parents are making these decisions based on many factors not having to do with best instructional practices (convenience, race and socio-economic considerations appear to top the list of considerations in urban areas).

Consequently, this study is important for two reasons. First, school districts throughout the state of Michigan are seeing revenues cut due to a loss of students for a variety of reasons. These districts have to cut programs, which have a detrimental effect for the students who stay. Second, if parents are making choices based on factors unrelated to instruction, or other academic reasons, such as race, then the entire premise of market-forced improvement may create incentive for non-academic school improvement. This is contrary to the rationale of school choice.

This study describes how and why parents in this rural area selected a school. Included are connections between this study and prior urban and suburban research, as well as new revelations that have not been mentioned in prior research.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the two most important people in my world: My wife Pam, who is truly my best friend. She continues to support and encourage me through all of my challenges and desires. Additionally, this work is dedicated to my mother. You also continue to support and encourage me in all of my aspirations. Over the many years, your direction has kept me well grounded, focused, and has been instrumental in making me the person that I am today.

A

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Introduction

Chapter I

A school of choice plan was initially implemented as a method to provide parents the opportunity to select the best school for their child. Convinced that school choice has the potential to improve efficiency, spark innovation, and improve the overall quality of public schools, Chub and Moe state: “. . . 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” (Chub and Moe p. 217, 1990). Perpich (1989) supports that rationale by stating: “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)

While a school of choice policy proposes that parents can select the best school for their child, research in Europe found that parents more often settled for mediocrity. For many parents, the pattern of choice behavior suggested that they chose a school that would be simply satisfactory, not exceptional. In essence, it is a matter of finding an acceptable alternative to the district school rather than making an optimum choice from a large range of possible schools. At the secondary level, for example, the majority (62 percent) considered only one alternative to the district school and a further 27 per cent chose between two alternatives. At the primary level this tendency was even more marked: of the 183 requesting and considering parents, 144 (79 percent) considered only

one alternative and a further 32 (17 percent) only two alternatives. The picture is very much one of choice between one or, at most, two alternatives rather than extensive comparison. (Adler, Petch, Tweedie, 1989).

One way to learn more about how parents gather information related to the factors that make a school desirable for their child and about how they approach these significant choices is to explore the criteria and rationales currently used by the parents in selecting their child's / children's school. As part of this exploration, it seems important that legislators, school administrators, and educators hear clearly the parents' voices as they describe the decision-making process and the criteria used in assessing their children's needs and selecting their children's school of choice. Thus far, very few studies (Henig 1994 and 1996; Bell, 2004; Pleasants, 2000; Koenigknecht, 1998) have sought information directly from the parents who have made a school choice to identify the rationale and process used in making that choice. Most certainly, there have been quantitative studies which gathered information regarding inner city schools. However, no research is found that specifically focused on school choice in a rural setting. Therefore, this study seeks to learn directly from the parents how the selection for school of choice works. Understanding the reasoning by parents for school selection could enable state legislators and school administrators to make education-related decisions based on facts rather than on speculation.

While the literature shows that parents with higher levels of education are more likely to participate in schools of choice, these studies failed to address the parents' selection criteria or decision making process used by parents. Specifically, researchers have shown that Chilean parents with higher levels of education and greater

socioeconomic status are more likely to enroll their children using a school of choice model (Camoy and McEwan, 2000; Aedo and Larranaga, 1994; Gauri, 1998; Winkler and Rounds, 1996). While these findings are interesting, they do not explain how those parents made the decision to choose one school over another. One possible method identified by Camoy and McEwan (2000) comparing the characteristics of the schools chosen by parents would be to examine certain factors, such as test scores or the socioeconomic status of school populations to determine if these were the driving force for the decisions.

Additionally, research in urban and suburban districts indicate that parents are making choices due to “revealed” preferences, such as race, socioeconomic status, or cultural ideas rather than their stated preferences, such as the quality of instruction or the reputation of high standards in the district (Adler, Petch, Tweedie, 1989; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Bell, 2004). The plan of this study is to look through a rural lens provided by the parents to determine specifically how and why parents’ in rural districts select a school for their child. Parents may provide insights that differ from studies that have been conducted in the urban/suburban studies. Further, I hope to uncover the parents stated preferences and seek information that may be further revealed through quantitative inquiry in the future.

If a parent chooses a school based on characteristics other than the quality of the academic offerings and the potential of improved educational opportunity presented for his/her children, then how will parental choice have a positive effect on the quality of schools? Additionally, if parents are making decisions regarding the schooling of their child based on criteria not typically associated with the policymakers’ official rationale

for implementing a school of choice policy, who will truly benefit from the decision? In the end, this study will identify the stated reasons why parents select schools in a rural setting in Southern Michigan.

Lack of Criteria for Parent's Choice

Criteria serve as benchmarks or yardsticks against which quality can be measured. Accreditation standards, for example, set forth the minimum level of qualifications schools must achieve. School choice is designed to give parents the opportunity to select a school that will best meet the unique educational needs of their children. However, up to this point, rarely do experts on school quality, researchers, educational administrators, teachers, or even state legislatures, provide a set of criteria that parents may use in making significant choices for their children. Since no clear criteria have been established, parents are forced to make school choices without understanding what factors would indicate high quality in a school or on what basis one school rather than another might better serve the needs of students. If Michigan's state legislators or Board of Education have been unable to delineate criteria for measuring quality in schools in spite of having the opinion of experts and the support of research on education, then how can parents identify criteria on which to base school choices?

The History of School Choice

In an effort to increase student accessibility to a high quality, publicly funded elementary or secondary education, and with the hope of improving the quality of all schools by this process, individual state governments (including Michigan) have taken

actions that fundamentally changed the concept of public education in the United States. In 1995, the State of Michigan opened the door for charter schools and all schools that lie within contiguous counties of a local district for all students. This legislation allowed parents to enroll their children in any school within or near their county, providing that district opted to accept school of choice students. Thus, students could choose to attend a school that was not in their immediate vicinity. Another aspect of this state action was that it opened the door for charter schools, which like public schools would be state funded, but, unlike public schools, would be “for profit” entities (Moe, 1994).

In this way, the legislature created a market-driven educational concept. Parents may be unaware that the claims of these schools may have had more to do with marketing strategies directed toward increasing the numbers of students enrolled in their programs than with finding the right school for their child’s academic and social needs. In School Choice Policies in Michigan: The Rules Matter (1999), Arsen, Plank and Sykes indicate that this lack of an enlightened consumer may be a difficult problem for school choice: “One of our key points here relates to information. An efficient and effective market requires information. If parents are making choices based on insufficient information, it is difficult to get an efficient market. This is not just true in education; it is true for other markets. So, if you buy a grocery item there will be a requirement to put on the box the ingredients. If you want to buy a stock, you want to know there is a common accounting standard used in company reporting because there are information problems here. These kinds of issues must be addressed.” (p.27)

This is a trend that can be seen across the world (Adler, Petch, Tweedie, 1989; Gauri, 1998). Legislatures have initiated a process that defines secondary education as a

commodity and parents as consumers of that commodity. Plank and Sykes (2003) indicate that, "The convergence of four interrelated trends lies behind the growing enthusiasm of governments around the world for school choice policies. Changes in the intellectual, institutional, political, and demographic environments of national education systems are all pushing governments in the same direction, toward policies that offer parents more choices about the schools their children attend and encourage schools to compete for students and revenues." (p. 8)

A central question regarding the advent of schools of choice in the United States today is whether schools of choice, that were conceptualized as a response to multiple needs within the education system, such as enriched curriculum or smaller class sizes, are in practice effective in meeting those needs. Evidence used in answering this question is whether parents, who currently are charged with matching their children's needs and abilities to a specific school system, have the tools or information, and, secondly, have a rational decision-making process to make this choice. These two factors weigh heavily in assessing the effectiveness of the school of choice concept. The first factor relates whether parents possess adequate information upon which to base their decisions on schools, includes knowledge about their child's academic and social needs, about what constitutes quality in a school system, and about the quality of the multiple school systems under consideration. The second factor relates to whether parents have and apply a rational decision making process that would allow them to use this knowledge to set priorities, to make assessments, and to make effective school choices.

Competition Driving School Improvement

There are both advantages and disadvantages to school selection. The theory behind school of choice is that competition between school systems will drive schools to make improvements; however, little evidence could be found to support this. Without understanding the rationale upon which parents base their school decisions, it is impossible to understand how competition drives schools to improve their performance. Neither is there evidence that parents possess the ability to assess their children's academic needs. Further, parents seldom, if ever, receive information regarding the districts accumulated Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) scores or other generalized student achievement results.

The negative side of schools of choice may be that school competition is not driven by student achievement (e.g., MEAP scores); then will schools rise and fall based on football game scores? Will other factors not related to academics drive parental choice? If parent sentiment is to be the key to defining quality in schools, where will the line be drawn? Will parents be allowed to set the school schedule to fit their vacation plans to the detriment of their children's and other children's educations? Also, why is there no mention of the current accountability practices of electing local citizens to serve on the school board who represent the whole of the community?

There are strong advantages for schools of choice. Convinced that school choice has the potential to improve efficiency and the overall quality of public schools, Chubb and Moe (1990) state, "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)

Perpich (1989) supports that rationale by stating: "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)

School improvement may be initiated through a school of choice policy. This policy could be synonymous with capitalism, survival of the fittest, or possibly by capturing market shares. Those who are efficient, effective, and successful at selling their "education" product, will draw more students and subsequently more money. Arsen, Plank, and Sykes (1999) state, "New policies in Michigan create options for parents to send their children to schools beyond their immediate neighborhood and to new or converted schools that are chartered by agents of the state. The new policies seek to decentralize control over education by allowing individual parents and local communities to have a greater say in their schools. The new policies also promise to introduce the advantages of market-based competition into the public school system. If schools must compete with one another for students and dollars, they are likely to be more attentive to what parents want. Schools that lose students and dollars will receive sharp signals that they must improve to stay in business." (p. 23) However, Urbansky (1989) believed that there was more needed than just improving public schools; rather he suggested a need to "find new and more effective ways to educate more students." (p. 236) Plank and Sykes (2003) suggest that charter schools and schools in general will have to be innovative in order to attract and maintain a stable student body in order to survive. Further, schools will now have to be more responsive to their public, to their customer, if they are to expect to continue to provide services for their students (Plank,

Sykes, 2003).

Will competition for students improve the schools at the bottom of the student performance distribution? This question cannot be answered at this time. Improvement may be the goal of schools of choice plans, but Ladd (2002) indicates that research may actually show otherwise. She states, "Of particular interest in the United States is whether the competition for students induced by giving parents more choice over the schools their children attend will provide effective incentives for schools at the bottom of the performance distribution to improve. The international evidence shows that not only is competition unlikely to improve such schools, but it is likely to exacerbate their problems." (p. 12-13) Schools may actually lose the funding that they desperately need in order to improve or in order to provide training to improve.

Even with school of choice, there is no guarantee that schools will improve. Plank and Sykes (2003) asks: "If you introduce choice policy into a public education system, will those policies serve to stimulate innovation? That is, create some kind of dynamic through which schools of choice or other schools will begin to develop innovative and improved practices." (preface) Innovation in this context means new ideas that promote new best practices. Seeley (1985) embraced choice as the answer to the tremendous problems found in public education: "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) However, none of these authors shed light on the simple question as to how a simple sorting of students through the school of

choice plan will actually drive school improvement.

Choice Policy Debate

School of choice is controversial. While there are strong beliefs that support school of choice, there are also opponents that argue that this movement is not in the best interest of the student, the community, or the school district. Ladd (2002) acknowledges this polarized debate by stating: “Disagreements about school choice and the role of competition in elementary and secondary education feature prominently in education policy debates across the United States. Advocates of giving parents more opportunities to choose the schools their children attend whether through greater choice among public schools, the introduction of charter schools, or the use of vouchers that can be used at private schools, argue that greater choice will improve the education system. More choice, they claim, will expand educational opportunities for poor children, promote innovation, and, through the discipline of competition, increase student achievement. Defenders of the traditional public school system challenge many of these arguments.” (p. 3)

While many argue that competition will improve public education, such as Chubb and Moe, others believe the jury is still out. Ladd (2002) indicates a need for more research and better research: “Unfortunately, the recent growth in charter schools and the few small experiments with school vouchers provide at best limited and, to date, not very complete evidence on the validity of competing claims. For example, well-designed studies of small-scale voucher programs can shed light on whether the children who use vouchers to attend private schools achieve at higher levels than those without the voucher

option. Because the voucher experiments are small, however, such studies provide no information on whether competition from private schools will improve the quality of education in the traditional public schools.” (p.6)

Summary

Currently, there is ongoing research regarding school of choice; however, Ogawa and Dutton (1994) write, “Research on parental choice is sparse. Very few studies of choice programs have been reported. In addition, the research base is very fragmented, thus, the little research on educational choice that has been reported is spread over a wide array of program types. This may be due to the scarcity of choice programs. Whatever the reasons, it leaves a body of literature that is not only thin, but also contains many important gaps.” (p. 275) Similarly, Fuller and Elmore (1996) indicate: “If we want to develop (school) choice systems that are sensitive to the cultural and social differences among groups of parents and students, then it seems clear that we have to understand a good deal more than we presently do about how individuals understand and construct their choices from their cultural backgrounds.” (p. 200) These authors support the need for research that will provide a foundation of knowledge related to the informational basis and decision making process that parents use as they make school choice decisions.

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how and why parents in rural areas select schools for their children to attend. Research in urban areas suggests that parents are making these decisions based on many factors not having to do with best instructional practices (race and socio-economic considerations appear to top the list of considerations in urban areas). Consequently, this study is important for two reasons.

First, school districts throughout the state of Michigan are seeing revenues cut due to a loss of students for a variety of reasons. Subsequently, these districts have to cut programs, which have a detrimental effect for the students who stay (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Bell, 2004; Wells, 2004; Ladd, 2002).

Second, if parents are making choices based on factors unrelated to instruction, or other academic reasons, such as race, then the entire premise of market-forced improvement will be null and void (Wells, 1996; Buckley and Schneider, 2002). For instance, if we find that parents in rural communities choose to send their child to another school because the football team wins 10+ games per year, then the market analogy would suggest that schools across the state should all improve athletics, not academics. This is contrary to the rationale of school choice. In order to study the decisions of parents regarding school choice in a rural setting, this study will be guided by the following four questions:

1. What factors are influential in the parents' decision to choose a school in a rural community?
 - a. Proximity or convenience for the parent?
 - b. Poor experience with a former district?
 - c. Perception that the receiving district matches the parent's values?
 - d. Perception of peers, colleagues, or community – reputation of the school?
2. How do parents judge the quality of a rural school?
 - e. Are parents making decisions by evaluating curriculum?
 - f. Are parents making decisions by evaluating staff/service/responsiveness?
3. What sources of information do parents use in choosing a school in a rural community?
4. Who is involved in making the decision for schools of choice?

Literature Review

Chapter II

Introduction

As defined earlier, inter-school choice, or schools of choice as it is commonly known (Buckley and Schneider, 2002), provide parents with an opportunity to select a school of their liking (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Wells, 2004; Ladd, 2002, Vassallo, 2000). A school of choice policy is a topic that can be discussed from several points of view. Typically, a person sees it as a positive opportunity for students or believes that choice may also cause more harm than good (Ladd, 2002; Wells, 1996). Interestingly, both sides seem to use some of the same arguments to defend their position. For example, advocates and opponents alike use the education of poor children to defend their point of view. Advocates say that a school of choice policy will provide poor parents a way to select a good school without purchasing housing in a wealthy area. However, opponents indicate that the poor parents are the least likely to utilize their opportunity to choose.

As you maneuver through this chapter and the topics presented, you will see that there has been substantial research conducted in regard to schools of choice (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 2000; Koenigknecht, 1998; Pleasants, 2000; Bell, 2004, Vassallo, 2000; Buckley and Schneider, 2002). What you should also see as a glaring omission is that not one study has focused on school of choice policy in a rural setting. In the review of the literature, it became clear that there is a shortage of research conducted on parental choice in rural communities. Further, this research is important not only for educators

and parents, but also for the legislators who are making up the rules for schools of choice (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Vassallo, 2000; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001).

This chapter provides a brief glimpse at the history of a school of choice policy that begins with compulsory attendance in or around 1900. The idea centered on the rationale that parents were responsible for educating or making sure that their child became educated. Through the last decade, in most cases, this meant enrolling a child in a public school setting. Only the very wealthy could afford to pay for private schools, and similarly only the middle class and above could afford to move to a different neighborhood in order to select a school of their liking for their child. Now, through a school of choice policy, parents may choose where to send their child (Bell, 2004; Friedman, 1962; Moe, 1990; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999).

A comparison and a contrast are made of the differing view points and the arguments supporting or condemning schools of choice policy. First is a look at the main reasoning behind a school of choice policy, which is to create a discipline that is innovative and efficient. A school of choice policy was designed to encourage educational reform, improve instruction, and to improve student achievement (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Moe, 1990; Ladd, 2002; Wells, 2004). However, innovation has not occurred, and improvements are not visible due to a school of choice policy (Ladd, 2002; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Buckley and Schneider, 2002). What has occurred is simply the providing of choices that are more of the same: more publicly funded schools with the same teaching pool, the same administrative pool, the same curriculum, and the same instructional strategies (Ladd, 2002; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Wells, 1996).

Second, a school of choice policy was designed to improve access for better educational opportunities to minorities and economically disadvantaged students, thus reducing segregation in our schools (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Ladd, 2002; Wells, 2004; Bell, 2004). This has not been effective and may work contradictory to this goal.

Key issues of this study begin with the parents' decision making process in how parents decide where to send their child (Bell, 2004; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Pleasants, 2000). A market analogy would suggest that parents will select the best school option for their child (Moe, 1990; Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Bell, 2004; Ladd, 2002). We find, however, that parents do not necessarily act as wise consumers. Parents make decisions in a myriad of ways that sometimes ignore the overall quality of a school. Quality as defined by instructional best practices may not be the criteria that parents use to base their decision. Second, parent information is a key component to good decisions (Bell, 2004; Pleasants, 2000; Koenigknecht, 1998; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Buckley and Schneider 2002; Vassallo, 2000). This section will look at parent information and the problems that parents face in finding factual information with which to base a decision. Third, parental involvement is discussed as an indicator of both student success, and as an indicator for selecting a school of their choice. For example, if parents are involved with their child and/or their child's school district, then the parent is more likely to use the opportunity for selecting a school. Further, this study will show that the child's voice is often important in selecting a school. When a student is happy at his/her school, then more often than not that student is going to be successful. Information here suggests that school of choice policies are here to stay.

This chapter also discusses the potential of sustaining a school of choice policy. Schools of choice policies have been in existence around the world for quite some time. Though the United States have more recently joined this movement it seems apparent that allowing parents to choose where to send their children to school is here to stay. There is no indication in the near future of reducing the parent's option.

It is observed that the research that has been conducted has obviously overlooked rural Michigan. Students in rural Michigan are often found to be at-risk, economically disadvantaged, and poorly prepared for any level of schooling. These students and parents may be similar in socioeconomic status to their counterparts in urban or suburban settings but may select schools in a very different way. One difference is the lack of school choices in the rural setting. Bell(2004), Pleasants(2000), and Koenigknecht (1998), Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, (2001), Buckley and Schneider (2002), all conducted studies that contained inner city contexts. Bell looked specifically at a myriad of schools, including inner city and suburban public school districts as well as magnet, charter, secular, and non-secular schools, all within a five mile radius. Parents in rural Michigan may not have a second school of choice option within a 15 or 20 miles radius, much less having at least six different choices. This gap in the research will identify four questions that could be addressed:

1. What factors are influential in a parent's decision to choose between or among rural schools?
2. How do parents judge the quality of a rural school?
3. What sources of information do parents use in choosing a rural school?
4. Who is involved in making the decision for schools of choice in rural Michigan?

History of School of Choice Policies

The concept of public education in the United States grew from Thomas Jefferson's notion that democracy requires an educated citizenry (Fazzaro, Walter, 2002; Ladd, 2002; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001). Over the last hundred years, the concept of public education has been in transition. Compulsory school attendance is one example of that transition (Ladd, 2002). As early as 1900, the government was exerting its power to require parents to provide an education to their children. In 1901 the Supreme Court of Illinois proclaimed:

The natural rights of a parent to the custody and control of his infant child are subordinate to the power of the State One of the most important natural duties of the parent is his obligation to educate his child, and this duty he owes not to the child only, but to the commonwealth. If he neglects to perform it, or willfully refuses to do so, he may be coerced by law to execute such civil obligation. The welfare of the child and the best interests of society require that the state shall exert its sovereign authority to secure to the child the opportunity to acquire an education (Grubb and Lazerson, p. 25, 1982).

Thus began a government bureaucracy committed to the concept of public education as a child's right and a parent's obligation. School systems that began as one room school houses that dotted the country began to grow and grow, eventually turning into one of the largest governmental machines in the United States (Vassallo, 2000; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Wells, 2004). Tyack (1976) compares school systems to machines stating that, "School systems grew in size and complexity, new techniques of bureaucratic control emerged, ideological conflict over compulsion diminished, strong laws were passed, and school officials developed sophisticated techniques to bring truants into school" (p.359). Further, schools identified new ways of finding children and getting them into school and also developed new programs to cope with the unwilling students

whom truant officers brought to their doors, among these were day-long truant schools, disciplinary classes, and a host of special educational opportunities promoted by state and federal laws (Tyack, 1976). However, there is some concern that legislators and judges are not the best equipped to direct or administer public school systems, as Tyack points out that “advocates of these new forms of governance argued that education should be taken out of politics and that most decisions were best made by experts” (pp. 373-374).

Alternative schools or schools of choice were first discussed in the 1960’s (Friedman, 1962; Bell, 2004; Ladd, 2002; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001). However, it was not until 1986 that schools of choice were recognized by political forces. In the report of the National Governors’ Conference, A Time for Results, the Governors’ position was summarized thus: “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). Subsequently, in 1989, President George H. W. Bush convened a White House workshop on school choice where he came out openly in support of the concept.

School choice was then embraced in the 1990’s as a way to address a number of perceived problems in the public education system. Chub and Moe (1990) state that “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. School choice has the capacity, all by itself, to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer in a myriad of other ways” (p. 217). Thus, the improvement of public schools was linked to a market

economy, and parents became the consumers of the educational product (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Ladd, 2002; Bell, 2004; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Buckley and Schneider, 2002).

Currently, public school systems find themselves caught between a bureaucratically restrictive government and the demands of the market place, which suggest that they be autonomous in responding to the needs of the consumer. For example, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) regulation places very clear demands on states to be accountable, to abide by and document compliance for nearly 900 pages of legislative regulations. Further, more restrictions, and demanding state reforms, and mandates require districts to conform until each district is a mere reflection of every other district. For example, during the fall of 2005 the state passed a requirement that no district will begin school until after Labor Day in the fall. The reasons are that students will be working their summer jobs and that our economy needs the tourists, with neither reason having anything to do with education. The state also revealed in October 2005 that beginning with the 2006-2007 school-year, all high schools in the state will have mandated class requirements, with unit tests to follow. These mandates continue to drive public schools to become more homogenous and have reduced the autonomy of individual school districts. In direct contrast, federal, state, and local governments tout parental choice as a way to bring about change or innovation and to improve schools, thereby acknowledging that schools must have autonomy to improve and grow. If one is to have competition among schools, parents must be allowed to choose among schools. Further, competition requires that schools have great autonomy in order to have flexibility to become innovative (Ladd, 2002; Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Moe, 1990;

Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Buckley and Schneider, 2002).

The argument is that traditional public schools systems have become overly bureaucratic and resistant to change. However, if innovation were the goal, if school improvement through experimentation and entrepreneurship were actually believed to be a method to develop better educational processes, then why increase the rules, the requirements, and the bureaucracy? But, if new schools were provided without the bureaucracy, they may become innovative, and perhaps all schools could improve (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999).

Innovative and Efficient Education

For the past twenty years, the theme of “do more with less” seems to have dominated public education at all levels (Frost, 2005, Personal communication). The debate continues over whether school choice will result in an innovative and more efficient education product (Moe, 1990; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Ladd 2002). By removing the local district boundaries that provide public schools with a monopoly of students or by promoting private school opportunities for all students, parental choice will change the pressures facing public schools and, by theory, the role of competition will induce them to provide higher-quality education with better efficiency (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Ladd, 2002; Vassallo, 2000; Wells, 2004). However, rather than encouraging schools to improve, school choice may simply drive less affluent schools out of existence (Ladd, 2002; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Wells, 2004). In many countries, parents determine the quality of a school by the socioeconomic and racial mix of its population. Higher-income families are more likely to choose schools based on test

scores and the average education level of other parents. Similarly, families with the financial resources try to move their children out of schools with large proportions of disadvantaged and minority students into schools with more privileged students. Parents choosing to relocate to areas associated with higher income may provide their child with opportunities of better schooling, more positive peer influence, and vastly improved resources (Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Ladd, 2002; Vassallo, 2000; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999).

One goal of school of choice is to improve educational opportunity by better matching children with the specific school that will best meet their academic, emotional, physical, and social needs. The perception here is that public schools will have specific differences that would enable them to meet each student's complex needs. This perception is reflected in the schools of choice debate. Increased opportunity for inter-district choice may also encourage important educational goals. The greater the student base, the greater the diversity of the program opportunities to help kids. The conventional concept that all students learn the same is vastly outdated. Research shows that students learn in a variety of ways, and most recently, the educational community is beginning to recognize and embrace that alternatives are needed for students who do not perform well in the traditional classroom (Ladd, 2002). In this light, increased inter-district choice would provide opportunity for parents to select a school that would better meet the needs of their child.

Chubb and Moe (1990) believe that breaking down the bureaucracy, eliminating the unions, and streamlining education by implementing choice for parents will result in efficiency and effectiveness. The most persuasive rationalization for providing parents

more choice of the schools their children attend is to force schools to compete. In the spirit of competition for students, and thus dollars, schools will improve the quality of education they offer or risk losing their students (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Bell, 2004; Pleasants, 2000; Koenigknecht, 1998; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Buckley and Schneider, 2002). As mentioned before, the current public school system has maintained a monopoly for the past five decades and has become a bureaucratic system that is wasteful and mediocre at best (Hill, 1997; Vassallo, 2000). In contrast to the notion of creating a more innovative and efficient educational product, thus far, the school of choice experiment seems to have yielded little benefit. If innovation is defined by a change in curriculum, policy practices, or teaching methods, which are the foundation of instruction, currently there is very little innovation occurring (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Ladd, 2002; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001).

While academic success is purported to be the overarching goal of school choice, academics have been found to be one of the least important reasons behind parental choice. Parental choice for both elementary and secondary levels is quite different from the choice advocates would predict. Elliot, et al, (1981) found that parents preferred the process provided by schools rather than worry about the end product. In essence, the majority of parents who are choosing a school for their child, choose based on more humanistic criteria, such as, "I like that teacher," or "the administrators there are really nice," rather than curricular rationale or instructional best practices. The educational product is not the focus of their decisions (Adler, Petch, Tweedie, 1989).

Another unintended consequence of a school of choice policy may be the elimination of public schools altogether. Ladd (2002) acknowledges the emotion that is

brought about in regard to eliminating or destroying public education as we have become accustomed to in America, simply due to the new policy of schools of choice. In essence schools will either improve or close their doors. This author states that, “Much of the U.S. debate takes place at an ideological level. Proponents of choice and competition often rely on simplistic arguments about the putative power of markets to generate higher quality education at lower costs. Opponents of expanding choice and competition often object to any move in that direction on the grounds that it will destroy the public education system” (p 3).

Improved Access vs. Segregation

One criticism of the existing school system was that economically disadvantaged and urban families do not have the same access to quality education as those of more affluent, better educated, suburban families. In this context, freedom of choice is closely connected to the idea of equal access. To be free, in reality, indicates a right to make decisions for yourself or your family (Friedman, 1962). Ladd (2002) acknowledges this argument by indicating that freedom to choose may be enough to support a school of choice policy; in America, we have “the cherished value of freedom of choice” (p. 12). Americans can choose to live in the city or in the country. Americans can choose where to work, who to marry, where and what to worship if they have the resources. However, in the poorest communities, such as inner city or rural districts, the minority families and the socioeconomic disadvantaged families do not have the opportunity to relocate for educational purposes, nor may they have the means to transport students to their schools of choice, thus these students end up in the lowest-performing districts. In contrast,

wealthier families can choose to send their children to higher performing schools or private schools where the children are more like their own (Ladd, 2002, Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Wells, 2004; Buckley and Schneider 2002).

Similarly, Fuller (2000) argues that poor parents should have the power to choose good schools for their children. This author explains that, “This is a debate about power. . . . This is about whether parents of low-income African American children should obtain a power that many critics of the choice movement exercise every day on behalf of their own children” (p. 10). While much of the research surrounding schools of choice will mention low income, African American, or city children, they fail to mention low income, rural students who are similarly powerless to change schools, due to the distance between schools or lack knowledge to leave.

However, socio-economic status does not mean that parents cannot choose wisely. Being poor does not cause parental incapacity to choose well (Ladd, 2002; Wells, 1996; Bell, 2004). The waiting lists at such many high performing and private schools demonstrate that those who are in the process of choosing a good school for their child may know what they are doing (Sonnenfeld 1973).

In contrast to the idea that schools of choice will make educational opportunity more equitable for economically disadvantaged students, thus far, it appears that they are less likely to take advantage of their opportunity (Ladd, 2002; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Wells, 2004; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001). Families at or below the poverty level are much less likely than families in higher income brackets to seek out and take advantage of the inter-district or intra-district choice options that are available to them.

Further, they have less access to information about educational options, or they lack the initiative to seek information regarding options. Also, they often cannot afford to transport their children to distant schools, and they may be hesitant to send their child to schools they see as being more prestigious or of a higher class (Ladd 2002).

School choice is seen as advantageous to the middle or upper class because schools may be selective in whom they accept. School of choice policy in Michigan provides some exclusionary powers for districts. Districts in Michigan can decline students who have been disciplined by the schools in the student's past. If a student requesting to enroll through the schools of choice option had been suspended for any amount of time in the past two years, or if that same student had been expelled at any time during the student's history, then a district can deny enrollment to that student. In many instances, this favors middle and upper-income families. The power is given to schools to select their students, a power defended as a reasonable process of self-governance for school districts. Additionally, parents tend to make decisions about the quality of a district based on the ratio of its minority and low socioeconomic students (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Ladd, 2002); thus the selection of students gives districts an opportunity to protect their reputations by choosing the more advantaged students. Finally, districts now have a financial reason to select students who are the least expensive to educate. If schools are to be driven by a market based conception, then we have to assume that financial decisions will be made regardless of the educational needs of individual students favoring those of the middle and upper classes (Ladd 2002; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Wells, 2004). For parents with a lower socioeconomic status, this is not the case.

In addition, social segregation by school choice may be a detrimental and unexpected side effect of school choice. While there are trends that have been identified in inner cities, primarily “white flight,” school choice may exacerbate this problem. Most people are aware of the issues of white flight, where white families move in droves from inner city areas or areas where there is a concentration of minorities. What is not known is whether schools of choice will actually increase this phenomenon. Will choice promote social sorting based on race, religion, educational background, or socioeconomic standing (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Wells, 2004; Buckley and Schneider, 2002)? In the current practice, it appears that this concern may be a reality.

Magnet schools were initially pre-occupied with providing opportunities that would encourage desegregation. However, over time, there has been a shift in ideology moving away from a goal of desegregation into a goal of simply improving instruction and thus student achievement. These shifts have paralleled the discovery that magnets are less effective in desegregating schools than what was first hoped but rather had some indication that they may be improving the overall educational quality (Raywid, 1984).

Similarly, Archbald (1988) describes a process of self selection or self-sorting that takes place within magnet schools whereby students and even school personnel will be drawn to schools because of their superior quality. This author believes that schools of choice, specifically magnet schools, will improve the quality of education because their “. . . distinctive specialization and autonomy give staff a clearer sense of purpose, there is greater incentive to prevent “disorder”, since adversity affects a school’s reputation and ability to compete for students, and there is, a probable self-selection of people

(principals, teachers, and parents) who are above average in their commitment and ability to encourage student discipline and agreement regarding educational goals. (pp. 470-471).

Key Issues

Decision Making Process of Parents

Parents could have a wide range of rationales for their school choices. In the few studies (Henig, 1990, 1994; Bell, 2004; Buckley and Schneider, 2002) that have been conducted there is no definitive answer as to why or how parents make these choices. Those who have conducted qualitative research, such as Bell, 2004; Koenigknecht, 1998; Pleasants, 2000 all sought to determine parental preferences in urban or suburban environments. As of this writing, research in parental decisions regarding rural inter-district transfer is non-existent. However, Schneider and Buckley (2002) indicate a need for research due to the lack of qualitative research in this area. All studies conducted in this area are based on survey data or internet data that often contradict each other. The stated preferences regarding a reason for choice are much different from the preferences that are revealed (Buckley and Schneider, 2002).

The most prevalent ideas may indicate that parents choose as whole complicated individuals from a multiplicity of factors, such as, the social appropriateness of the school, social ties to other choosing families, the reputation of the community, transportation opportunities, emotional interactions to school teachers and administrators, and the experiences of the children of relatives and neighbors with all aspects of the

school (Metz, 1987; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Ladd, 2002). Similarly, Williams (1993) identified four school factors that parents reported as influencing their school choice decisions. In order of importance, these factors were discipline (86%), staff (86%), academic standards (84%), civic/moral values (70%), and academic courses (65%). In another study, Sonnenfeld (1973) suggested that parental choice was based on the location of the school, its program, the school environment, and school cost. Additionally, a Gallop poll 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; (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. (Elam 1990).

In an attempt to decipher the parental process of selecting schools, Kamin and Erickson (1981) classified parents as either thinking or unthinking depending on the amount of thought they gave to the school choice decision. Parents who gave little thought to their options of schools were classified as “unthinking” and were typically:

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 to have finished secondary schools.
6. More likely to have been educated exclusively in public schools. Less likely to have discussed the choice of a school with someone outside the family.

7. Twice as likely to have let the child influence the choice of a school.
8. More likely to have considered only one school.
9. Far more likely to have sent the child to the school where most of the child's friends attended.
10. More likely to have left the choice of a school to a point near the beginning of the school term.
11. Much more likely to explain their choice in terms of convenience or the child's own preference.

Thinking- parents, on the other hand, typically were found to attain a higher social class and more likely to choose private or alternative schools (Kamin and Erickson, 1981).

Information Gathered

In theory, school of choice moves educational decision making from the state to the parents. In practice, the power of assigning students to a local educational district is removed from governmental decision makers and is given back to the parents. This creates a competition between schools for students and the money that follows each student. A school of choice policy takes ownership away from the professionals and hands it to the consumers (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Ladd, 2002; Vassallo, 2000). The consumers now have the ability to choose a school that they prefer with no requirement to make the choice based on instructional technique, curriculum, or any educationally implicit reason. Further, the reasons for parents' choice may be based on erroneous or misunderstood information (Ladd, 2002; Buckley and Schneider, 2002).

This uncovers another criticism in the school of choice debate, which is whether parents possess adequate information on which to base a decision. Finding quality information may be difficult for parents who want to choose wisely. Adler, Petch, Tweedie (1989) posit that parents base their decisions on irrelevant or poor information at

best. Further, while there have been studies that sought to discover how information is gained by parents (Bastiani, 1978; Woods, 1984; Wyn-Thomas, 1985), parent assessment of school characteristics remains subjective. Often times, the information parents use is learned from their children, neighbors, or family members (Bell, 2004; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Ladd, 2002) and may often be found to be misperceptions or totally misguided understandings of school policy or curriculum learned by second hand information (Adler, Petch, Tweedie, 1989). Making decisions with misinformation jeopardizes the very foundation of the policy of choice.

Information may be the greatest tool for parents who are attempting to make the best decision possible for their child. With good honest information, parents have the opportunity to make the choose a school for their children that provides the greatest opportunities. For a marketplace to be competitive and healthy, information is required so that the consumer may make informed decisions. It is imperative that parents receive accurate information about the schools that are available to their children. Additionally, if this market is to create innovation and efficiency, then teachers and administrators need information about what are best practices in other districts, so they, too, can improve (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001). Ironically, this is actually in conflict with many practices that we find in real life markets. For example: What makes the Colonels secret recipe so good? What ingredients go into a can of Coke? What is in Bush's baked bean that makes them so good? We have all heard of industrial espionage. Why would a market place in the educational field be any different? If one district finds the magic bullet for students learning and student achievement, would not a market philosophy suggest that a district should profit for their innovation, their

discovery?

There are several factors that appear to inhibit parents from sending their children to the best schools. Primarily, information may not be made available to all parents. Secondly, parents may not have the desire to have their child compete in the best schools due to fear of their child feeling inferior among better students or for other emotional issues. Parents living in or near poverty may not have the necessary information concerning school quality because such information is difficult to obtain and understand (Camoy, McEwan, 2000; Levin, 1991; Wells, 2004; Ladd, 2002). Additionally, information that does exist may not be fully disseminated or available to all parents (Gauri, 1998; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Buckley and Schneider, 2002). Even with full information on school quality, however, members of lower social class groups could be intimidated by, skeptical of, or opposed to members of the prevailing group, and therefore, remove themselves from competition for seats in the “best” schools. This means that parents, living in poverty, might not be as likely to choose higher performing schools with a higher socioeconomic student make-up even when their children might qualify for these districts (Wells, Crain, 1992; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Wells, 2004; Buckley and Schneider, 2002).

While information is important, it may not be the predictor of a parent’s choice. In a quantitative study, Adler, Petch, Tweedie (1989) found that in Chile, the parent’s reasons for choosing schools were not necessarily based on the quality of a particular school, but on other factors (Bell, 2004; Adler, Petch, Tweedie, 1989). Three surveys revealed differing reasons for rejection by parents of a local school district. The size of the school was the most frequently given reason. Location of the school was the second

most cited factor in rejecting the local school. In other words, a school located closer to the parents' work place seemed of some value to the parent regardless of whether the accepting school was deemed a failing school or not. The final factor was that of sibling attendance. If a sibling of one child attended a school, then the parents preferred that their other children also attend at the same building (Adler, Petch, Tweedie 1989). Finally, the danger related to the rejection by the parents of their local assigned district is that of appearance. There is a tendency to believe that a school that loses children is a bad school (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999). Therefore, when numbers decline, parents may see it as a quality issue and not realize that other parents are making decisions based on their personal convenience.

In spite of all of the school choice factors that parents report in surveys, there would seem to be an underlying factor that drives the school choice decision. Either the local school has a characteristic that pushes parents away, or another non-local school has some attribute that attracts the parent (Adler, Petch, Tweedie, 1989). What is not known is to what extent parents conduct research to determine the best opportunity for their child. The idea of accepting a school known to be less than exceptional is called "satisficing." This brings several questions to the forefront. Are parents setting pre-defined goals prior to choosing a school? To what extent are parents seeking to achieve the various pre-defined goals in their choice of a district? To what extent are parents looking for an appropriate alternative? Closely related questions are to what extent do the parents go to search for a school, and what resources are spent in the investigation of options. Moreover, to what extent is the prime motivation an avoidance factor, for example, a desire to leave from one school district, and to what extent is it an attraction

factor, for example, a positive appeal towards another district? Avoidance factors are more likely to be linked with the satisficing activity (Adler, Petch, Tweedie, 1989).

Increasing Parental Involvement

Research (Defour, 2003; Ladd, 2002; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Vassallo, 2000) teaches us that parental involvement is significant to the success of children. Research also tells us that the two strongest indicators of a child's success are the educational accomplishments of the birth mothers and the socioeconomic status (SES) of the family (Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001); that is, students from high SES families tend to do better than students from low SES families. However, research further indicates that when parents from either group become highly involved, they can contribute to continued success of the students during high school and beyond (Henderson and Berla, 1995).

While disadvantaged parents may feel a need to exercise a choice of schools because their local school is failing them, there appears to be more than one solution. The parents can make a difference by providing any type of support to the child. Students from single parent families and/or students with working mothers benefit from any positive educational support those parents can provide. Support can be time, materials, experiential, or financial. Important is the ability of the parents to get involved (Henderson and Berla, 1995). Along this same line, the gap in student achievement between the working-class and middle-class children may be more appropriately explained by inconsistent patterns of school district interactions with parents and with similarly inconsistent patterns of parent interactions with their children. Teachers and

administrators can get involved with parents in order to demonstrate how to help their children be successful. Parents who feel powerless and excluded can be reintroduced to the school district and to their child in order to establish effective lines of communication, regardless of race, religion, or financial status of the family (Ziegler, 1987). Similarly, the cultural origins of a family should not determine how well a child performs at school. Parents from a multiplicity of cultural origins and with differing financial situations or differing levels of education can promote inspiring home environments that encourages student achievement. (Kellaghan et. al., 1988).

Current evidence indicates many parents are failing to provide their children with the foundational skills needed to profit from education, which contrasts with the idea that all parents want and are qualified to be directors of their children's educational process. While there is great emphasis put on schools and their failures, researchers are less likely to look toward the home for issues relating to poor performance of students. Every educator that has spent a year in the profession has heard, and probably stated, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree". This is a statement generally made in frustration when a child is not performing well, and the parents are not able or willing to help motivate the student. Occasionally, researchers will echo this sentiment and pit school against family. One such study in America concluded that poor student achievement of children from low income homes was due to the impoverished language found in those homes. Mothers from the lower class were less effective in praising children, asked fewer questions of their children, provided less direction to their children, and communicated non-verbally more often compared with mothers within the middle or higher classes (Scott-Jones, 1993).

One factor that might be considered a disadvantage of parental decision making in the schools of choice debate is the parents own educational background and experiences (Bell, 2004; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Ladd, 2002; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001). While school choice advocates often propose that poor families should have the opportunity to attend the best schools, research indicates that in reality, the opposite occurs. Less educated parents are less likely to respond to the offer of higher social class schools, or schools that have been identified as higher performing, than do parents who are more educated. This is not to identify the less educated parents as irrational choosers but serves to point out the need to discover, specifically, how and why these parents would not exercise their right. For example, Wells and Crane (1992) argue that school choice is governed not only by available resources but also by access to pertinent information.

Some research indicates that in poor families, the parents might actually be alienated from the educational process. Bridges and Blackman (1978) described alienation as “powerlessness.” They argued that individuals with higher levels of education probably tended to have fewer feelings of helplessness and, therefore, they will search for information. This perception of alienation and the limited social contacts of economically disadvantaged parents hinder access to the school (Nault and Uchitelle, 1977; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001).

Student Enjoyment

The overall enjoyment of the participation in school, of a marginal student, would or could lead to that student improving their overall successfulness (Raywid, 1984).

Successful students in any school are often those with positive attitudes and dispositions toward their school. Schools of choice may or may not benefit students in this vein. While less successful students may indicate happiness when they first choose to attend another district, there are many questions to be answered regarding how long that happiness will continue (Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Ladd, 2002). Student satisfaction with the school engenders a positive beginning in two ways: (1) it opens the door for future success, and (2) it helps to promote positive actions prior to success. Schools of choice have the potential to generate student enjoyment and to create positive opportunities for students (Raywid, 1984).

Student achievement and student happiness may go hand in hand. The concept of student happiness has itself been the object of considerable study (Argyle, 1987). Some findings indicate the student's happiness with the school in some way drives the parent's decision making process (Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Ladd, 2002; Buckley and Schneider, 2002), and is applicable only for the student who is already enrolled in school. The different ways in which happiness may be evaluated and its connection with factors, such as, education and social relationships, may be explored in great detail. Parents may, in effect, be using the concept of happiness as a form of school evaluation, instead of a more conservative list of quality factors associated with choice behavior. Indeed there is some evidence to suggest that there may be an association between children's perception of their happiness at school and student achievement (Gray, McPherson and Raffe, 1983). The parent may therefore, with varying degrees of awareness, be choosing the appropriate environment knowing that it will be advantageous to their child (Adler, Petch, Tweedie, 1989).

Sustainability

In the past 20 years, many states have been challenged in their ability to provide appropriate education for all students. These challenges have driven policies that provide parents with the opportunity to choose a school of their liking. Currently this has led to very little innovation but rather has just provided more of the same with little hope for increased student achievement (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Ladd, 2002; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Wells, 2004).

The fact is that there is very little evidence that school choice policies work at all. Even around the world where choice has been in place for decades, there is little evidence that supports a significant increase in student achievement (Ladd, 2002; Buckley and Schneider, 2002; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Wells, 2004). Some criticism arises that schools of choice is just the “fad du jour” which will come and go like other school improvement tactics. Raywid (1984) disagrees with this stating, “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 (p. 71). This support may be one reason why schools of choice continue to proliferate in rural Michigan and in many rural areas throughout the United States (US). Similarly, there is no serious effort to decrease the opportunities provided to parents to choose the education for their children (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Vassallo, 2000). In the US, it remains a constant discussion of how to implement vouchers and/or increase parental choice in both federal and state governments.

The school of choice debate must be taken seriously because those at most risk if the system fails are the children. When the local public schools decline due to lower

enrollment and less funding, what will happen to the children who continue for one reason or another to be enrolled there? Many schools in the rural areas of Michigan have been and continue to be devastated (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Wells, 2004, Ladd, 2002) by opening the door for parents to choose other districts. School choice is also an important topic for parents and students who may be satisfied with their public school, or are satisfied enough that they do not want to move. For these students, the district that is serving them may have to cut programs and opportunities due to the small percentage of students who feel the urge to change districts. While the satisfied majorities are not leaving, a downward spiral in the quality of the schools may be created by the minority of students who leave because of higher academic expectations, issues of discipline, or other issues while taking their state monies with them and forcing districts or schools to cut programs. Subsequently more students/parents are unhappy about those cuts, and they also choose to go elsewhere. With the loss in revenue the district again cuts programs and again loses more students. In this very real scenario, choice certainly has negative impacts on the majority of students who are not dissatisfied or are not willing or able to choose another option and in the end stay (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999). While this is not a stated goal of schools of choice, it may be a hidden goal of schools of choice. In either case it may have an impact on many students who are choosing to stay in their local school. These children are being harmed by choice (Arsen, Plank, Sykes, 1999; Wells, 2004; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, 2001; Ladd, 2002).

Conclusions

Since school of choice is a relatively new frontier in public education, there is much research that still needs to be done. Two broad conclusions can be drawn from a review of the current research literature on school choice decisions of parents in rural communities. First, there is not enough evidence to determine whether the concept of school of choice is effective as the panacea that it was purported to be. Still to be determined is whether school choice has proven to increase innovation and efficiency in the discipline of education. Second, it appears that a school of choice policy actually has a tendency to undermine opportunities of equal access and promotes further segregation within schools, districts, and the state. These consequences direct us to further research into the key issues of parental decision making.

The key issues regarding schools of choice in rural areas center on decision making by the parents, and while parental involvement and information regarding schools are certainly key issues that affect schools of choice decisions, currently, there is very little knowledge in precisely how these affect a parent's decision. Next, student satisfaction or happiness plays some roll in a parent's decision making process, but how will a parent use this information to make a good decision regarding a school choice? Finally, the history of school choice and the knowledge that choice may be here to stay provides a solid foundation to suggest that research must be conducted to better understand how parental choice will continue to affect school districts and the discipline of education, and how additionally, legislators should continue to seek equity in education for all.

In conclusion, an important realization is that past research has overlooked rural education. Students in rural Michigan are often found to be at-risk, economically

disadvantaged, and poorly prepared for schooling. The students and parents in rural communities are similar in many ways to their counterparts in the urban communities but may select schools in a very different way. I believe that there are four very important questions that need to be answered regarding schools of choice in rural Michigan districts. They are:

1. What factors are influential in the decision of parents living in a rural community to choose a school?
2. How do parents in rural communities judge the quality of a school?
3. What sources of information do parents in rural communities use in choosing a school?
4. Who is involved in making the decision for schools of choice in rural Michigan?

Strategy for Inquiry

Chapter III

Research Questions

This study will be guided by the following four questions:

1. What factors are influential for parent's in rural areas decision to choose a school?
 - a. Proximity or convenience for parent?
 - b. Poor experience with a former district?
 - c. Perception that the receiving district matches the parent's values?
 - d. Perception of peers, colleagues, or community – reputation of school?
2. How do parents judge the quality of a school in a rural community?
 - e. Are parents making decisions by evaluating curriculum?
 - f. Are parents making decisions by evaluating staff/service/responsiveness?
3. What sources of information do parents use in choosing a school in a rural community?
4. Who is involved in making the decision for schools of choice?

Introduction

This study focuses on how and why parents choose one district over another in a rural setting. Parents hold the key to understanding what is desirable in a rural school district. As a former principal, and currently, as an assistant superintendent in a rural district, I see many parents who have chosen a school for their child based on a multitude of different reasons that were not necessarily driven by the overall quality of a school. Qualitative evidence is lacking that suggests why a parent chooses (Buckley and Schneider, 2002) the school for the child; however, while there is some quantitative data, results are somewhat questionable because stated preferences differ from revealed preferences. Surveys may ask the questions why or how; researchers may not be able to sense hesitation or partial answers from a survey (Kvale, 1996; Miles and Hubberman,

1984). While interviewing the respondents, I seek to ask the questions why and how and to delve deeper, in search of opinions, perceptions, and attitudes toward school of choice decisions (Glesne, 1999) and to understand the story behind the stated preferences. I seek to reach out to parents to find what truly moved them to choose one district over another for their child. Using this insightful information may help school administrators, legislators, and other researchers to have a better understanding of this broad topic. This idea is supported by Rubin and Rubin (1995) as they state that “qualitative interviewing is a way of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds. Through qualitative interviews you can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate.” (p. 10)

The Pilot Study

During the coursework for the PhD, I had the opportunity to conduct a “pilot study” regarding parental choice, how and why they select a particular school district. While conducting the pilot study, I found myself needing to focus not only on the interview of the day but also on the arrangements of the interview tomorrow. In preparation, I realized that each parent could be the potential “light bulb” of this study. If I missed an interview because of my responsibilities at work, the opportunity to capture that special piece of information that tells the story of how and why may be lost forever. The realization that one missed appointment might cost the study the most important data available. Glesne (1999) suggests: “As a good interviewer, you look ahead and ask, What does the situation call for? Some of the specifics about what to anticipate already have been mentioned. The lay summary is an example, in which to consider both what

must be said in order to present oneself and the project cogently, and how what you say may vary from situation (the superintendent of schools) to situation (the parents of students). What materials and equipment is needed to be assembled for the interview session? Who should be seen next, in light of what has been learned and not learned, and what arrangements need to be made to set up the next interviews? Anticipation feeds off the results of taking stock, an activity that might well be included at the end of the day in the daily task of log writing. Reflecting on each day is preparatory to anticipating what is next, both broadly in terms of the inquiry, and narrowly in terms of the next day's activities." (Glesne, 1999)

Participants

The subjects of this study resided in several rural districts in Southwest Michigan. The parents were self selected based on their decisions to choose to exercise their rights for school of choice. While all parents were invited to participate in the study only parents who volunteered to participate were interviewed. Additionally, parents that lived within the boundaries of the district that I work in were automatically eliminated from the list of potential interviews. While virtually every parent in this school district will be a chooser by default, those who do not choose to select or to give serious consideration to selecting a district other than the one in which they live have also made a choice. This study seeks to understand what pushes a parent past the tipping point (Gladwell, 1995) to choose another school rather than the local school for their children. I am interested in the meaning behind the choice: how parents make sense of the experiences and that of the structures between the resident district and the chosen district

(Merriam as cited in Creswell, 1994). Parent selection in this study is not random; it is done by design. The parents or actors who make a school of choice decision and the process that they use hold the answers that this study seeks (Miles and Hubberman 1984).

Participant Selection Rationale

Purposeful sampling was used to identify and contact subjects in the rural community to gain insight and understanding into their decisions regarding their reasoning for school choice (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1980). Further, these respondents are being selected for interviews because of their experiences with school choice in rural areas (Merriam, 1988). In essence, participants were selected because:

1. These parents chose to take advantage of the opportunity provided for by schools of choice legislation
2. The selected school had a relatively large population of choosers from which to draw an appropriate size sample (20 +)
3. In this rural area, all schools participate in offering enrollment opportunities for schools of choice students

All parents that selected the district through schools of choice legislation were invited to participate. In all, 28 parents or sets of parents were contacted and invited to participate in the study. Of the 28 potential interviews, 2 sets of parents could not be reached because the district did not have current phone numbers or addresses. Two more sets of parents declined to be interviewed and two agreed to be interviewed and then missed all scheduled appointments. The ability to gain access to a district is often one of the most daunting tasks of a study. The Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) provide districts with an easy excuse to refuse to release parent information and to consequently deny research to occur in their district. However, the researcher's

professional relationship with the administration in the chosen district allowed not only access to this research opportunity, but the district's superintendent volunteered to assist in contacting parents, and offered unlimited building access for the interviews. Rossman describes this as seeking permission from the gatekeepers (as cited in Creswell, 1994).

Participation by the parents in the research regarding school of choice relies on their willingness to communicate freely and truthfully. While they may answer questionnaires or surveys, there is no guarantee that the choices provided with the questions asked will bring out the real reasons parents select a school. However, it is possible that in a direct interview, the interviewer may access information that parents may not want to reveal - - - the answers that they are unwilling to respond to on paper or even in a phone survey. Adler, Petch, Tweedie (1989) support this by writing: "It should not be forgotten also that in offering and then selecting their reasons for choice, the mix that parents opt for reflects the particular 'account' which they wish to present of their behavior. The extent to which this is a deliberately selective construction of reality cannot be known. Given, however, that parents were quite ready to select for example options which spoke of "not the kind of children that we want our child to mix with," or to speak of 'rough and rowdy children', there is little evidence to suggest that parents felt constrained to volunteer only what might be perceived as acceptable criteria. Greater insight into the complexity and meaning of choice behavior would, however, have required a less structured and more searching interviewing methodology." (p.135)

Research Method

Direct, one-on-one, semi-structured interviewing (Esterberg, 2002: Patton, 1990)

with a list of predetermined questions was the method used for this research. In this method, the researcher used personal cues, such as hesitations, contradictions in answers, or other opportunities to look deeper into the respondents' answers (Esterberg, 2002).

Interviews provide the opening to learn about that which is not known, while also providing the chance to ask the question that was not developed before the interview.

Glesne (1999) states: "The opportunity to learn about what you cannot see and to explore alternative explanations of what you do see is the special strength of interviewing in qualitative inquiry. To this opportunity, add the serendipitous learnings that emerge from the unexpected turns in discourse that your questions evoke. In the process of listening to your respondents, you learn what questions to ask." (p.69)

Further, the interviews for this study were not only asked how and why but this study also sought to find the background of the parent chooser. The history of the parent is potentially important if it has connection to the subsequent choice for the child. There may be a cultural norm that either encourages or discourages a choice decision. Rubin and Rubin (1995) state: "Both oral history and life history interviews are examples of focusing on concepts of culture. In interviewing, researchers learn the rules, norms, values, and understandings that are passed from one generation of group members to the next" (p.168). This type of cultural interviews may provide insight into why parent respondents choose one district over another. Interviews get people talking about their experiences, feelings, or observations. Observations put you on the trail of understandings that then becomes one's perspectives. This insight into the history, a gaining of understanding, is what interviewing will provide to this research (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). To understand the nature of constructed realities, researchers interact and

talk with subjects regarding their perceptions; the researcher seeks out perspectives; they do not try to reduce the multiple interpretations to a norm (Glesne, 1999). To define and understand qualitative research further, Peshkin (1992) indicates that it may be broken down into four sub-categories: description, interpretation, verification, and evaluation. In this study, I intended to interpret the responses of parents in order to describe the deeper reasons these parents chose to select an alternate district. 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)

Throughout the course of this study, I followed Kvaales (1996) suggestions for interviews. Kvale suggests that:

1. The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee may increase the understanding of the phenomenon
2. The shorter the interviewer’s questions and the longer the subject’s answers, the better
3. The interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers
4. The interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the subject’s answers in the course of the interview
5. The interview is self-communicating, it is a story contained in itself that hardly requires much extra descriptions and explanations (p. 45)

Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews provided the data base for this study. This

qualitative data will consist of (1) detailed descriptions of the interviews; (2) situations in which they take place; (3) the researcher's perceptions about the people, the interactions, and observed behaviors of the parents; and most importantly, (4) direct quotations from the parents about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts. This data will provided adequate depth, detailed descriptions, including quotations, and excerpts, which have been treated as raw data from the empirical world (Patton, 1980; Denzin and Lincoln, 2002). Other sources of information included informal interviews with school officials, intermediate school district officials, university staff, and other parents.

The raw data that were collected reside both on audio tape and in detailed notes made throughout the interview. Patton (1980) suggests: "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)

The audio tape recorder used was a micro-recorder. It had the ability to record for two hours without changing tapes and had a battery capable of sustaining recording for approximately 10 hours. This meant no electricity was required and no disruptions occurred during the interview that could have changed the flow of thoughts. Glesne (1999) suggests the following regarding audio tapes: "Most persons will agree to the use of a tape recorder and for most research purposes an audio record is fully sufficient. Give due attention to the quality of your cassettes, tape recorder, and microphone" (p.79). These audio tapes were then transcribed, verbatim, so as to ensure that the participant's

responses were accurately portrayed in the findings of the study.

Finally, notes were taken throughout the interview as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen, (1992) in order to protect against the mechanical failure of the tape recorder and also as a way to begin to organize themes and important revelations; as such, data analysis began simultaneously as data collection (Creswell, 1994).

Instrumentation

The process remained very rigid at the outset. The district was contacted through the researcher's professional contacts (Creswell, 1994), with a follow up letter explaining the merits of the study (Appendix A). A meeting was then established between the districts superintendent and the researcher. In essence this meeting for all intensive purposes was an interview. At conclusion of the interview, not only was the study approved, the superintendent volunteered to help contact parents and to arrange the interviews. However, there was one simple caveat; I was to provide the superintendent and the districts school board a summary report or conclusion of my findings (Appendix E). The superintendent indicated that the board had recently questioned why parents were choosing Durban, and why some parents were leaving Durban for another district. Once this was agreed to, the research was ready to begin. In fact, the superintendent had his secretary help in contacting and arranging times for the interviews. This provided the district an opportunity to maintain confidentiality of all parents addresses and phone numbers. Subsequently all potential participants were mailed the same introduction letter (Appendix B). Before being interviewed, participants signed an identical waiver that indicated their approval to be interviewed and tape recorded (Appendix C). Further, all

participants were asked the same 24 questions during the initial one to two hour interview sessions (Appendix D). However, while the study began with 24 questions, other questions outside of the scope of the study were used to clarify and to seek more information, to find the meaning behind the respondent's statement. Glesne (1999) supports this approach by stating: "Semi-structured interviewing is a somewhat formal, orderly process that you direct to a range of intentions. Researchers ask questions in the context of purposes generally known fully only to themselves. Respondents, the possessors of information, answer questions in the context of dispositions (motives, values, concerns, needs) that researchers need to unravel in order to make sense out of the words that their questions generate. The questions, typically created by the researchers, may be fully established before interviewing begins and remain unchanged throughout the interview. Questions may emerge in the course of interviewing and may be added to or replace the pre-established ones; this process of question formation is the more likely and the more ideal one in qualitative inquiry." (p.68)

Questions changed throughout the study as they did with the pilot study. Further, a follow-up phone conversation or a follow-up face to face interview were not needed to seek additional information from some or all of the subjects. This type of evolution may help further studies of this nature and may help to instruct quality questions of a quantitative nature.

Site of Interviews

Interviews were conducted in the school districts library. This provided an appropriate meeting site that was familiar to the parents and yet provided a very quiet and

confidential setting. Interviews were scheduled at the parent's convenience, most occurring between 5:00 pm and 10:00 pm week-days, and between 8:00 am. and 5:00pm on Saturdays. Glesne (1999) supports this by stating: "Convenient, available, appropriate locations need to be found. Select quiet, physically comfortable, and private locations when you can; they are generally most appropriate. Defer to your respondents' needs because their willingness is primary, limited only by your capacity to conduct an interview in the place that they suggest. An office set aside for the researcher on a regular basis is ideal for interviews with students conducted at school." (p.78)

Procedures for Data Analysis

Data analysis began during the interview, both in written form and by audio-recording. While listening to the participants' responses I recorded notes regarding information that appeared to be of relevance (Denzin and Lincoln, 2002).

Simultaneously, I was analyzing and interpreting the meaning behind the responses, sorting information into categories, formatting the information into relevant stories, and sometimes writing qualitative text. (Creswell, 1994; Miles and Hubberman, 1994; Worthen and Sanders, 1987).

Data analysis continued after the interview and following the transcription of the tapes. Data was divided into coding categories (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Tesch, 1990; Marshall and Rossman 1989; Denzin and Lincoln, 2002) or themes in matrices to further organize and manage the notes and transcriptions (Miles and Hubberman, 1984). This provided a way to further organize the data, to delete unimportant information, and to cluster important concepts relating to particular questions or themes. Data was then

analyzed using a process suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1982):

1. Ascertain and develop impressions from notes and transcripts
2. Identify themes from the data set
3. Focus and concentrate on observing and documenting
4. Generate questions for future study

In essence, the data was reduced from more than 400 pages of transcripts, interpreted, and sifted in order to sort out important concepts and then irrelevant information was discarded (Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Miles and Hubberman, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 2002). Further, the data was loaded into a software program called Atlas Ti. This software allowed the researcher to be more accurate in identifying themes. In doing so, the whole of the interviews were more manageable and provided a more understandable picture of the research data (Tesch as cited in Creswell, 1994)

Finally, a narrative was developed combining important questions and the respondents' answers that provides clues that yield answers to the questions of how parents choose a district for their child, and why they have made the choice (Esterberg, 2002; Riessman, 1993; Denzin and Lincoln, 2002). Their stories may be used by administrators, legislators, and other researchers to make more informed decisions regarding schools of choice.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by the following conditions:

1. By the sample as inclusive to only those parents who elected to participate in the school of choice opportunity
2. By the cooperation of the parents who were interviewed
3. By the expertise and skill of the researcher in interviewing, soliciting, and analyzing the data from the parents

4. By the size of the sample
5. By the examinations of the decisions regarding choice to only those parents who agreed to be interviewed

Influential Factors of Parents

Chapter IV

Introduction

In the previous chapter, four questions were identified that would guide this study. First, what were the factors that influenced parents' selection of the Durban Public Schools over other schools? Second, what aspects or characteristics of the school district did parents use to judge the quality of this school? Third, what information if any, did parents use to assess the quality of this district? Finally, who participated in making the decision of which district to select? In Chapters 4 through 7, the thought processes of the participating parents are discussed in an effort to provide insight into the process that they used to select their children's school district. Figure 4.1 provides an overview of the parent's responses that will be found in this, and the next three chapters.

This chapter specifically identifies the most common responses from these parents regarding topics that influenced their choices, such as parent experience or educational background, and the relationship that convenience has with school of choice decisions. Chapter V identifies the most common responses regarding parental judgments of the quality of a school district, including the size of the district, district responsiveness, discipline within the school system, and the idea of using the term "chaos" as a way of describing a "bad school". Chapter 6 identifies the parents' most common sources of information about schools and describes the processes that parents use in seeking the information. Chapter 7 explains how parents view the significance of their children's enjoyment of their school, and also identifies which family members participate in the school of choice decisions. Chapter 8 provides a summary of the important concepts

Participants Responses to Common Themes

	Convenience	Parent attended Durban	Size of District	District Response	Discipline	Chaos	Gathered Information	Student Enjoyment is Important	Child Participated in Decision
Interview 1	X	X	X	X	X	No	No	X	No
Interview 2	X	X	X	X	No	No	No	X	X
Interview 3	X	No	X	X	X	No	X	X	X
Interview 4	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	No
Interview 5	X	X	X	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 6	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Interview 7	X	X	X	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 8	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Interview 9	X	X	X	X	X	No	X	X	No
Interview 10	No	No	X	X	X	No	X	X	X
Interview 11	X	No	X	X	X	No	X	X	No
Interview 12	X	X	X	X	X	No	No	X	No
Interview 13	X	No	No	X	No	X	No	X	No
Interview 14	X	X	X	X	X	X	No	X	X
Interview 15	X	X	X	X	No	X	No	X	X
Interview 16	X	No	X	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 17	X	No	X	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 18	X	No	X	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 19	No	X	No	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 20	X	X	X	X	No	No	No	X	No
Interview 21	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Interview 22	X	No	X	X	X	X	No	X	No

X = theme played a role in the decision

Figure 4.1

from each of the chapters 4 – 8 and explains the ways that this data supports prior research. Finally, Chapter 8 gives voice to concepts that were not reported in previous research on schools of choice. In addition, Chapter 8 identifies areas, and makes recommendations for future research.

All of the data which was collected through interviews focuses on one small rural school district in Southwest Michigan. That school system, which for purposes of confidentiality, I have renamed Durban, has less than 500 students enrolled for grades kindergarten through 12th grade. In spite of its small size, this school district has somehow managed to draw 57 students from 32 families through the school of choice process. While other rural districts within a 30 mile radius are slightly larger in enrollment size, the schools of choice enrollments are not as high as at Durban. Figure 4.2 identifies the students who both participate in the schools of choice process and are shared by this group of schools.

Resident District		Cape Town	Durban	Eland	Hot Springs	Jonesburg	Krueger	
Cape Town	Sending	47	0	25	19	1	2	0
	Receiving	35	0	10	11	1	8	5
Durban	Sending	26	10	0	0	3	9	4
	Receiving	57	25	0	5	11	12	4
Eland	Sending	18	11	5	0	0	2	0
	Receiving	30	19	0	0	0	7	4
Hot Springs	Sending	32	1	11	0	0	0	20
	Receiving	19	1	3	0	0	0	15
Jonesburg	Sending	37	8	12	7	0	0	10
	Receiving	48	2	9	2	0	0	35
Krueger	Sending	63	5	4	4	15	35	0
	Receiving	34	0	4	0	20	10	0
Total	Receiving	223	47	26	18	32	37	63
Total	Sending	223	35	57	30	19	48	34

Numbers represent students shared between these schools only

Figure 4.2

Through the next four chapters, whenever reasonable, parents' statements have been represented in full context, to give the reader a better opportunity to understand the parents' personalities and perspectives. While their statements may seem long, their words tell interesting and important stories which might be lost in a simple summary. While the length of their statements is sometimes long, the insight their statements provide tells an interesting story, one that could be lost in a simple summary. In addition, I have attempted to draw a portrait of these parents, by describing those parts of their history and experience that seemed relevant to the school of choice questions under study here. Hopefully, this data will support a fuller understanding of the decision processes used by the participants.

Parents School

Two common threads were discovered throughout the interviews. The first was that parents, who had attended Durban as children, felt very comfortable bringing their child back to the same school. In spite of the fact that the school may have changed greatly from when the parent left or graduated, these alumni still felt a level of assurance that their child would be served in a positive manner by the district.

The second thread, centers on the idea of convenience for the parents. In most cases, the parents were more concerned about the ability to juggle a busy work schedule with the difficulty of running kids to the doctor. Additionally, parents identified the convenience of having family members close to the school so that the children could walk to the family members' homes for baby sitting services. The convenience of daycare was also mentioned quite often as a reason to choose a district. The following

pages contain data that pertains to these themes.

Doug has a girl in the 3rd grade and a son in the 4th grade at Durban. Doug attended Durban across his entire primary, middle and secondary educational experience. He remembers his experiences and comments on the lack of problems that he encountered there. He acknowledges the influence these played in his school of choice decision. Doug states,

“I went all thirteen years here. That probably weighed quite a bit on our decision as well. I’ve got a narrow mind. I didn’t really have any problems that I couldn’t live with here, so this was fine. Now, I don’t know what it was like going to another school at that time because I never went to another school. But I’m also somewhat carry the same theories if it ain’t broke don’t fix it. Uh, you know if I went here, and I made it, and I’m happy, and I get along in life, why not send my kids, you know.” (Interview 4)

Similarly, Irene’s husband attended Durban kindergarten through 12th grade. Irene did not attend Durban. They have a daughter in 1st grade, and Irene is currently not happy with Durban. Irene has not left Durban because of the history that her husbands’ family has with Durban, but hinted that she would like her children to attend the schools that she went to. Irene states,

“ . . . I mean my husband is from Durban. He went to school here - - - graduated here. Now my kids are right over there at their grandma’s house right now. I thought a lot about it because I’m from Krueger, and I just didn’t quite think that Durban had things to offer that the other schools did as far as variety,

but I got to thinking, you know, a small school, you know, then she'll get more attention and continue to grow and continue to learn at a fast pace. And, well the only reason why I'm staying here is uhm - - - my husbands family all graduated here or she would have been gone at Christmas because I don't think I should have to fight this much for them to get the teachers to do what they are supposed to be doing. I'm from Krueger, all my family is in Krueger, my friends are in Krueger. My nieces and nephew are going to Krueger schools." (Interview 9)

Laura and Luke both attended Durban Public Schools for their education from kindergarten through 12th grade. They have a daughter in the 1st grade and are happy with the schools. They both recalled the pleasant experiences they had as students in Durban and are confident that the school can serve their daughter as well. Laura indicates this by commenting:

"I went to school here. He went to school here. I remember the teachers and the school; I mean, now to go in there with her, and they still know me, and I think that was one thing that, that really sticks in my head is that it being such a small school that you knew; they knew everybody in which it kind of sticks with you. Honestly, from the time she was probably really a baby we wanted her to go here, just because this where we went to school. I know the teachers, well most of them, a lot of them at least in elementary are teachers I had for teachers." (Interview 12)

Nannette attended Durban from 5th grade through 12th grade and graduated from

Durban. She now has a 4th grade son who attends there. Her primary reason for choosing Durban was her positive experiences and the way the school made her feel when she was here. Her relationships within the Durban school system have contributed to her perspective that Durban is a good school, one that will be beneficial to her child.

I questioned: ***“Tell me a little bit about your background, where you went to school.”***

Nannette responded, “We moved here and I graduated from Durban.

Uhm - - - and I think that was one of the biggest reasons why when we moved back here I went with Durban rather than Cape Town because we were living in Cape Town at the time. I know how it made me feel, and I was sure that was how he would feel if he came here, and he has done wonderful since he’s been here. I know how I was taken care of when I was here, so I didn’t have any doubts that he was not going to be treated the same. You know this is home for me, and I wanted it to be home for him. ” (Interview 14)

Opal attended Durban across her primary and secondary education. She then attended college, completing both a bachelor’s degree and later a master’s degree. She has recently moved back to the Krueger and works for another local school district. Her sons are in 5th and 11th grade and after reportedly doing some considerable research; the family decided to enroll the children in Opal’s alma mater. Opal provides the following as reasons:

“I went to high school and elementary school here in Durban and then went to Western Michigan University and then went to College of William and Mary for my graduate work, and my husband is military, so we have been traveling for 22

years, so we are just returning back home. The other thing I should mention was the familiarity and sense of community here in Durban. I guess I had good feelings coming out of this, so I felt like that was an experience they should have.” (Interview 15)

William is a school teacher in a local district. He has two sons, a 4th grader and one that just started kindergarten. Although William works in one district, his family chose to send their children to the school that he attended as a boy. Interesting is the sense of dissatisfaction that he indicates regarding Durban, yet he still enrolled them in Durban. He states,

“My wife and I went to Durban, and we liked the familiarity we had with a lot of the teachers that were still there from when we both went to school there, and when she (Williams wife) used to teach there. What I don’t like is what I’m seeing now, especially at their intermediate, lack of communication, the lack of challenging certain students who can explore on their own and excel on their own, which the Krueger teachers did a very good job of doing. They are extremely behind technology-wise, and that has lead to us even considering possibly pulling out and going someplace else.” (Interview 20)

Convenience

School is close to Work

Betty has a 2nd grade son, and a 4th grade daughter; convenience of daycare was one of the main reasons that she chose Durban. When asked; “why did you move your children?” Betty states,

“Convenience was the main reason. The other thing is we are still involved with Durban, and we know everybody. Like I said, it is a small community. Our babysitter lives in the Durban school district, so it's convenience with the daycare. I didn't want to change daycares, and so in kindergarten the bus could take them to daycare after school or before and pick them up there.”

(Interview 2)

Similarly, Ellen believes that it is especially convenient to have her daughter attend Durban because she teaches at Durban. Ellen's daughter Amanda attended another district, but was spending a significant amount of time in her mother's classroom. Ellen teaches special education at the high school level. Ellen stated,

“Amanda was going out of elementary school, and we thought it would be nice for her to come to the same school I was at. She was coming to a lot of the extra things that the school was doing, and she was in my classroom, and she was getting to know those people already. She chose to come here.” (Interview 5)

Interestingly, Freda not only attended K-12 in Durban, but she now teaches elementary in Durban and identifies the convenience of having her children at the same

school. Freda's experiences as a student and currently as a teacher make her very unique in her perspective. Freda states,

"Well, one is obviously convenience. I think living in the area and knowing the people in the community is great. I didn't like driving to another community where we don't live, we're in Hot Springs, but we're near the border, I mean we are right on the line so, to me, we are still in Durban. When my kids are sick, I'm here. I can take them home. I think I just feel the attachment to the school in Durban. I've been here so long I just can't imagine anywhere else."

(Interview 6)

Helen attended Durban for her entire primary and secondary education. She has an 8th grade daughter that now attends Durban even though they live in another district. She indicates that the convenience of her parents being close was at the heart of the decision, as well as working in the community. Helen states,

"I could drive her to my parents' house, drop her off, and she could walk to school. So you know it was pretty easy still. I didn't have to worry about her getting back and forth to school. The main reason I, I waited is to make sure that she had proper supervision (laughter). I work here, and my parents are here, so there, you know it boiled down to convenience. If I took her to the doctor's office when she was in the other school, I would have to take an hour and a half off work just to go pick her up and get her to the doctor's office." (Interview 8)

Kathy has an 8th grade daughter and identifies convenience as the main reason for

the choice. When asked why Kathy moved her daughter to Durban Schools, she states: “It was a lot closer. If I had to pick her up for any reason it’s a lot closer than Krueger and Hot Springs School District anyway, and we only live about five miles, so it was just convenient for us.” (Interview 11)

Similarly, Laura and Luke mention the convenience of having a school near their child care provider as Laura suggests:

“From the time she was a baby we thought she would attend Durban. And we actually both work first shift, and there is nobody at our house to get kids on and off the bus that would be coming, so she was going to my sisters for a babysitter; and she’s in Durban School District. So that is why she is actually in Durban School District. But now that I can, if I’m going to stay home, I will probably still keep her here. I think the main reason we did it was simply the best choice for us; she would be at my sisters to ride the bus here and get off the bus while we were at work. (Interview 12)

Mark and Mary have a 7th grade and two 5th grade boys. Mary is from Taiwan and is actually the boy’s step-mother, but speaks of the children as though they were her own. Mark is obviously in charge as he answers all of the questions first and then looks to Mary for her expected approval. Mark indicates that they did not want the kids to attend Cape Town and then mentions convenience as the primary reason to send students to Durban. He states: “Availability. It was critical, once we decided we did not want Cape Town, so now the next question was availability. The only available district that

was convenient for needs for us was here. Otherwise, we would have had to transport to another district. (Interview 13)

Bus Transportation

Opal provided another interesting point while she was talking about the reasons that her family chose Durban. It seems that the Board of Education has decided to send their busses into the territory of other districts in order to increase their student populations and revenues. Opal states: “uhm - - - and the other thing that they did here that was very helpful is the bus route was within a mile outside their district and they - - - we had bus transportation if we wanted it. That was a big thing, when we’re both working, and so that was a sell. I think that’s probably one, one of their biggest logistical things if they want to do school of choice would be transportation. (Interview 15) Opal wasn’t the only parent to share this little secret with me, but she was probably the most forward in her thinking. Later, she would indicate the importance of marketing and competing for students. Durban, in fact, is running several routes into neighboring districts as far as 8-10 miles into the Cape Town district, according to Durban’s former Transportation Director.

Similarly, Paul has noticed that transportation is relatively easy when the district will make a special trip to pick up his 9th grade daughter. Paul indicates,

“I know you brought up the bussing about where we lived, both buses went by there. She actually did ride the Durban bus. It wasn’t a 100% me driving her to school. I do now but at that time I didn’t. And where were going to live, if

there is any luck, I'll continue to have custody of her, and that was a big choice when I decided to do it. You know we are only going to be about 4 miles from the school, which is about what we are right now. It will be just north of the school instead of south of the school. That was a big decision in buying a house, and I hope the school will continue to pick her up special." (Interview 16)

Finally, in probably the most intriguing interview of this research project, Ursula describes her thought process regarding the importance of bussing. Ursula has a 12th grade son at Durban, and two other boys who have moved to the school where she is most recently employed. Ursula has an interesting background. She taught in a local school district (which she attended as a child), and was fired during her second year there. She was then "blackballed" by that same district when she interviewed at Cape Town Public Schools. She recently was hired in Hot Springs and now teaches high school science. While her sons all attended Durban last year, she had a disagreement with the Superintendent last spring regarding a personnel issue and then decided to move her younger children to her new district. While even I had difficulty understanding the entirety of this family's story, she brought more light onto the vastness of the bussing across district lines. Ursula states,

" . . . there are three buses that go down our road. So, it was easy just to ride the bus. We lived here, so we knew everybody and resources again, we didn't have a lot of money while I was going to school and that was the factor. He knew a lot of children here, and we knew the families. My husband grew up, so, he did grow up here. And he knew everybody that was a big factor. The

people were very encouraging about having Cole come in and be in the classrooms. And they said; “We can’t wait to have Cole.” This is wonderful, and that’s working for him, and they made it a very open door. Let’s work on this, and let’s help Cole and do the best we can. So this time we really didn’t, but talking about and I talked with Cole a lot because I drove him to school.”

(Interview 21)

Summary

The examples above highlight three of the most common responses to the question of why parents selected a particular school district. The factors that seemed to be most important here were parent’s educational background, the convenience of the schools location, and bus transportation. It is logical to consider bus transportation as a part of the convenience of a school system. What makes it interesting in this case is that student transportation by urban and suburban districts, across district boundaries, is a topic that has not been mentioned in previous studies. Transportation in this rural area has been identified as very competitive, with as many as four different districts running buses on the same roads picking up students within other school districts’ boundaries.

Parents Judge Schools

Chapter V

Introduction

Parents described ways in which they judge schools in response to almost every question throughout the interview process. While there were questions specifically designed to elicit information that would reveal how parents judge schools (Appendix D), it became evident very quickly that each question and each parental response produced more data that describes how they judge a school district.

The size of a district and the size of the community was one of the themes that parents talked about in great detail. District response, including push and pull factors was another theme that was often mentioned. Push factors are basically defined as any characteristic or correspondence that causes a student/parent to decide to leave a district. Pull factors on the other hand are characteristics that encourage a family to choose a district through school of choice legislation. Finally, discipline issues and the concept of chaos was a prevalent topic that parents stated as a primary reason to select, or to avoid a district in a school of choice decision. Discipline quite often was described in relation to push factors. In other words, if a child was continually in trouble in his resident district, then the parent/child indicated a desire to find a new school; to avoid the trouble.

The following pages describe some of the most prevalent and intriguing responses from parents in this study.

Class Size

In trying to determine what parent's value in a school district, the concept of the size of a district, and sometimes the ratio of students to teacher, or class size became quite apparent throughout the interviews. Additionally, the size of the community was often used interchangeably with the size of the district. Similarly, the size of the district was used interchangeably with the size of the class. In fact, 20 out of 22 parents or sets of parents interviewed mentioned size as being an important characteristic of a class, district, and/or a community. When talking about her vision of a bad school, one that she would not want her 8th grade daughter to attend, Annette said:

“I think an overpopulated school is awful, to make the students to teacher ratio smaller and not that it's anybody's fault, it's just too much for anybody to keep track of. There is not time spent on the students. The big thing is sometimes you know one of them in their family has like ADD and stuff, and he really hasn't got help in school either when we had problems. Nobody has time to work with them on an individual basis you know.” (Interview 1)

Similarly, Casey also was adamant about the low class size; however, she seems very confused about how big the classes are in Durban compared to the school they left, Cape Town. The exchange was even confusing to me, as we conversed about her 9th grade son.

“What aspects of a school are the most important for children to learn?”

Casey replies, “In my opinion, they have to have the teacher to student ratio low, because that to me is the biggest problem that Cape Town has. Here,

the seventh grade class, I believe, consists of about 30-45 students. Cape Town has 20-25 students per class, and they have four classrooms. So he was just getting lost in the shuffle. He wasn't getting the individual attention that he needed, and that is what these kids with learning problems, they have to have."

"So how many classrooms or how many in a class do they have at Cape Town?"

"Twenty to twenty five."

"They had 20-25, and Durban has how many in a classroom?"

"I believe 30-45 for the whole seventh grade."

"How many seventh grade teachers do they have?"

"My goodness, I couldn't tell ya, cause my son only has four. And the gym class and choir in the sixth grade was his last year, there was four, six grade rooms with 20-25 students per room."

"So the class sizes here are much smaller?"

"A quarter of what they were over there. I like the small classrooms. He has to have a small classroom in order for him not to get lost again. I like the teachers; I have not had one problem with any of the teachers."

"What's the definition of small classrooms? What is too big?"

"Small is ten to twelve, too big would be twenty five, thirty. I mean, I realize that with the science class in Durban, it has all of them, but there are still only thirty-two, and he still has the help that he needs. And the teachers are still there if you need help. So that's small. The class size is what I wanted, that to me is important" (Interview 3)

Doug and Dana provided more insight into the importance of having a small school, with small class sizes. When talking about their decision to choose Durban they went on and on about how important the size of a district is, and how important the size of the class is. Doug began,

“It was a small class, and I like the small school. I’m not one to patronize - - I don’t patronize Wal-Mart. They’re too big. I don’t like big. I like the small guy. I’m a small guy. I’m a small business man. I’m a small guy, I like small, I like the small and on a personal level.”

Dana interrupts, “Coming from the big schools I’ve heard of how a small school works through him (husband) and friends and stuff that have gone to this school. And the experiences of me being basically the good kid that never got in trouble, I wished that I had gone to a small school because there was a lot of things that I seen and had to go through that I didn’t feel that was really was necessary. Because you know it was the rules they had were set for the trouble makers, and it was the good kids that got caught in the middle there, and they couldn’t get out. I mean, you had to suffer with the bad ones.”

Doug -"And you read about graduate classes out of the new schools there - - - Prairieview and Jonesburg, it’s nothing to have a 300 or 400 class for graduation. And I remember when I was a senior in school getting ready to graduate, and they said: "Well, how many are at your graduation?" And I said: Well our junior classes are honor guard for seniors. And they said: "What do you mean honor guard?" So I told them what it was that we did. "Well, how big is your class?" Well I graduated with 37, 37 yeah I know everybody four years on either side of me

through school. I know the whole high school. And they graduate with like 150, 200 kids. They're lucky if they know their entire class, and I know three classes on either side of mine." (Interview 4)

As an elementary teacher in the district, one would expect that Freda would be supportive of small classrooms, and small schools. Interestingly though, Freda associates the size with safety and security. She states,

"Well I think it has to feel comfortable and safe to them, which is why I like the smaller school. I also think, you know, the people and you feel more comfortable, more like family because if you don't feel safe and comfortable you're not going to be able to learn anything. So, that is very important, and of course, I think that people know that a great school would definitely be a small school where most people knew each other. Small schools have more options for kids. uhm - - - facilities could be maybe better (laughter). But small schools are certainly comfortable." (Interview 6)

From a different perspective, Helen again speaks about bad schools as schools that are overcrowded. Interestingly, she mentions how her experience has influenced her perspective regarding small schools. She remarks,

"I mean there was my niece. She went to one elementary school that the classes were way overcrowded. I mean there were way too many students in a class. I'd have to go with a small school because there's a lot more interaction. You can't just become lost in a sea of faces. The teacher knows you. The teacher

is going to know you. There is no escaping attention. Everybody is going to know who you are. Its individualized attention and I think that's important because I just, I think that you, that especially as a teenager, you need someone to really to be able to focus on you." (Interview 8)

When asked about important aspects of quality schools, Paul doesn't hesitate to mention the perception of size as being very important. He begins,

"The nice thing about Durban is that the classes are smaller, so there is a little more benefit there as far as teachers maybe having a little more time per student. I'm not going to give you a number, but I would say where the teacher's able to give time to students that need it. And there are some students; my older daughter was that way; she never needed to study. I mean, she could set down to take a test and do the whole nine yards. Brittany is the opposite; she needs to study. Maybe she needs a little bit more one-on-one from a teacher, so that to me is a benefit of a smaller school. The smaller school, you know, I could feel like that's a benefit as far as the smaller classrooms and that." (Interview 16)

Similarly, Quinton who is a pipe-fitter by trade identifies small class size and small schools as those of quality. When talking about the qualities of a good school, Quinton not only mentions size as being important, but goes further to define what a small class is. Quinton states,

"I guess classroom sizes, you know, try to keep the classroom sizes down where they're not; if you got 20 kids in there it's a lot easier than teaching 30-40

kids. I mean the more one-on-one contact the teacher can relate to 20 kids easier than she can 40. And trying to keep 40 kids in a classroom and occupied and doing their school work and stuff, it's a lot of hassle. I mean, you know there are a lot of disadvantages of being a small school, but then there are a lot of good advantages. I think the good out weighs the bad. I mean they might not have all the high tech stuff that the other schools got, whatever, but I think that having a small school is more important than that." (Interview 17)

District Size

Betty sees the advantage of having a small school for her elementary students, but hedges somewhat on what will happen when they get to high school. The advantage of a small elementary school is appealing; however, the lack of opportunities at a small high school is troubling. While her children are in the 2nd and 4th grades, she is already talking about the future. Betty begins,

"Like I said, it is a small district. And I do like the comfort factor of the small district and that I know when my friends go to kid's houses, I know that family, and I know what's going on." (Interview 2)

Jack and Jill, the grandparents of 10th and 5th grade girls, similarly attribute small schools with teachers that care more. The girl's mother died in an automobile accident two years ago, and their father has never been around since their birth. Their decision hinged on the fact that the girls attended a small school in the Upper Peninsula, and these grandparents wanted them to continue in a small school. As they talk about their

granddaughters, they relate small schools with caring and professional teachers, teachers that will teach common sense. Jack begins by talking about teachers not teaching. He begins,

“Teachers should teach the basics, the basic fundamentals and a little bit of common sense. Common sense nowadays is out the window. I think that the smaller district, such as this one or whatever, has more, a little better opportunity to present them basics. I think the teachers are a little bit more geared to a smaller school environment where in some of the bigger ones it’s just a job. There is a difference between that and the teacher being a job or an occupation that you are almost called into. Also, the smaller the district, the fewer the kids, they may get better attention from the teachers and so on. To me in a big school, when they are teaching; it’s a job. In a smaller school, the teachers, it’s an occupation. I think there is a difference.”

Jill agrees by nodding her head and suggests: “I can’t imagine that they would enjoy making new friends because that was one of the things they were most concerned about. I think with a bigger school it is like comparing it to a church. If you want to get lost in a church, go to a big huge church. If you want to be a worker in the church, you go to a smaller one. You know, I don’t think we are ready to get lost in a big school.” (Interview 10)

Kathy’s daughter is in 8th grade and shares her idea of a bad school. This concept continues to surface as a bad school being big and unfriendly, while a small school is warm and inviting. Parents have the perception that there is more opportunity to build

relationships in smaller schools. However in larger schools, its all about crowd control.

She begins,

“Well, (long pause) I guess a bigger school is uncontrollable; you’ve got more people, and you’re going to have a whole different world. It’s like getting a big crowd together. You can’t control a big crowd; I like it because it’s a one-on-one if you have a problem. A good example of bad schools would be the Florida Schools. I have a lot of relatives in Florida, and we’re not talking about like 20 high school graduates. We’re talking about 200-300 graduating at one time. Its bam’ bam’. There is nothing nice about the graduation. You are in and you’re out and that is it. But, I consider that a bad school, in order to get something through, you have to go through about 3 or 4 people to talk to the person you want to.”

(Interview 11)

Nannette graduated from Durban and has a 4th grade son. The size of the district and warm comfortable feeling one gets from a small school is special. She describes a small district:

“Because this was a very small town, very small school district, I think I felt like I fit in more. That is, I got a cozy warm feeling being here. This is like a second home; that’s how comfortable I was. uhm - - - I can’t say that there was any teacher that I was never happy with. I got along great with all of the teachers. I guess you can’t sum it up into one word, but being a smaller district I honestly felt this was where he would fit in and be comfortable; that certainly came into play. That was very important to me after knowing how things were before we

moved, in the school he was in before.” (Interview 14)

Another common thread shared in many of the interviews was the belief that this small district had a positive effect on their child. Rebecca shares the following about her 12th grade son:

“Michael is a little, (ha) he’s actually a good kid. He did exactly what I said: “Get all your hard stuff done in your junior year, and then have fun in your senior year,” and he is pretty smart, but he doesn’t put it to the fullest potential. But I think Durban has a lot to do with how he is. Where as if I were to have sent him to a bigger school district, which I had to fight for him not to go to Coldsprings, and he’s contained a little bit, but he’s pretty good. Because everybody knows everybody, the teachers, the kids know that if they come here they know my child. So if he’s not in school, they call me at home or work. You know they keep an eye on them. They know the parents; they know the kids. I just feel better about a small district. Because I went to a big school, I know what it was like. I went from a little school to a big school, and that didn’t work out very well. And my kids started in a little school, and Durban is a smaller district, but I was trying to get it really close to the same size, and I had heard good things --- so ---.” (Interview 18)

District Response

Push Factor

Adam and Annette certainly felt frustrated with the teacher in Cape Town. Their response to remove their daughter from that school would be considered as a pushed factor. In essence, the district response to their needs was bad enough in the parents perspective to move their child to another school. However, if the parents had indicated that they were lured away by a school, that would be considered a pull (this will be described in greater detail in the following section). As we move through this section, we will see parents who were pushed away from one district or another. Here is what Annette had to say about Cape Town:

“It was a lot of struggle with her, a lot of effort on our part, and that was the frustration that we had was that teacher; “I don’t do one on ones. I don’t do this, I don’t do that;” and sometimes, you know, a teacher taking time to explain things, can explain things different than a parent can, and sometimes a child will listen to it. That teacher was terrible; no communication! So, it was just that she was (the daughter), I guess more when she was getting up like in middle school is when she really started getting behind in like Math; and English is where we really started noticing that not a lot effort was put out by her; she wasn’t doing so hot. And I like that the principal (Durban’s) when I first met him, we talked to him about the situations going on, and he like, had examples of, he didn’t say any names, but I like, I felt like he really paid attention to his students. I really liked that he knew what was going and kind of who to keep an eye on. I just, I liked that I really felt like he paid attention to what’s going on.” (Interview 1)

Similarly, Casey had the same type of issues with her 9th grade son. She felt as though she had to fight just to get a response from the school. The lack of response from the resident school is what drove her to choose another school. Casey explains,

“I yelled and yelled, and then they said that he was just lazy. He was lazy and he had an attitude problem. They said he was a violent child, and he is just not. In fact, his teachers here tell me he’s so quiet that most of the time they don’t even know he’s in class.”

“How long has he gone to Durban?”

“He started in, I believe it was mid September of his sixth grade year. I had had all the problems with Cape Town that I could deal with.”

“So you’re just over a year here?”

“Yes, I mean it is just a difference in his grades and his whole attitude. So we made it worth it. He wasn’t getting the individual attention that he needed, and that is what these kids with learning problems, they have to have. They don’t care. One instance before we moved to Detroit. My son was doing Cape Town. We were traveling back and forth on weekends, and I was dating a guy up there, and it was a Thanksgiving weekend. So I’m coming home from work Wednesday night; and we’re hurrying; we’re trying to beat traffic - - - Detroit’s a mess (laughter). Uhm - - - he had scratches on his face. Then I looked and he had this big goose egg on the back of his head. So I’m trying to figure what went on. The teacher, the principal, nobody called from Cape Town. When we got back Monday, I had the principal on the phone, and I asked: “What happened?” “Well

he, he's an attitude problem," they said. I said he is not an attitude problem. You put him on the bus with an ice pack and a head wound and didn't even bother to call me. He said: "Well I forgot." I said you just don't forget about head wounds. I said. And it was, that was just, they did not care. They don't care. There was a student over there when my son was there, he had emotional problems. And he was a violent."

"The other student?"

"Yeah and they would call his mom when he would start to get out of control. They called his mom when he starts to get out of control, but yet you can't call me when there is a problem like that. That's a health issue. They said: "Well that's the way we deal with him."

"You said there had been other fights before that, or other scraps, or other issues?"

"Yeah, he had been the victim of a bully. There were three that I knew of. And basically that principal said you are going to stand there and take it if a bully beats you up. I said no he's not. He's not going to throw the first punch, but you are not going to, he's not going to stand there and let some bully beat him up. I said if you are, if your teachers can't keep an eye on what's going on, then you need hire more people to keep on eye on what's going on. They care in Durban; they are willing to work with me. Uhm - - - they are willing to work with the students. They want him to succeed."

"How do teachers demonstrate they care, what do you see as a parent, or how do you know a teacher cares?"

"They would call me. They will email me. They will help him more. She realizes

what he needs, a little extra help, and she will allow him to take his test with Mrs. Williams. When he doesn't understand a question it can be explained to him. If he doesn't understand, they will quietly set down and try to help him, explain it to him."

Later in the conversation, Casey describes yet another incident at the former school. I ask, ***"This was after the trip to Detroit? This was another fight?"***

"Separate, a separate incident, the school I thought maybe it would calm down through the summer. And he said mom: "I've had enough" and he said: "You know they're rude there, the teachers are rude." She (principal) said: "Oh it's you again;" when I took him the next morning and I. I had been in contact with the superintendent over there before. I had also been in contact with the school board over there."

"Who was the principal at that time?"

"The principal is Mrs. Johnson. The principal that was in that day was Mike Ross who I had had as a teacher. And I have a lot of respect for him as teacher, as a coach, as a person, but Mrs. Johnson I have no respect for at all. I think she is a useless piece of space." *(Mrs. Johnson was recently recognized as principal of the year by a state association)*

"If you were to list three, or the three most important reasons for enrolling your child here what would those be?"

"I like the teachers. I have not had one problem with any of the teachers. They sat down and talked to me and listened to my concerns that I had and even when I enrolled him I expressed concerns about uhm - - - his hand writing and his

reading. In fact, Josh Hightower (Durban's Principal) was setting there when I was filling out the papers to enroll him and he had him write. He said: "We just need more practice." So that to me said volumes right there. When the principal, I'm not sure if he was acting superintendent at the time or not, but he sat right there and was talking with me and answered questions and was talking to my son as a person not a as a child but an actual person. But that said a lot, and I'm so happy with him being here." (Interview 3)

Ginny's 9th grade son is also a young boy who did not have much success at Cape Town. Ginny felt like no one cared. Again, even though Ginny acknowledges that her son is mischievous, she describes a lack of response from the resident district that caused the parents to choose another school. When asked to describe Andrew, this is what she had to say:

"Andrew is a very mischievous child, classic ADHD syndrome. Whatever you want to call it, and uhm - - - that is where part of the problem with the other school arose. Cape Town was the school he was going to, and they didn't even want to recognize the fact, even though he had been diagnosed by the doctors. I just couldn't take the stress. We compared the disciplinary process of both schools, and the one here is corrective, not punitive as such, I mean they can still punish the kid because they messed up. I mean if a kid screws up in school why punish him; I should say why reward him by giving him the day off and sending him home so he can lay around and watch TV or whatever you know. And at the time I was working, so, yeah he loved the day off (laughter) you know."

“What was the critical moment? When was the decision that something needed to change, and you were taking him somewhere else? What was the critical moment?”

“I had to decrease my stress level and that constant battle with the school was just one more thing to add to the list. They weren’t doing anything for him, and it was making me worse so. And, well, the principal once we did, there was the initial principal-student interview.” (Interview 7)

Irene’s daughter is in 1st grade at Durban, and this parent is one of several who are not satisfied with the responses that they have had with Durban. Our conversation is interesting because not only is she not transferring her daughter out of Durban right now, she is not convinced to move her next year either. We enter this conversation somewhere in the middle after Irene has hinted dissatisfaction with her daughters’ teacher. I asked:

“The first grade teacher is not very good?”

Irene responds, “I don’t, I don’t know how to describe it. I’ve done nothing but fight this year for my daughter at this school.”

“What happened?”

“Uhm - - - the teacher’s ethics are just not, they’re not working, and we’ve proven it and told them that, and it’s still going on regardless of what I’ve done.”

“You say ethics, what’s she doing wrong? Give me an example.”

“She’s treating my first grader like a third or fourth grader. Her sentence structures were way off. It was awful, she hated school. Because you know she thinks she goes for school all day; then I gotta come home and try to catch her up. And she is very bright. That’s the sad thing. She’s bright, and she catches on to

things fast, but this was awful.”

“Describe what a bad school would be like.”

“Where they don’t keep on top of their teachers and make sure that they are up to par and going in to them and sitting there and making sure that the teacher is doing what they’re supposed to. I’m talking once a month you go to each teacher to make sure they are following, I don’t know, code or ethics or whatever you want to call it. But that the kids are learning, following up with parents to see if what the teacher is doing is working. Stay on top of teachers basically.”

(Interview 9)

Jack and Jill talk about the importance of teachers caring about kids. This is a very common statement that will be continued throughout many of the interviews of this study. When talking about quality schools, caring teachers was commonly mentioned by many of the parents. Additionally, parents describe caring teachers as those that love kids, and also communicate often. Jill suggests,

“I think a great school is where teacher are there because they love the kids. Sure you gotta work for money, but it is because they love the kids, and they want what is best for the kid which engulfs as far as teaching their best. And this idea any more seems like of asking kids. You don’t hear of too many kids being failed because they can’t make it. They just pass them along for whatever reason so that they don’t, they aren’t embarrassed to stay behind or whatever. But don’t miss out on the point you are there to teach them. If they don’t learn how many years or whatever they have got to be there to learn because it is for the best

in the future.” (Interview 10)

Along the same lines, when asked what a bad school is, Paul describes one where teachers do not care. Where teachers do not invest enough effort with their students. He states,

“A bad school is where the teachers don’t have, or don’t take the time, to work with students, especially the ones that maybe need a little bit more. Uhm - - allows a lot of behavioral things to go on, not just with one student but when there is a group problem. One thing that, at least in this particular case, it seems that Cape Town School District has a lot of relative teachers you know. Like you had a brother that was two years older and went to the same school you did, and maybe he wasn’t a model student, or whatever you want to call it, or just didn’t get along with the teacher. And that, that to me kind of follows through a little bit over there. I haven’t seen that here. Uhm - - - and I know a lot of the teachers there. I know a lot of the teacher here at the tech business end. I mean I work on quite a few vehicles from both places so.” (Interview 16)

Similarly, Stan talks about schools that just “won’t help kids, that won’t teach kids.” Stan begins by talking about teachers who do not care.

“They just, in my opinion, they don’t know how to teach and help individual students that, I mean, it’s not like you gotta spend a lot of time with them, but if a kid’s having problems and raises their hand, you know. If you want them to learn you gotta go help them. And they didn’t do that. Personal relations,

learn your kids, you know, how to interact with people but definitely a big part. Because I mean you can have all the books in the world, but if you can't interact with somebody, you can't get the information you need to formulate an opinion about anything. If you don't get along with somebody, you're not going to learn from them, you know."

"Describe the critical moment when you finally selected a school? What was the last straw at Cape Town?"

"It began with major problems with my oldest daughter. Kids at school, and it wasn't so much the things that happened in school but was things that happened out of school and in both kids being there, and, you know, lack of supervision. And a major issues."

"Did she get in trouble?"

"No - - - she got raped, not in the school, but the school had no, I mean when we started going to court, you had kids that liked that boy, and they started doing stuff in school to harass her, and the school wouldn't do nothing, and that was the last straw that broke the camel's back." (Interview 19)

Pull Factor

Laura and Luke tie the idea of a small school with better service. Their response indicates an attraction to the Durban School District. This attraction to a district is considered a pull factor. Laura comments,

"I like the teachers and the school. I mean, now to go in there with her and they still know me, and I think that was one thing that I, that really sticks in

my head is that, that it being such a small school that, you know, they know everybody in which it kind of sticks with you. The teachers, the teachers, you know, are the most important. The teachers and how they really teach the kids is the most important.” (Interview 12)

When Nannette was asked; “What is a great school?” She also began with caring teachers; again indicating the idea of a pull factor. Nannette states,

“I know that if I went to a place like in a classroom I want to know that the person who is going to be teaching them is someone that is there because they care for the students. And I know that I can say with the few teachers that he has had since he’s been here that he has gotten that. We keep in close contact as needed, and I like that. I want to know, like if he’s having a problem I want to know about it, so I help fix it too. I don’t want it to be that with, not necessarily behind my back, but I want to know what I can do and what you are going to do to make sure that it’s taken care of. Also, a teacher that has a smile on her face because she’s happy to see her students. Durban has just had this type of reputation.” (Interview 14)

Opal talks about important aspects of a school which are important for children to learn. She begins with safety and moves into a warm caring environment. Here is how she explains it:

“My feeling would be the most important characteristic is their ability to feel safe and comfortable in their environment. I think it is really important,

especially the high school level, because I think if you don't feel like the environment fits or is a place where you can ask questions and be accepted then there's other things going on that you are not able to learn. Uhm - - - probably I guess I would have to say the quality of the teaching has got to be up there, too. Teachers who don't want to be there would be a bad school. uhm - - - I also I kind of was looking for a feel of warmness coming in and that is hard to find when you are going in the summer, and so I was looking for that. I was looking for somebody with like an open door. Come on in, let me talk to you - - - that kind of a feel. And so that really kind of was a turning point for us because I didn't really know about that program and then going to meet Mr. Lapeer in that program. It is just phenomenal and talk about a warm welcome! Uhm - - - he did a great job at reeling us in right away. ." (Interview 15)

Quinton talks about a school where students can learn, he begins by talking about what a great school has:

"It, it has to have good quality teachers. Teachers that get along, understand the kids, and can motivate them. I mean that's a lot of it, I mean I remember when I was in school the teachers just seemed like they were there; the ones I thought were good, were motivated. They had a lot of good ideas and tried new things and things like that to get you into what you were doing. And I think that has a lot to do with it. That's a good school. She, she says that she really enjoys the teachers. That seems like what they do, and the ones that she doesn't enjoy as much, they don't seem to do that as much. Cause that's how I took it

when I talked to her.” (Interview 17)

When asked what a good school is like, Zoe responds:

“Uhm - - - they are when, when I hear about the teachers, and they tell me that they’re willing to work with students and not just to brush them off, and they have really good programs as far as working with parents and trying to, uhm - - - if you have a problem it’s easy to approach the teachers and the staff there. Also the teacher’s level of knowledge is a big thing, and I do like the program where they’re having to still be in classes and still go to school and keep up on their schooling. I like that idea that they, that is an awesome idea.” (Interview 22)

Discipline

History of Problems

Another of the common threads in how parents judge schools is the level of discipline. In this case discipline is not always the same as punishment. Rather parents think of the term discipline as a school with structure or rules. Of course, some of these parents indicate that they are leaving a school because the rules were too stringent or unfair. The next several pages document their stories. When asked why Adam and Annette moved their daughter out of Cape Town their reply indicated discipline issues in her resident district: Annette explains,

“She uhm - - - seventh grade year she was aspired to a good average student A, Bs, and Cs. Uhm - - - you know, basic, you know, eighth grade /

seventh grade troubles nothing too bad. Uhm - - - well prior to that, and she just started making some poor choices. Uhm - - - well, just her actions not completing her school work, her grades were deplorable. We tried everything from having the teachers send notes to sending it home everyday making sure she was doing her homework to make sure she didn't miss too many days and what we, we ended up pulling her out of school mid-term. It was in January of last year, and we home schooled her for the rest of the year just to even get her caught up. Uhm - - - at this point she having no extra curricular activities whatsoever. She danced since she was in kindergarten, there as just nothing left. We allowed her no phone calls; she was just making crazy choices (laughter)."

Adam – "And we wanted a school that maybe would address, maybe talk to the parents about if they are seeing problems with their kids because we, we were informed that, that they were starting to see problems with her but it was kind of way too late."

Annette - "She had arranged for a couple friends to meet her there, and, fortunately, this is a place she had been going like I said since she was in kindergarten, and she decided that was going to say she had to go to the bathroom or whatever, and they took off. They just took off running around town. So that, that was just it. She's just so influential that I didn't, I felt that if didn't get a handle on it she was just going to go down a really bad path. The day we were informed was the day we actually took her out of school."

Adam - "I think she was, we, we both feel that she probably wasn't going to pass because of her grades had we not done that. And she's already, she's a late

birthday so she's already older than some of the other kids, so we didn't want her, you know, have that hanging over her so. We thought it would be the best for her." (Interview 1)

While Casey talks about the lack of caring from the teachers and administration, what she alludes to, is the history of trouble that her son had while in Cape Town. With only six months of history in Durban, at this time, it is not known whether these same types of problems will begin again. When asked about her son's last district she states:

"They didn't care at all, when I would say, you know, there is a problem. "Oh, no there is no problem. We don't have a problem." Yeah there is a problem. It was unreal. I mean he came home one time in a brand new white t-shirt and it was bloody. I soaked and scrubbed it for a week."

"His blood?"

"Yeah, the principal said well he got into a fight he's suspended. He was defending himself from the bully; you know he's a bully because he's been in your office several times not just for my kid but for other kids. So you can't, violence in schools is a big issue that needs to be addressed. And it can't be from parents or that's just kids being kids. But if they are violent now it is only going to get worse and you need to stop it now before it gets worse." (Interview 3)

Ginny talks about the fact that her son was a discipline problem and that she was actually shopping for a school where there would be fewer discipline issues. Ginny shares her perspective:

"Uhm - - - we sat down a certain set of rules, which were basically the same things that we knew when he came here. You know, they have you sign a contract, and we knew that that was what it was going to be, and that is pretty much the same guidelines we gave him. And this is the way it is, and you know if you can't do that then you are going back. To begin with, I wanted a student handbook. I had a copy of that from Cape Town, and I was comparing it to the one he was going to. That was one of my concerns because like I said, all they were doing they weren't helping him. I mean Cape Town, they were not helping Drew. They were, we'll give you-in school suspension. That doesn't do any good, not if he's not doing anything, you know. Out of school suspension's like a vacation day. He don't care."

"How often would you say he got in trouble?"

"If I didn't get a call at least once a week, I'd count my blessings. And the, that was if he got a suspension, they'd call me; if it was anything else they didn't. They are too quick to just straight across the board everybody gets the same discipline. But is the discipline correcting the problem? Are we addressing what's caused the problem? No. Somebody attacks my son in school, and if my son defended himself, they both got kicked out. Does that make sense he has no right to defend himself and, especially if it was a girl, the girl got no discipline and the boy. The little girl I specifically remember once incident the little girl goes up to kick my son, you know, and he, all he did was just push her away, and there was, you know, witnesses to the fact. He gets suspended. She didn't get anything." (Interview 7)

Helen's daughter also had social problems. This appeared to be her politically correct way of saying discipline problems. Especially interesting is the idea that she does not care about her daughter's academic achievement at all. Helen shares her description of the problem.

“My daughter is 13. She’s always had problems socially, and she had no friends. So, I transferred her to Durban for a fresh start, and she just, she’s, she bloomed socially here. I mean, she really doesn’t have that many friends, but at least she has some, and she’s being more of a normal kid. And her grades have suffered horribly, but she has a social life, and I think until she gets into high school I’m not really as worried about the academic side. I want her to be, you know, somewhat social before I worry about her grades. Because it was getting kind of worrying there at the other, her time in Hot Springs. I mean (pause) there’s all the academic stuff but, the social interaction is a big thing for me anyway. Learning to get along with other people to make your way through without, you know, getting into too much trouble (laughter).” (Interview 8)

Paul talks about his 9th grade daughter and the fact that she has been expelled due to her past behavior. He begins by describing their resident district and also mentions that her behavior did not change right away when she transferred to Durban. However, she has improved recently. Paul states,

“Years past, I know in Cape Town when she went there she had a lot of problems socially. Grades were marginal. She came here and in 7th and 8th grade,

and the problems kind of followed her here. This year she has had a real good turnaround socially. She's doing well."

"Was she getting in trouble a lot or, suspended or expelled?"

"Yeah, uhm - - - yeah I can't tell you how many times. She may have been expelled once or twice. I can't say. I can't remember. I think this occurs where the teachers don't have or don't take the time to work with students, especially the ones that maybe need a little bit more. Uhm - - - that allows a lot of behavioral things to go on. Not just with one student but when there is a group problem. Uhm - - - she had said before that she wanted to move out of Cape Town School because of the problems socially." (Interview 16)

Avoiding Discipline Problems

Doug and Dana talk about the stories that they have heard about the lack of discipline at Cape Town. Doug begins,

"We had relatives, my sister's boys, and we have some very close friends that had kids, and we got stories that just we drew the conclusion that it was not going to be where we we're going to send our kids. Uhm - - - and the daycare that we had was in Cape Town, and her (child care provider) kids, went down to school there, and they came home with some of the same type of problems that we had heard. I mean, just the same typical stuff that the kids were in trouble with one thing or another and this and that, and, you know, it was just stuff that we that fell right in with everything that we'd hear about." (Interview 4)

Nannette talks about her son Christian as a typical boy that needs structure. She describes him this way:

“He is a character. uhm - - - Christian I would say is a typical boy. That is what he has always been referred to as a typical boy. He’s a very good child; uhm - - - he needs a challenge though. I’m not going to lie. He really needs to be challenged, and he needs and likes to stay busy. He likes and wants to be entertained or have something to do from the minute he gets up to the minute he goes to bed that he’s happy. He, we found out that when he was six that he was one of the milder cases of having ADHD. And that is based on what a computer test said. I had begun to wonder, but like I said, I think that as long he has something to do to keep himself occupied, he’s okay. But if he does not have something to occupy him that’s when he starts to make the wrong choices, and he doesn’t use his time very wisely, but he is a straight A student. He is above grade level in math and reading definitely. He is at an 8th grade reading level and math I believe he is between a fifth and sixth grade level, but he is an excellent student. He just needs structure and to be kept busy” (Interview 14)

Chaos

The term "Chaos" caught me a little bit by surprise. This term was used most often when I asked the parents to describe a bad school. However, the term also came up multiple times in different parts of the interviews. The following provides some insight into their ideas. Doug and Dana talk about the most important aspects of a school for children to learn? Doug begins,

“Getting along, obeying rules, respect uhm - - - respect for others.

Respect for themselves. Is there something I haven’t covered yet? Learning that life is made up of everything that you can imagine including disappointments and happiness and troubles and stuff you can wiggle out of and stuff you just got to face up to. Just learning, just plain learning life is important in school. But it isn’t up to a school to teach a hundred percent that a kids got a learn.”

“Describe what a bad school is like.”

Doug – “Chaos, no rules, or different rules for different people.”

Dana – “I say the different rules for the different people.” (Interview 4)

Freda also mentions chaos when talking about a bad school. Since she is a teacher that has taught in several districts, she might have some prior experience with her description of chaos in a classroom. Freda begins,

“I don’t think a bad school would have a lot of order. It doesn’t have a good chain of command, you know. So it’s not safe, because of that. Without discipline that’s needed to keep kids in line and make sure they are doing what they are supposed to be doing. And of course teachers if they don’t have their uhm person at the head keeping track of things. They may start to do whatever they want and, you know, and there’d be chaos so, order is important.” (Interview 6)

Jack and Jill describe the Hollywood version of chaos, and actually, several of the other parents identified with a movie version of a school that is out of control, or chaotic.

Jack offers this,

“Well, when you gotta put up metal detectors for them to go through everyday, gotta have police watch the halls all day, you got people walking around carrying guns and knives or whatever to school, total and absolute chaos. It’s almost like a jail setting, and I have been in a few of them. That is a bad school. And I don’t know why, where it started, who allowed them to do this, allowed them to do that, didn’t crack down, didn’t do this. A lot of it is from the system, and the so called correctional system, or whatever. You can’t do this. You can’t do that, but you can let the kids run around. I don’t buy that, and those kind of schools are painful. The laws and stuff like that. It used to be if your kid in school was misbehaving - - - I know I had a few of them myself when I was in school - - - that if the principal or something crack you on the backside, you go home - - - big deal. I’d say; “Mom!” She’d say: “Hush up!” Or you’d get more, you know. From then to now, now you can’t look at them cross eyed. I think they are running scared, so they don’t crack down like they ought to. For their own sake.” (Interview 10)

Laura and Luke, identify the same Hollywood perspective of big schools, as bad schools. Laura states “I think of that you see on the movies where they have to have all the metal detectors and drug dogs coming in (laughter).” (Interview 12)

Similarly, Mark and Mary also identify a bad school as chaotic and then define it.

Mark –“In my opinion a bad school has uncontrolled students and chaos.”

“What does chaos look like?”

Mark – “Chaos, in my opinion, is the staff not exerting control, also students who do not give the staff the respect that they should have.” (Interview 13)

Nannette describes a bad school, as similar to Hollywood movies, and refers to chaos. She begins by talking about Hollywood movies:

“Uhm - - - the bad thing is I can only refer to movies that you see in movies, but I am sure that there are school out there that may have those problems. Students that reach a point where uhm - - - they might not make the right choices. That they have a high rate of drop outs, or they have breaks in security because there is chaos, you know, drug smuggling or students that bring guns to school. Like Columbine. That was quite the problem they had there. That to me would be a bad school. Where you’re having to go through a metal detector before you even go to your classroom.”

“How would you define chaos? What is chaos? What does it look like?”

“Chaos to me is an out of control classroom. That would be chaos to me, and I have seen them where it’s just loud and very disruptive, not only to those people there but to classrooms in the same hallway. That to me is chaos. No order, kids running out of the classroom because the bell rang, and everybody is going here and there and everywhere. I think it should be, there should be order to it. Uhm - - - (long pause) okay. The bell rings. You get up and a single file line maybe, you go, you get your coats, your boots, or whatever, and, if you need to come and be seated before going to the bus then that is how it should be. Or if it’s time to

go to the bus, you put your things on, and you stay single file, and you go to your bus. And I know you are not going to have that 100% of the time, but I know I've come in here before, and you, as a parent, you are dodging because they are not following the rules, or they're not doing what they are supposed to be doing, so that I guess would be chaos to me." (Interview 14)

Quinton describes a bad school as one that is chaotic. His reference to cliques is also in reference to a school that is bad. He mentioned cliques several times during our interview, and it was obvious that he believes that cliques are damaging to students. He begins:

"A bad school is like...(long pause)...I guess I, you're talking about as in the cliques, and you know, that you have a lot of that in school, and teachers don't, or the school system itself, doesn't really stop them. I think that is really hard on kids. I mean, even when I was in there, there was a little bit of a clique, but to me it sounds like there is even more of that nowadays than there used to be. I don't know why, but, you know, I think that has a lot to do with it. Kids are hanging out in the hallways and bathrooms. Kids swearing at teachers and principals, bringing guns and knives, like in the bigger schools, it's just utter chaos. You know, outside, of course, there's not too much of that around here, but I doubt there's too much of that anywhere anymore because things have changed so much since I've been in. When I went to school we could go, we could take off for lunch and stuff like that where nowadays they aren't allowed to do that. So, I mean they have a tighter rein on it. Stuff like that." (Interview 17)

Summary

In this study, parents described the characteristics in which they judge the quality of a school. In broad terms, parents in this rural area judged the quality of a school based on 3 criteria. First, they most often mentioned the size of the school, the district and the community as being a major factor in their decision. Second, parents indicated that the response that the parents received from either the resident district or the receiving district provided a basis on which to judge the school. The district response could either be a push, or a pull factor. Again, push factors could be any type of communication (or lack of), between the parent and the school that causes the parent/child to leave that district and enroll in another district. Oppositely, a pull factor is any characteristic that draws a family into a district through school of choice legislation. Finally, parents often mentioned discipline as a factor to judge a school. Discipline could be related to their child making poor choices in one district, subsequently moving to another, or it could be the reputation that a school district has. For instance, some parents indicated that they avoided one district due to the discipline problems that other parents were having with their child. Most interesting in this section was that parents consistently used the term “Chaos” when talking about bad schools, or schools with discipline problems.

Information Gathered

Chapter VI

Introduction

Recently on a lengthy flight, I found myself engaged in a discussion with a flight attendant about her school of choice decision for her little girl. She mentioned that her daughter's elementary school was great! Not wanting to miss an opportunity to cast doubt on a public school, I quickly inquired as to how she knew that her daughter was in a "great" school. The flight attendant seemed puzzled by my question, so I continued. "How do you know that your daughter is learning as quickly as the children in the charter school down the road?" Now I had her thinking. She replied, "Oh, the teachers and secretaries are all so nice." I continued: "What curriculum are they using in her third grade class in regards to writing, reading, math, or social studies? Is your daughter reading on grade level? Are all of the teachers deemed "Highly Qualified" by national standards? Are the building and district making "Adequate Yearly Progress" as defined by No Child Left Behind? Have you studied education, researched best practices, or are you familiar with Charlotte Danielson's work on teacher evaluation?" A constant shaking of her head indicated to me that she had actually very little knowledge about what was happening within her daughter's classroom. "Then how in the world do you know that your child is receiving a "great" education?" I wondered.

The conversation which had lasted less than ten minutes was pleasant, but I could tell that my questions were truly bothering her. I felt certain that my

questions had her thinking, and I hoped they would later be shared and discussed with her husband. I know that I left that conversation wondering on what basis and with what rationale other parents were making judgments regarding the quality and appropriateness of their schools for their children.

The previous was an impromptu discussion, of which I have unashamedly bothered many friends and strangers alike in the recent months, however, the formal interviews that occurred with the parents of Durban mimicked that discussion, and most of the interviews revealed that very little information, if any, is being gathered by parents. Typically, parents will rely on the perceptions of friends, family, or quite often, even work associates. It seems that word of mouth in most cases serves as good enough. Occasionally, parents will seek out information from the school as well. This chapter looks at the types of information that parents, or as in the first section, looks at the lack of information that parents gather in order to make a school of choice decision. In many cases, the information gathered is closely tied with how the parents judge the quality of a school. In short, the personal values of the parents weigh heavily in the decision.

No Information

When making important decisions, a person would logically gather information before making a decision. When a person buys a house, normally there are inspections, inquiries into the quality of the structure; the value of the home is balanced with the location of the property. Similarly, if a person is buying a car, they can read “Consumer Reports”, or go online to “Car fax” if it is a used car. In either case, information is gathered to help determine the best course of action. However, when selecting a school

district many parents gather little of no information to help them with their decision. In many cases, parents are leaving one small rural school for another school that is very similar. Additionally, parents seldom mentioned any barriers to information. The one barrier that parents occasionally mentioned was inferior web-sites. In the following exchange, Betty clearly sends the message of good enough in the following dialogue:

“Did you gather any information about the different school districts around?”

“Uhm - - - no. If I did, I would probably go and talk to the individual superintendents just to get a feel of what they see for their schools.”

“Are there any barriers that make it difficult to get information from a school district?”

“Not that I have ever run up against. I mean out on Michigan Department of Ed web site you can look up all that you need.” (Interview 2).

Jack and Jill wanted to know about the size of the school; they did not look for student achievement data, and since the girls previous school was near in size to Durban, assumed that the curriculum would also be the same. When asked about their information search, Jill begins:

“Well, like we said, the main one we think about was size. It was what we were looking for in terms of various reasons with them being moved down here in a different culture all together, as well as different area, and it being full time. So many different changes, so we tried to make the changes as easy as possible and that is why we were thinking of a smaller school. And I think that, talking to different ones in church, which has made it feel right. It’s right down

the road, but I would also talk to customers when I was cashiering, and I noticed that their shirts were from Durban. I would ask them how was Durban Schools.

Talking to other people about it. Talking to one another. Again telling them about the girls. Wanting a small school rather than a big school.”

“Did you gather any information as far as curriculum or MEAP scores, anything in regards to student achievement?”

Jill – “No.”

Jack – “We really didn’t gather any information, other than the size of the school. It’s pretty much the same as it was up there as far as the curriculum, the same. Kind of slid right in, at least, that is what we thought at the time the best that would work out. And so far it has.” (Interview 10)

The interview with Nannette was very typical; she did not seek any information, but thought that the schools administration might have the best information. Having the knowledge from Chapter V regarding district response, this is a very important detail. When those rare few parents make appointments or just show up to ask questions, they are really looking to see how school personnel will respond. Here is how the discussion progressed:

“Did you gather any information about this district or another district?”

Nannette related –“I knew, I guess I didn’t even, I didn’t give it a thought. I didn’t really have any questions.”

“If you were looking for a new district today, who would you believe has the most important information about the schools?”

“I would hope the principal or superintendent could give me the information that I needed.”

“Looking back at that decision, and kind of in retrospect, did you have enough information to make an informed decision?”

“(long pause) As far as placing him here versus another city or another school? You know what? I didn’t have any information at all. I went strictly based on me.”(Interview 14)

Friends and Neighbors

Casey, however, did look for some information. She talked to other parents who gave her their best knowledge. Several of the interviews in this study revealed that parents would listen to friends from work, regarding the school district. She states,

“The class size is what I wanted. I had talked to other parents about the school. Like I said, I used to work here in town. I, you listen; you see how many parents have complaints; you kind of get to know and see what kind of parents they are. If their complaints are valid, and there weren’t that many complaints about the type of school district this is. So that to me is what’s important.

“So looking back did you have enough information about Durban? If you had it do over again would you seek out more, or do you think you had enough information?”

Casey – “I wouldn’t change. I would still bring him here. I wish I had done it quicker, but I would still bring him here. Because like I said the parents, you can listen to the parents and know if they are happy with the school district and if they’re not. And if they’re not, they’re going to be really vocal where’s if they’re

happy about it, they are going to be just as vocal but not as vocal as if they're not happy. You see." (Interview 3)

Helen also felt that other parents could help direct her to a decision. She knew she wanted a change and thought that trial and error might prove best. She said,

"Uhm - - - I really didn't. I just, I, I looked into how hard it would be to transfer her. Uhm - - - what I'd have to fill out what I'd need I think I would have to, to ask because I have friends that have kids all over in the area. Uhm - - - one of my friends have a child in another district, a child in Cape Town and two in a Charter school down towards Indiana. All according to need, she moved them around until she found the school that fit them the best. So, I think you have to ask other parents, you know. How do you like the school because that I think is a lot of it. Uhm - - - it's really important with where people send there kids. Because you talk to other parents, how have your kids done in this school, you know, and all that because you know some kids do better in some schools, some kids do better in other schools, and it's not always just because this one, they say this one's the best. You know, some people say this is the best doesn't mean that it's going to fit your child." (Interview 8)

While Irene relied on other parents and students' descriptions of Durban, she readily admits to not having enough information.

"I just asked people, mostly kids that have went here. I also went on my husband, you know. When he came here, it was an awesome school, and I was

hoping that that was still here. What the school is like right now? I asked parents to learn more about this school. Yeah, I don't think the school board or the superintendent really has a clue what's there's just too few of people trying to run the school that they don't know everything."

"Looking back again at your decision, did you have enough information to make an informed decision?"

"Not really. I wished I would have went for more. I wished I would have came here and, like in the first pre-school program, I was blinded because it was so awesome because I was at home with my daughter, and I did go and I watched her learn in that class and that teacher was awesome. So I just figured if Durban is going to hire a pre-school teacher like that, you know, then they'll keep up on the rest of them. So I wished I would have sat through other prospects of teachers that she would have had."

"Were there any barriers that made it difficult to get information?"

"Uhm - - - I don't know people protecting people, yeah. The school, the school stands behind their teachers, and they're not going to give a negative word about their school. Call here, walk here, talk here, talk to this teacher. That teacher there's not going tell you bad things." (Interview 9)

When this discussion occurred with Mark and Mary they mentioned that the students would have the best information about a school district. This idea was also mentioned by other parents in passing. Each of the parents that mentioned the students having the best information also immediately indicated that was an improbable source of

information, because talking to those students would be unlikely. Mark begins:

“The students, but you couldn’t get it out of them, but I’m sure. But successful information, I would say parents. We just talked to neighbors and talked to people here. We looked at their web site, and they had a hideous web site. There was no information available, just a bunch of nonsense. The State of Michigan had more information that was of no interest when I got into it. This school’s web site I was concerned about the lack of technological advancement that this district had when I looked at their web site.” (Interview 13)

Zoe was new to this topic. Her son was just enrolled in Kindergarten yet she did not even visit the school prior to enrollment. When asked about her search for information she explains her thoughts.

“Basically right now is, a lot of it is, from people with experience with them, um I have not yet to be, to have the opportunity to go up there and speak to them. But that’s basically all the information that I have gotten through is people that have, that had really good experiences with the elementary. I haven’t heard a bad word about though, so, and I know a lot of people that have, that are actually in the elementary, kids that are actually in the elementary that just love it.”

(Interview 22)

“What would your response be if I could show side by side comparisons of student MEAP scores or district MEAP scores or discipline rates, or college attendance rates, or basically, if I could show you a side by side comparison that proves that Krueger students perform better than Butler what would your response be?”

“I know that, I know that that is totally possible being from the country. I know that that is totally possible. One of the other aspects when I chose Durban was simply because it is a farming community, and that’s, I came from the same background, and I don’t want him to lose that being here. And, so I was, it was a very tough decision. It was a very tough decision.” (Interview 22)

Family

Family contacts were often mentioned as a way to gather information in this rural area. Additionally, many of the parents had attended Durban themselves and believed that the information that they possessed was sufficient to make a decision. Doug and Dana describe their search for information in the following exchange. We pick up the conversation as I ask:

“What information did you gather about Cape Town?”

Doug – “We had relatives, my sister’s boys, and we have some very close friends that had kids, and we got stories that just we drew the conclusion that it was not going to be where we were going to send our kids. The daycare that we had was in Cape Town, and her kids went down to school there, and they came home with some of the same type of problems that we had heard. I mean, just the same typical stuff that the kids were in trouble with one thing or another and this and that, and, you know, it was just stuff that we that fell right in with everything that we’d hear about.” (Interview 4)

Dana added: “We’ve got a neighbor who has actually pulled his kids out of Cape Town, and they take them to Hot Springs. And his wife is a daughter of one of the

school teachers. His wife's first husband is a teacher at Hot Springs and that was the connection down there." (Interview 4)

Quinton was the least involved with the decision for his daughter to attend Durban. He basically allowed his sister Michelle to make the decision. While his daughter is a senior now, the decision was made several years ago. When asked about whether he gathered information, Quinton states:

"No, not really because Michelle, like I said, Michelle's kids had been going here since they were little, so, basically, Michelle's the one that said, you know, she would really like Durban and going with her cousin. I mean, I just took it from my sister, I mean, because like I said I didn't look into it any farther because that was what she wanted to do, and Micky said she'd do it. I guess if I would have thought about it, no, I didn't. I mean, I never really give that a thought." (Interview 17)

Rebecca related her information search to the idea that her husband and the rest of his family attended the district; so she believed that the family already had enough information.

"Oh yeah. My family, my husband's family went here and it is, just very pleased with it. It's a small school, and they don't have a lot of things to offer. You know, where I was used to you get the swimming, the big football. They don't start football here until 9th grade. So, I mean, it didn't have a whole lot to offer, but it was enough." (Interview 18)

School

Ginny, whose son had discipline issues in Cape Town, was most interested in the student handbook and how the new principal would deal with discipline. I began:

“What information did you gather before selecting Durban?”

Ginny responds: “Uhm - - - the student handbook. I got a copy of the student handbook from the office here, and I was comparing it to the one he was coming from, and like I said, the disciplinary procedures, processes, whatever, however you want to label them was what I looked for. That was one of my concerns because, like I said, all they were doing they weren’t helping him. I mean Cape Town they were not helping Drew.” (Interview 7)

Opal is the exception to this rule. Opal actually traveled to at least 4 different schools searching for information, although this is second nature for her and her family. This family has moved quite often and had to change schools quite often. Opal explains the search for information as a process of elimination.

“Honestly, it was more of a process of elimination. Uhm - - - and the fact that we were trying to weigh teenagers perspectives, and I had a junior going into high school, and a freshman, and Mackenzie, we weren’t as worried about that at that time. So it was kind of like a logistical balance, uhm - - - a moment of a little bit of apprehension. Our kids have changed schools a lot due to the military moves, so we were really hoping to make the best of it. We are going to stay here, and when you are making that kind of decision it is a little tougher than this will due for a year or two.

“Specifically what information did you gather in regards to the schools you were looking at? Or did you look at multiple schools? Which schools did you consider?”

“We looked at Krueger, Coldspring, Durban, that was pretty much it. And we did look into Jonesburg, but we didn’t like, go visit there. I just did internet kind of thing for Jonesburg, but Coldspring, Krueger, Durban and St. Johns, but I’m sorry. What was the question? What kinds of things...”

“What information did you gather from those schools?”

“We mainly were looking at their level of AP classes that they would be able to get. Uhm - - - I also I kind of was looking for a feel of warmness coming in, and that is hard to find when you are going in the summer, and so I was looking for that. I was looking for somebody with like an open door. Come on in, let me talk to you, that kind of a feel. We looked at soccer because that is a huge thing in my son’s life, so uhm - - - that was a drawback for here. So that was tough, and we, we did look into that at Krueger and Coldspring both uhm - - - because that would have been something that might have been another factor. Not very educationally sound, but a factor. So those were the kinds of things we looked at. As far as for the elementary level, I mainly was, I mean, I was fairly confident that the Krueger, Coldsprings programs would be fine, so I didn’t really investigate elementary a lot.”

“Who do you believe has the most important information about a school?”

“Probably the students; not that we really asked any of them.”

“Looking back on your decision did you have enough information to make an informed decision?”

“No, because, yes, we could we have gotten more, yes. Coming in the summer is a little bit more difficult than coming in to view a class or see it with the kids in there, and so yeah, that method didn’t work.” (Interview 15)

Stan was concerned about environment and sought out the principal to talk about the possible change. When asked about gathering information Stan replies:

“Specifically the principal, several discussions with him. The environment of the school. The area which, like I said, I grew up down in this area, and the time I spent in this area, and checking out they hadn’t gotten too wild with; you gotta have a book, I mean, that kid can’t take the computer home to study. You know the computer age is here but they’ve gotten way too carried away. There were too many problems with computers.”

“Who do you believe has the most important information about school?”

Stan – “It would be, in my opinion, it would be a toss up between actual teachers and the principal. The principal has gotta have his thumb on the artery and every part of that school, but so do the teachers, you know, and good teachers would know that so and so teaches this class, and they are good, you know. Oh, this one is kind of mediocre, you know. But they need to be able to recommend which teachers are, you know, good at working with the student that has a problem, like my daughter with attention deficit. You know, it is good to have a teacher that can, like I say, this one here that she’s going to in this grade next year there’s these three teachers you know. This one is really excellent with those kids, you know, could give her the extra help or whatever. You know, it’s going to be a

toss up between teachers and the actual principal.” (Interview 19)

Summary

Information can certainly be one of the most important tools in deciding upon a school district. The type of information and the amount of information that parents in this study gathered is quite interesting. The information was not of a quantitative nature; it was not based on MEAP scores, drop out rates, or percentage of students going on to college. It was based on word of mouth and prior family experience. If the district did not push the family away many years ago, then it must be good enough for my child. However, this does not fit with a market philosophy.

If a market theory is to become reality in the public school sector, should it not require an informed customer? In other words, if parents are making decisions without gathering information; or parents are making decisions based on their experiences, and/or their families experiences 20 years ago, will the market be strong enough to force change? Will the schools be forced to improve the educational opportunities for their students, or will they actually be encouraged by these parents behaviors to continue to do things as they have always been done?

Participants Making Decisions

Chapter VII

Introduction

The final question that this study was designed to answer centered around student participation, whether the students enjoyed their experiences in their resident district and subsequently, in their school of choice district. These two concepts are very closely tied. If a student is not happy in one district, and that same student is given the power to choose to attend another district, it could have broad implications as to how a district responds to students and how districts advertise for customers.

In this study, parents described not only who made the decisions, but also some of their thoughts regarding why they were choosing a district. Parents seem very concerned about their child's social life. Student enjoyment could be the focus of this entire chapter as it could be argued that each section is directly tied to the student's enjoyment of school.

In the first section, one parent even mentions that a social life is more important than academic learning. As could be expected, students and parents were also concerned with sports and extra-curricular opportunities of each district. Next, several parents mentioned the importance of finding a special fit for their child; specifically matching their child with the school district. Sometimes, according to one parent, this may mean switching schools several times. Additionally, some parents discussed that their child hated their resident district's school, and now they hate the new school. Finally, this chapter will look at the discussions regarding to students participating in the decision at

the elementary and secondary levels; it also will demonstrate what happens for those parents that have both elementary and secondary students in their home.

The next three sections are designed to provide an insight both into the parents' rationale of how a student's happiness plays into the decision and who is involved in making that decision.

Student Enjoyment

Social Beings

Adam and Annette thought their daughter was too social and decided that they would move both of their children to Durban. Through our discussion, you will see two aspects. While they do not want their daughter to be distracted by having too much fun, they still have a desire for her to enjoy school. We enter this conversation as I ask:

“Does she enjoy school?”

Annette begins: “Uh-hah, she does now, because to her school is more social than learning and that is what I was at. She wasn't happy at all at first, when we first transferred her. It was just that she was. I guess more when she was getting up like in middle school is when she really started to getting behind in like in Math and English. That is where we really started noticing that not a lot of effort was put in by her, she wasn't doing so hot.”

Adam – “It was definitely a lot of her fault, too, because she, she likes the social aspect of school, and she's a conformist, and she really likes the, the friends that are allowed to, you know, pierce their body and wear all kinds of makeup and, so she's - - - cause she wasn't really allowed to, she kind of just clings on to those

people. Some of them aren't, they're not, they're not bad kids, but some of them aren't the best influence on her either. Cause a lot of them kids don't do their school work either, you know, so she wouldn't do it either, you know. That's part of it, too. Good students, you know, say they like their school, too, a lot. You know a lot of kids don't like their school, but now I think she is happier, I think. I think she'd rather be here. You know, I don't think even if we could put her in wherever, I think we would leave her right here. In fact, she had two days off for in-service, and she told me today that she was so ready to go back to school. She was bored at home." (Interview 1)

Ursula talks about student enjoyment when asked what a great school is like. As a teacher that has taught in several districts, she describes what it is like to see the students enjoying themselves in the classroom. She volunteers:

"A great school is one where children enjoy being in the classrooms or, if not, maybe a single classroom they enjoy the subject matter. And you will see that by not only scores, scores are one way of taking a look at things, but when kids are in there, and they are motivated, they are working, it is kind of nice. Uhm - - - when you walk room-to-room-to-room, and there is lots of different styles of teaching going on, and kids are having fun - -they are not acting up in this room that is quiet and peaceful, reading and working, they are sitting there enjoying and they are immersed. They go into the science room and are up and checking animals and getting their test scores and coming back and doing this investigation repeating and teaching each other what they missed. In the lunch

room kids are getting some time to have, uhm - - - social interaction. ” (Interview 21)

Sports and Extra-Curricular

In this study, many parents mentioned the importance of extra-curricular activities such as sports, as driving school of choice decisions. These extra-curriculars also seemed to be tied very closely to student enjoyment. When talking about her 9th grade son, Casey indicates that he loves sports but really does not care for the school. She also points out that there have evidently been problems in the past, specifically learning disabilities. When asked does he enjoy school? Casey responds,

“He likes sports. If it has to do with sports, he’s in it. And hockey and baseball and basketball, and he don’t really play football, but he likes it. Uh, he really doesn’t care for school, at least not as much as what he could. He has learning disabilities that was discovered after I transferred him out of Cape Town and into here. It was discovered that he had severe, I guess you would call it, because at seventh grade he has a second grade reading level and a third grade math level. So, unfortunately, he spends most of his day with the special education teacher, which I know he doesn’t like, but he goes. ” (Interview 3)

Doug talks about the difference in his children. One likes school, especially the competitive nature of sports in school. The other student is the total opposite, he likes going to school for the basis of learning. When asked about whether his children enjoy school Doug responds:

“Yeah, they are night and day difference. One is competitive and just gobbles up anything for sports that he can. uhm - - - he’s through it. We give a certain amount of encouragement for playing and doing whatever he wants, and the other one he’s not competitive. He doesn’t like, he doesn’t particularly care for competition. He sometimes likes to participate in some things if its fun, but he really don’t, he don’t really have too much interest in anything that’s actually going to be a win or lose situation. The other one he enjoys coming to school for the purpose of recess, friends, sports, after school activities, and what not. He is quite intelligent on that aspect. But the other one is a sport oriented competitor, and the older one he don’t care if he can make a basket or not.” (Interview 4)

When thinking about the importance of education vs. sports, even the teacher’s child is more likely to mention sports as a factor of enjoyment. Ellen, special education teacher in Durban, mentions sports when asked about whether her daughter enjoys school.

“She likes school; she’s involved in a lot of extra activities. Volley ball, cheerleading, cross country and track. She’s into lots of activities, but really not concerned about grades.” (Interview 5)

When talking about student enjoyment William, who is a school teacher, immediately responds with extra curricular activities. When asked,

“Does your child enjoy school?”

William states: “Yes, little league, basketball, piano on the side. Although, he is

now at that stage where we don't know whether he likes school just for the sports, or whether he enjoys the class work. I think he does, but that's hard; he doesn't express much. I mean, the oldest one doesn't express much. The youngest one loves it. He's our social butterfly, and he loves being around other kids."

"Did Cooper, express his love for school when he was in Jonesburg?"

"Yeah. He really loved it, but Dad was pretty much in his classroom or building every other day just kind of peeking in, checking up on things, so I kind of knew how he was doing, what he was doing, where as - - I'm kind of out of the loop over there, so I don't know I can't answer that one 100%. I'm going to assume that he enjoys it. " (Interview 20)

Special Fit

Ginny ties student enjoyment to teacher response and principal response. Ginny's 9th grade son had discipline issues at his previous district, and he was also a special education student. When I asked,

"Does Andrew enjoy school?"

Ginny responds, "More so now than what he did prior. And it was, he couldn't, in Cape Town, he couldn't, I don't know what to say, function freely, you know. They didn't try to work with him knowing, knowing that he had this problem, or even keep in contact with me, you know. I was a phone call away. When he was in elementary school, they did that, but when he got into middle school with a new principal and stuff they didn't. In elementary school we, we were okay but when you got up to middle school, and then high school, nothin.

Now here they are extremely good about contacting me, but of course, I do know the principal. But I didn't know that until after we had already switched schools, which works out even better for us. Now he really enjoys coming" (Interview 7)

Mary who is the step mother indicates that they do enjoy school and that is important. She states,

"I think they like school, yeah, they always come home and come with a lot of stories from school what I did today at school, what the teacher did today and what activity they did. They like school so much. They have everything like computers everything needed working good, and the kids be happy the teacher can make it easier for the teacher and, if kids are happy in school, teacher can teach child in dealing with something like that, and I mean they have equipment." (Interview 13)

Nannette ties her son's enjoyment to a feeling of comfort and the ability to fit in. She also mentions the progress that he is achieving. Nannette states,

"He really enjoys school. He really likes it and there again when we moved back to Durban, and he started here he was coming into Durban; he finished first grade here. Uhm - - - Christian was finally somewhere where he was comfortable, and where he feels he fits in, and where feels he is actually making progress. He has wonderful friends and has made friends a lot easier here than in his previous school. Uhm - - - and I think that was one of the biggest reasons why when we moved back here I went with Durban rather than Cape

Town because we were living in Cape Town at the time. I know how it made me feel, and I was sure that was how he would feel if he came here, and he has done wonderful since he's been here. ” (Interview 14)

Similarly, Quinton talks about his daughter and the relationship that she has with another family member. Interestingly, she attended the larger school of Jonesburg and hated it. Quinton suggests,

“When she went to Jonesburg, she didn't like school at all. Hated it, I mean, complained every weekend I picked her up. Then, her and her mom moved down here, and my sister said well, why don't you go to Durban instead of Cape Town, and I'll pick you up, and I'll make sure you get there. Like I said, she's been on the honor roll every year ever since, and you know, pretty much her grades have been As, Bs, a few Cs now and then when she, you know she studies. I don't have to tell her to study. She enjoys it. She, I mean, she really enjoys coming here. As a matter of fact they moved to Prarieview, she did her sophomore year in Prarieview; and she struggled really bad there and didn't have very good grades, and she begged me to come live with me.” (Interview 17)

Hates School

A third choice might be on the horizon, or it may be that Helen and her 8th grade daughter settles for “school sucks”. Helen describes her daughter's dislike of both the former district and now Durban. I asked,

“Does she enjoy school?”

Helen responds, “No. She absolutely detests it, but, yeah, I don’t know if detests might be too strong a word, but she really, she hated Hot Springs. Really, really, hated it. I mean she would cry, she hated it so much. And here it’s just, “school sucks”, which is pretty normal for a teenager but she, she likes it a little bit better here, but she still doesn’t like school. ” (Interview 8)

Kathy has an 8th grade girl Rebecca. This is the first interview where a student actually attended the interview session. What is most interesting about this session is that as Kathy talks about anything being positive, Rebecca is obviously not in agreement as she wanders around the room shaking her head and sighing in disgust. I began by asking about Rebecca. Kathy describes her daughter:

“She’s very artistic. She’s an excellent drawer. She likes music real good. She likes to be by herself a lot, but she also likes her friends. She has a bad temperament. She’s different from the boys. She’s really possessive, very possessive. She does like school, and I think she’s going to turn out to be a pretty good adult. I say it’s important for them to learn about, like geometry, something for buildings and stuff, but I also think they should have art in the school and more stuff the kids are interested cause if kids are interested in something in school, they are going to want stay in it. Rather than just you know the basics math and reading. No matter where they are at you know they have to enjoy where they are at.” (Interview 11)

Decision Makers

Elementary Participants

Research in urban and suburban areas indicate that the older the student, the more likely they were to participate in the school of choice decision. While this study certainly supports that conclusion, in Durban, even elementary school-aged students seem to have a say in the matter. Parents seemed very willing to allow their children to be the “decision makers.” When asked to *“Describe how you involved your children in the decision.”* Betty replies,

“Well, there was lot a work involved when they were little. I’ve been talking to them even now about a possibility of switching schools and telling them why, you know. Uhm - - - my daughter was very willing to do that. My son absolutely does not want to change. So for now, I guess their staying here. I went to Cape Town and I feel they probably have more to offer at the high school level. But then when I started thinking about it, I mean they are going to have virtual high school, or they do here so that can bring classes in that they wouldn’t otherwise have. And I do like the comfort factor, the small district, and that I know when my friends go to kids’ houses, I know that family, and I know, you know, what’s going on.” (Interview 2)

Doug and Dana were very matter of fact about making the decision to send their children to Durban. When I asked,

“Did you involve your children in the decision to which school they would attend?”

Dana said very quickly: “Nope (laughter). They have asked how come they can’t

go to a school so they can ride the bus and not have to have us drive them, but they are worried about the gas of us driving them back and forth. The bus would come, and it wouldn't charge us anything. They might have closer friends.

Where we are they wouldn't have closer friends. ”

Doug jumps right in: “Neither one of them was real enthused about coming over here because we had them in a day care in Cape Town, and we had them in a preschool in Cape Town, so 90% of the kids that they made friends beginning at an infant stage that they knew and grew up with were all going to go to Cape Town. They kind of wanted to be with all their friends. So, when they got done with preschool, two years of preschool, and we told them you're going to go over to Durban school now, and there wasn't anybody that they knew was going to go to this school, it was going to be all new. They weren't too enthused about it, but we said; “Well you're going to come over here, and you're just going to make new friends, and you're going to come here if you like it or not, kid (laughter)!” But, no, we didn't ask them. We just told them what they were going to do. ”

(Interview 4)

Ellen, on the other hand, spent time with her daughter, who was already coming to school events with her mother. Ellen states,

“Yes, I involved Amanda. She was coming to a lot of the extra things that the school was doing, and she was in my classroom, and she was getting to know those people already. And, actually, it was before we moved. She had a choice; she could have stayed. I was driving back and forth already, so she chose to come

here.” (Interview 5)

Helen gave her daughter a choice between Durban and Jonesburg. Indicating that it was Erin’s (her daughter's) choice. When asked,

“Was your daughter involved in the decision at all?”

Helen replies, “Uhm - - - I gave her the option of going or not. You can either stay in Colon or you can go to Durban. Take your pick.”

“Did you nudge her either way?”

Helen – “No, I just told her because she kept telling me I don’t want to go to Jonesburg. I don’t want to go to Hot Springs, and then I said, Well, it’s Durban or Jonesburg(laughter). Those are your choices, so make up your mind. ” (Interview 18)

When discussing the children’s involvement, the shortest response award would go to Laura and Luke. They absolutely positive that it is a parent’s decision. This is the conversation:

“Did you involve the children in making the decision?”

Both – “No!”

“Did you have a family meeting at all to discuss the decision?”

Both – “No!”

“Did you have a family meeting at all to discuss the decision?”

Both – “No!”

“Were there friends or other family members involved in your decision?”

Both– “No!”

Mark and Mary did involve their boys in the selection of schools:

Mark – “They were a part of the talks between the parents and the counselor. We drove them to the facilities. We involved them in any decisions between what happens in this family, and they were all in agreement to go to school here. ”

(Interview 13)

Nannette indicates that there were several conversations with her son Christian and that basically he wanted to go where his dad went to school. When asked,

“Did you involve Christian in the decision at all to attend Durban versus Cape Town?”

Nannette states, “Yes I did. Well, he knew that we were going through the move and uhm - - - I just explained to him the options and he said okay. He also had known this is where his dad and I graduated from. Uhm - - - he knew that I know a lot of the parents and children already in this community whereas in Cape Town, we were kind of the newcomers and that I know he did say had a lot to do with why he wanted to come here. Uhm - - - but he, he said: “Well I want to try Durban,” so this is a trial for him. Uhm - - - “but if things don’t work out can I go somewhere else?” And I told him yes because that would not be a problem for me. So, well this is where he chose to come, and he’s still here, so things are going pretty good.” (Interview 14)

High School Participants

Casey indicates that their son was involved from the beginning, and she too, mentions the importance that sports or extra-curricular activities plays in the decision. She states,

“We sat down and talked about the school here; he knows a couple of students here. Perrysburg didn’t offer a lot and he does like the sports. He does like to participate in them. To me the sports bring out his confidence, and that is what some of the kids are here for. So I’m so sorry for some of them that their parents don’t even care to go to their games. Anyway, I discussed it with my son, and I sat down with his dad, and we sat down with him together. You know this is the problem that we’re having, and this is what talked about, and this is what we would like to try to see if this would fix the situation that he’s in.” (Interview 3)

Ginny’s 9th grade son was experiencing some trouble in his previous school of Cape Town. While Andrew had a say in where he went, Ginny was insistent that he would go somewhere. The family did have a meeting and Ginny describes it like this:

“There was a family meeting because my husband did have some say, you know. We set down a certain set of rules, which were basically the same thing that we knew when he came here. You know, they have you sign a contract, and we knew that that was what it was going to be, and that is pretty much the same guidelines we gave him. And this is the way it is, and you know, if you can’t do that then you are going back. Uhm - - - first of all, the process started with us

sitting down with my son and asking him why. I mean, is it an attitude problem. Is there, you know, a personality conflict here.” (Interview 7)

Although Quinton did not gather any information about the school other than listening to his sister, he did involve Ashley, and, in fact, basically allowed her to decide. He states,

“I told her it was up to her. I mean, because I said you can have your aunt pick you up and take you to school everyday and all that, or you can go to Cape Town, where you just get on the bus and be dropped off at home and, you know. And she did have some friends at Cape Town, so I mean, she did know something about the school cause it wasn’t like she wasn’t running from her friends. So, basically it was totally her decision. Personally I wanted her to go to Cape Town cause then there would be less travel and picking her up and doing this and doing that cause she could ride the bus, but - - - you know, I guess, like I said, it worked out.” (Interview 17)

Similarly, Rebecca allowed her high school sons to choose and they actually choose more than once. She describes how her son jumped back and forth twice:

“... oh yeah, and actually my oldest son, he decided to go back to Cape Town for a year and then decided to come back to Durban. So, he had to drive, of course, because at that time the buses wouldn’t pick up way out there. If they wanted to I could arrange for the bus to stop by our house, because all the busses come by us. But the boys had friends from Cape Town because they had went

there where the youngest one didn't get that many years, only kindergarten. I asked them, and all of a sudden had switched for a year, and my middle son loved it here, and graduated, so yeah, we talked about it. and I let them do whatever school they wanted, and they chose here." (Interview 18)

Ursula indicates that her son Cole was concerned about his friends. She allowed Cole to make the decision. Ursula stated the following when asked to describe how Cole was involved in the decision to come back to Durban.

"We, we talked to him a little bit about it. He missed his friends, and he missed uhm - - - you know some of his teachers. Oh yeah, we asked him about it, and how do you feel about school. Well, I liked the Durban school a lot better. I just felt like I was more of a person there. But we, we gave him a choice. We knew better, so even if he said no, I want to stay at Perrysburg, we were really going to have to work hard to talk about it, but it really wasn't even a contest about it. He wanted to come back here."

Both High School and Elementary

Jack and Jill adopted their granddaughters when their mother died in a car accident. They tell this story of their decision making:

Jill - "When they came down in June of that year, we talked to them about the schools, I think, right away. We took them around, showed them around here, and the other schools."

"Did they have a vote? Was there an equal vote between the four of you?"

Jack – “It would have been in principal, but there really wasn’t a vote. It was just a matter of, if they really wanted to go to Jonesburg, fine we would have let them go over. There wasn’t a vote per say, and I don’t think there needed to be because if we had said - - - maybe we did I don’t remember. In fact, they didn’t want to go there. The size of school, less opportunity to get into sports activities because so many more people, where here you got in all the teams you might have 50 people. There you got 50 people on each team. So, there’s less opportunity. Other than the end result, you know, the kids themselves. As long as they like the choice and are ready, willing, and able, it might improve them. It’s the love for the kids.” (Interview 10)

Opal, as you will remember, gathered a lot of information and actually visited several districts. Here she describes how the high school boys were involved, but the elementary daughter did not have a say. Opal offers this description,

“We dragged them along. They didn’t want to go in and visit; you know, go in the building and meet the people that were there. It wasn’t thrilling for them, and we talked to them, and we tried to prioritize what we felt, and then what they felt, and actually they probably tipped the scale here. Uhm - - - I think my husband and I, we may have gone on with Krueger but I think that they felt more comfortable, they knew a couple people, and then when they met Mr. Longstreet over there I think that was another bonus. Uhm - - - that is about as much involvement. We didn’t really involve our elementary level child. I mean, she went and saw the school, but that was about it. I guess we went out to eat one

night and discussed it with everyone that way. Another time it was kind of like. I talked to them each individually kind of a thing, and then, I think when we finally made the decision it was just, yeah, a family sit down kind of a thing. ” (Interview 15)

Stan describes the process of deciding. He indicates that his 5th and 9th grade girls were both involved in the decision. He states,

“Yes the girls were involved. It was a situation that we had the discussion when we were going to move. The main reason was that she couldn’t get the help she needed when she had the problem out there. And they had two different choices like of where they wanted to go and stuff and like we sat them down, explained to them this school has this style teaching, and yes, we looked at that one, but you’re going to be in the same boat you were up there, and they could have gone. They were about 70% of the choice was theirs - - - Durban.”

(Interview 19)

Summary

In this study, student enjoyment appeared to influence the decisions of parents and students. Most parents, 17 out of 22 allowed their child to make the decision of which school to attend, or at least to have some say in the matter. Some parents put the social life of their students about the academic achievement. Sports and extra-curricular opportunities were mentioned by many parents as being important to their child. Also, the idea of finding that special fit for a child appeared to be a strategy that some parents

identified. Finally, there were several parents who indicated that their child just hated school. This concept of student enjoyment seemed to transition smoothly back and forth between who was making the decision.

This study indicated that older children are more likely to contribute to the discussion and the decision to change schools. Conversely the younger children, those in elementary and middle school are less likely to make the decision, or even to be involved in the decision. Those parents with children in both elementary and secondary programs allowed the decision to be made or greatly influenced, again by the older children. Finally, the decision, whether made by the parent or the student, appeared to be tied to the overall enjoyment of the child. With this in mind, wouldn't the students actually be making the decision at any age? In other words, if parents are relying on the student's enjoyment, happiness, or satisfaction, then the decision is really made by the child, irregardless of the age.

Conclusions and Implications

Chapter VIII

Scope of the Research

This research was conducted in a very small town in Southwest Michigan. The cooperating district, which has been referred to as Durban, has approximately 400 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. In fact, Durban is the smallest district in its county. Subsequently, Durban was chosen for four reasons: 1) the rural locality; 2) the size of the school; 3) the relatively large number of school of choice students; and 4) the only school choices available to the parents were schools similar to Durban (figure 8.1). In short, there were few options for parents in this rural community. Private schools, Christian schools, and charter schools were not really a viable option for these parents, unless they were willing and able to drive many miles each way. The closest charter school is approximately 15 miles from Durban. This meant that the parents were choosing a public school that closely resembled the school that they were leaving.

Fall 2005	Student Enrollment K-12	Percentage of Free and Reduced Lunch Students	Number of Certified Teaching Staff
Cape Town	1196	40	72
Durban	396	35	24
Eland	832	22	48
Hot Springs	1013	40	58
Jonesburg	1645	35	96
Krueger	2619	28	154

Figure 8.1

While the Durban School District is small, it has 32 families who participated in selecting Durban as their school of choice district rather than their resident district. Of the 32 families participating, 4 families reside in the district in which I work. These families were not contacted for interviews in order to avoid bias. Of the 28 parents that were identified for interviews, 2 declined to be interviewed when initially contacted by phone. Additionally, two parents were never contacted because the school district did not have accurate phone numbers for these parents. Another set of parents declined to be interviewed after initially agreeing to be part of the study and failing to appear for the interview even after rescheduling 3 times. These parents reported that their busy family schedule kept them from participating. Finally, one set of parents agreed to be interviewed, arrived for the interview and then declined to sign the waiver. They were informed that they could not be interviewed without their signature, and they left.

Data Supports Previous Research

Parents School

The results from this study were similar in many ways to previous research. The history of where a parent went to school undoubtedly played a role in how those parents selected a school for their children. Fourteen of the twenty-two parents or sets of parents interviewed in this study indicated that attending Durban had provided them with a satisfactory education and an acceptable level of comfort which they believed would translate into a safe and acceptable quality education for their children. The idea of a parent being comfortable with their school, the community school, was suggested by

Bell's research in an urban setting. (Bell 2004)

Convenience

Similarly, convenience is a well documented, motivating factor for parents. Whether a parent is concerned about before and/or after school child care, there is a relative who lives near the school, or the parent wants to be able to pick up and drop off the child on the way to work, it appears that convenience is a factor that is found in the rural setting as well as the urban and suburban. In this study, 20 out of 22 parents mentioned the idea that convenience played a role in their decision. Many of the parents indicated that this was the most important reason for selecting a school.

District Response/ Teachers Response

Every parent, 22 out of 22 interviews, mentioned the importance of the responsiveness of the school district. Most often the conversation centered on a district that did not respond to the satisfaction of the parent. Complaints often centered on a feeling that teachers and principals were not willing to help their child when they needed it most. Occasionally, the parents felt as though there was no one in the school district who cared about their child or their child's needs. District responsiveness in this study was centered on the idea of push or pull factors, and parents provided examples of both push factors and pull factors which impacted their school decision.

Information Gathered

This research found that in making a school choice, parents did not gather

information on the school options as one might expect. Several parents indicated that they knew the district well because they attended Durban; however, 8 out of 22 parents indicated that they gathered no evidence. Of the remaining 14 parents interviewed, only 3 gathered what might be considered educational information, by actually visiting other schools and examining more than one alternative. Rather, most of the parents relied on their past experiences (as suggested above), or they sought opinions from friends or family members. This, too, mimics the research mentioned in Chapter II, which suggests that parents in making school choices do not gather data, such as dropout rates, or test scores such as the MEAP (Bell 2004). Rather parents are searching for anecdotal evidence of a school's success, relying on a relative or friend's perception of the quality of a school.

Students Enjoyment

Previous school of choice research in urban and suburban schools indicated that parents want their children to have fun and enjoy school. Parent selection of Durban as their school of choice seemed to be no different. Again, 22 out of 22 parents, or sets of parents, acknowledged that their child should enjoy school. Several of the parents indicated that they were more concerned about their child's social life and the desire to have their child be liked than they were with the child's academic achievement. In many of the descriptions regarding a parent's dislike of the previous district, the parent suggested that their child was not getting along with other students, even to the point of getting into multiple fights, and coming home bloodied on a regular basis.

Parents and students making decisions

As reported in Chapter 2, older students are often provided with more choices or more opportunity to participate in the school of choice decision. The students and parents who were the focus of the present study supported this concept. Of the high school aged students, 10 out of 11 students were included in the process of making the school of choice decision. The elementary aged students, however, were only included 7 out of 11 times in the school of choice decision. In these decision processes, the school selected was linked with student enjoyment.

New Concepts Revealed by the Data

District Size

Parents in this study mentioned the size of the district or the classroom as being one of the most important issues in their decision to choose a school district. In this study, 20 out of 22 parents, or sets of parents identified the size of the district as a major factor in selecting Durban as their child's school. Additionally, parents mentioned the idea of a small school or the size of a school being important to them 118 times during the 22 interviews. This was a revealing topic that became apparent to me early on in the interviewing process. What was possibly even more revealing was that the parents had not collected any information that would provide them with exact numbers of students in the school as a whole or in the individual classrooms.

Discipline

An important finding in this study which has had little attention in past research is the notion of a smaller school district being an advantage because of the opportunity it offers for high structure and strict discipline. Discipline became a very consistent topic with the parents of Durban as 18 out of 22 parents or sets of parents, described situations involving discipline, that were of concern to them in deciding upon a school of choice for their child. Four of the parents described in extensive detail their disciplinary problems with their child, and indicated that the move to a new school district was directly related to a suspension or expulsion incident at the resident district. Other parents identified events in the resident school district that signified that the discipline was not strict enough there, and they felt their children were not as safe as they should be. Some parents felt that the small district of Durban could provide a very structured and disciplined environment for their child.

Chaos

The idea of a school in "chaos" is one that weighed heavily on the minds of several of these parents. While, "chaos" was often mentioned in response to a question regarding good or bad schools, the term was also used when discussing school discipline. In fact, 8 out of 22 parents identified classes or schools that seemed out of control and each of these parents actually used the term "chaos". As the conversation continued the parents defined the term chaos as a lack of control of the classroom, teacher, or principal. More often than not, this idea of chaos in schools went hand in hand with the parents desire to have consistent and constant control of the children and the environment of a

classroom or the school as a whole.

Limitations of this study

Although I did not voluntarily disclose my position as an Assistant Superintendent of a local district, I also did not lie about my identity if asked about my vocation or locality. In fact, prior to the interviews some of the parents knew of my administrative position and mentioned it during or after the interviews. Specifically, two parents knew my name professionally because they were teachers in the county, and another parent had read articles in the local papers and/or magazines that I had written. While these parents indicated that they were not concerned that I was an administrator, they may have avoided some comments or may have attempted to shape their comments so as to avoid disparaging ideas about the districts that they have left, the districts that they have chosen; and possible even the district in which I work. Additionally, they may have simply wished to avoid verbally criticizing administrators and or teachers whom they perceived to be my colleagues.

Coding

I conducted all coding of the data, and this is certainly a potential limitation of the study, however, this is a common limitation within dissertations. All coding was conducted using a software package called Atlas Ti. To alleviate potential mistakes, the data was coded three times in order to attempt to ensure consistency and reliability. Additionally, two independent readers were recruited to read the transcripts, and subsequently to affirm my assumptions. Further, a report was written (Appendix E) and

presented to the superintendent and the high school principal of the Durban school district. While these colleagues indicated that they would not have been able to develop this type of report on their own, they provided support for the accuracy of the conclusions. Both reported that they found no conclusions in the study with which they would disagree. While great effort was taken to reduce error, it still remains possible.

Future Research

This study sought to identify parental rationales for school choices within a small rural school district. Using a semi-structured interview in a qualitative study to begin to understand the rationales that parents use as they select a school of choice provides a foundation for future research. Parents' stated reasons for their school choices provide a beginning in the process of understanding parental preferences and desires relative to their children's educational setting. However, these findings merely open the door for future quantitative research. Revealed preferences as discovered in prior quantitative studies in urban and suburban school districts can now, and should now, begin in the rural school districts. This is not intended to suggest that parents in this study were not truthful, nor were they necessarily intentionally dishonest. However these parents may very well have diluted the events that they described to protect their children or reduce the scrutiny of others involved in the situations. Likewise, they may have omitted some damning information that they believed placed them, or their children in a "bad light." It would seem reasonable that these parents would avoid revelations that they thought would make them look like poor parents.

Additionally, future research has an obligation to examine the impact of parents'

school of choice decisions on school districts, especially in relationship to public schools, and specifically as to their effect on rural school districts where school choices may already be limited due to the lower population levels and less affluence. Researchers should look at the districts themselves to determine if school of choice legislation has driven them to make any changes. For instance, in Durban, it became apparent that at least three other rural districts in the area had begun to transport students from a neighboring district back to their own school. Further, it was evident from the conversation that I had with the superintendent, that Durban's Board of Education was inquiring into why parents were choosing schools, and also what they needed to do in order to attract more students and thus, additional funding. A significant question raised by this study is whether school of choice decisions might in the future effect the survival of some rural schools resulting in even more limited school choices for rural families.

Implications of the Study

School of choice proponents subscribe to a market driven concept of school improvement. Their rationale is that if a school is good, it will attract more students and a greater share of the market. It follows that if a school is bad, then it will lose students signaling a need for improvement. If the needed improvement does not occur, then the school will eventually close its doors due to the lack of customers. Thus the concept of school of choice as a quality assurance program assumes that parents will do their due diligence and research school based on criteria that measure in some way the quality of the academic, social, and environmental factors of each school that is available to their children. Following that, the parents will weigh their findings on multiple schools to

come to a rational decision about which school will best meet their children's academic, social and environmental needs. However, if instead, parents choose schools based on characteristics other than the quality of the academic offerings and the potential of improved educational opportunity presented for their children, then it seems unlikely that parental choice will effect improvement in the quality of schools?

In addition, the situation found in this study where parents are making school choice decisions based on criteria not typically associated with the policymakers' official rationale for implementing a school of choice policy, raises the question of who will truly benefit from the school of choice legislation? A market approach to "free" education may be a challenge to rural schools and to parents and students in rural areas where the economy of numbers does not encourage private enterprise schools to flourish. The result may be that in the future, rural families may have less choices, or lesser choices when it comes to education.

Recommendations

School districts, administrators and legislators need to understand how and why parents are choosing schools. In essence, we need to understand the customer, and to perhaps educate the customer. In our society, parents who are choosing to participate in schools of choice legislation are more concerned with convenience and student enjoyment than they are with gathering information regarding the quality of a school district. Parents who are choosing to participate seem to be more interested in their children's social life, than they are their child's academic achievement. The findings in this study suggest that school districts need to take action promptly.

Rural school districts can and should take steps to identify and include convenience factors as a primary service for their customers. These services might include daycare programs, all day kindergarten, or even after school tutoring that will support parents struggling with their busy schedules. Additionally, schools may want to focus on counseling and student assistance programming that will provide opportunities for students to better enjoy the school district where they attended classes. Richard De Four's work on "Professional Learning Communities" speaks to the need for students to connect to other students and teachers. De Fours work could guide school districts in improving students' sense of belonging and therefore the student's enjoyment of that school. This might also address parental safety concerns as increasing student enjoyment of a school across the student population reduces the risk of school violence. Whatever the strategy, the message is clear from these parents, "If our children are not happy, we will go somewhere else."

Finally, as an Assistant Superintendent, and as a former high school principal and teacher, the concept of providing an opportunity for a student to run from discipline or social problems at one district has never seemed to be an effective intervention to me. One of the themes that appeared in many of the interviews of this study dealt with discipline issues that these schools of choice children experienced in their past district. Before beginning this research, I had a firm opinion that the teachers, administrators, and the parents should teach students how to deal with their problems as they will have to deal with problems in life. However, during the past year, I have found a more centered position that suggests that some students may need a fresh start. Some students may need to leave a troubled past at one school behind and be transplanted in an environment that

will be healthier for them. Recently, I heard the following story that seemed very appropriate to this perspective. The story is centered on two Rotarians walking along a beach. In case you are not aware, Rotary is an international organization dedicated to service in the local communities as well as world wide service, such as Polio and Small Pox eradication.

There are two Rotarians walking along a beach. The beach is littered with starfish, and while the starfish are still alive, they are laying on the sand, gasping for oxygen and the life that only the sea water can provide. As they walk along, one of the Rotarians bends over, picks up a starfish and tosses it back into the sea. After about the 10th time that this occurs, the second Rotarian asks the first why he is bothering to bend over to throw them back into the water; after all he asks; "What difference does it make when so many others are dying?" They walk a little further, and the first Rotarian bends over picks up another starfish, throws it back into the sea and says; "It makes a difference to that one!"

While there are many questions as to how this market approach will improve all schools, quite possibly the best argument for maintaining this type of opportunity for the students and parents, is that one student who will truly benefit by having the opportunity.

Appendix A – District Letter

December 5, 2005

Dear Sir,

My name is Brian Metcalf and I am a doctoral candidate in educational administration at Michigan State University. I am conducting research for a dissertation regarding how and why parents in rural areas choose a district under school of choice guidelines. I would like your cooperation in allowing me to interview some of the parents of students enrolled in your school district.

To conduct the research, I respectfully request that you allow me to mail an introduction of myself and the research format to all of the parents in your district that have selected Helmer under the guidelines of the school of choice policy. I will use this list to take a random sampling of twenty (20) parents' names (households) to contact.

I will subsequently mail these parents a letter followed by a personal phone call from me; requesting the opportunity to interview them. Strict confidentiality will be maintained. The names of your district, all administrators and teachers within your district, the names of the students and the parents will all be strictly confidential and will not be named at any time in my study.

Sincerely,

Brian L. Metcalf
Doctoral Candidate
Michigan State University

Appendix B - Parent Letter

December 5, 2005

Dear:

I am a doctoral student at Michigan State University. I'm conducting research for my dissertation concerning parent's decision to participate in school of 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.

I would like to meet with you personally, instead of having you answer "yes" or "no" answers to written questions. I believe this will allow you to answer the questions in your own words; in essence to tell your own story, in regards to your school of choice decisions. All personal information that I collect through the interview process will remain strictly confidential. Your name and personal information will not be used at any time. 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,

Brian L. Metcalf
Doctoral Candidate
Michigan State University

Appendix C - Parent Waiver

How and Why Parents in Rural Areas Select Schools for their Children to attend

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how and why parents choose a specific school over another school. 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.

Our interview should take approximately an hour. If we have not finished in that amount of time, I would like the opportunity to meet again to finish the conversation. We most certainly will not exceed 1 ½ hours.

Absolute confidentiality will be kept in regards to your name and the names of your children; as well as the names of the school and town where you live.

Participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate at all, or you may refuse to participate in certain procedures or answer certain questions or discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the investigator: Chris Dunbar; Department of Educational Administration, 418 Erickson Hall, and East Lansing-48824. Phone: 517-353-9017; email: dunbarc@msu.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact - anonymously, if you wish - Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS) by phone: (517) 355-2180, fax: (517) 432-4503, email address: ucrihs@msu.edu, or regular mail: 202 Olds Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

By signing this form you acknowledge that:

- 1 the purposes of this study have been explained to you
- 2 you voluntarily agree to participate in this study
- 3 you give permission to have the interview ***audio tape-recorded**
- 4 you acknowledge that you may stop the interview at any time without penalty
- 5 you have been provided a copy of this form with MSU contact numbers should you need them

Respondents Name: _____

Respondents Signature assuring consent for interview to be audio taped:

_____ Date of Interview: _____

Appendix D - Interview Questions

Influential Factors of Parents

1. *Tell me about your background, did you go to a school in a rural area?
2. What do you think was most important about your elementary school experiences?
3. Describe your middle school experiences?
4. What was high school like for you?
5. What did you do after high school?
6. *What do you do now?
7. *Tell me about your son/daughter.
8. *Does your child enjoy school?

Judging the Quality of a School

9. Why did you move your child?
10. *What aspects of a school are the most important for children to learn?
11. *Describe what a bad school is like?
12. *Describe your vision of a great school.
13. If there was not public school choice, where would your child attend school?
14. *When did you first think about enrolling your child in a different school? What were your thoughts?
15. *Describe the critical moment when you finally selected a school for your child?
16. If you were to list the three (3) most important reasons for enrolling your child in this selected district, what would those be?

Sources of Information

17. *Specifically, what information did you gather?
18. *Who do you believe has the most important information about a school?
19. *Did you have enough information to make an informed decision?
20. Were there any barriers that made it difficult to get information? If so, what?
21. Looking back, how would you describe your decision-making processes?

Decision Participants

22. *Describe how you involved your child in the decision?
23. *Did you have a family meeting to discuss the options?
24. Were there friends or other family members that influenced your decision?

***indicates question was of great importance and asked of all participants**

Appendix E – Summary Report for Durban Superintendent

The following information is being provided to the Durban Superintendent and high school principal so that the Administrators and the Board of Education may better understand how and why parents are choosing Durban, through schools of choice legislation. In this study, 22 parents or sets of parents were interviewed. Figure 4.1 below will provide an overview of the parents' responses to 9 general themes that were developed throughout the interview process.

Parents School

The results from this study were similar in many ways to previous research. The history of where a parent went to school undoubtedly played a role in how those parents selected a school for their children. Fourteen of the twenty-two parents or sets of parents interviewed in this study indicated that attending Durban had provided them with a satisfactory education and an acceptable level of comfort which they believed would translate into a safe and acceptable quality education for their children. The idea of a parent being comfortable with their school, the community school, was suggested by Bell's research in an urban setting. (Bell 2004)

Convenience

Similarly, convenience is a well documented, motivating factor for parents. Whether a parent is concerned about before and/or after school child care, there is a relative who lives near the school, or the parent wants to be able to pick up and drop off the child on the way to work, it appears that convenience is a factor that is found in the

rural setting as well as the urban and suburban. In this study, 20 out of 22 parents mentioned the idea that convenience played a role in their decision. Many of the parents indicated that this was the most important reason for selecting a school.

District Response/ Teachers Response

Every parent, 22 out of 22 interviews, mentioned the importance of the responsiveness of the school district. Most often the conversation centered on a district that did not respond to the satisfaction of the parent. Complaints often centered on a feeling that teachers and principals were not willing to help their child when they needed it most. Occasionally, the parents felt as though there was no one in the school district who cared about their child or their child's needs. District responsiveness in this study was centered on the idea of push or pull factors, and parents provided examples of both push factors and pull factors which impacted their school decision.

Information Gathered

This research found that in making a school choice, parents did not gather information on the school options as one might expect. Several parents indicated that they knew the district well because they attended Durban; however, 8 out of 22 parents indicated that they gathered no evidence. Of the remaining 14 parents interviewed, only 3 gathered what might be considered educational information, by actually visiting other schools and examining more than one alternative. Rather, most of the parents relied on their past experiences (as suggested above), or they sought opinions from friends or family members. This, too, mimics the research mentioned in Chapter II, which suggests

that parents in making school choices do not gather data, such as dropout rates, or test scores such as the MEAP (Bell 2004). Rather parents are searching for anecdotal evidence of a school's success, relying on a relative or friend's perception of the quality of a school.

Students Enjoyment

Previous school of choice research in urban and suburban schools indicated that parents want their children to have fun and enjoy school. Parent selection of Durban as their school of choice seemed to be no different. Again, 22 out of 22 parents, or sets of parents, acknowledged that their child should enjoy school. Several of the parents indicated that they were more concerned about their child's social life and the desire to have their child be liked than they were with the child's academic achievement. In many of the descriptions regarding a parent's dislike of the previous district, the parent suggested that their child was not getting along with other students, even to the point of getting into multiple fights, and coming home bloodied on a regular basis.

Parents and students making decisions

As reported in Chapter 2, older students are often provided with more choices or more opportunity to participate in the school of choice decision. The students and parents who were the focus of the present study supported this concept. Of the high school aged students, 10 out of 11 students were included in the process of making the school of choice decision. The elementary aged students, however, were only included 7 out of 11 times in the school of choice decision. In these decision processes, the school

selected was linked with student enjoyment.

New Concepts Revealed by the Data

District Size

Parents in this study mentioned the size of the district or the classroom as being one of the most important issues in their decision to choose a school district. In this study, 20 out of 22 parents, or sets of parents identified the size of the district as a major factor in selecting Durban as their child's school. Additionally, parents mentioned the idea of a small school or the size of a school being important to them 118 times during the 22 interviews. This was a revealing topic that became apparent to me early on in the interviewing process. What was possibly even more revealing was that the parents had not collected any information that would provide them with exact numbers of students in the school as a whole or in the individual classrooms.

Discipline

An important finding in this study which has had little attention in past research is the notion of a smaller school district being an advantage because of the opportunity it offers for high structure and strict discipline. Discipline became a very consistent topic with the parents of Durban as 18 out of 22 parents or sets of parents, described situations involving discipline, that were of concern to them in deciding upon a school of choice for their child. Four of the parents described in extensive detail their disciplinary problems with their child, and indicated that the move to a new school district was directly related to a suspension or expulsion incident at the resident district. Other parents identified

events in the resident school district that signified that the discipline was not strict enough there, and they felt their children were not as safe as they should be. Some parents felt that the small district of Durban could provide a very structured and disciplined environment for their child.

Chaos

The idea of a school in "chaos" is one that weighed heavily on the minds of several of these parents. While, "chaos" was often mentioned in response to a question regarding good or bad schools, the term was also used when discussing school discipline. In fact, 8 out of 22 parents identified classes or schools that seemed out of control and each of these parents actually used the term "chaos". As the conversation continued the parents defined the term chaos as a lack of control of the classroom, teacher, or principal. More often than not, this idea of chaos in schools went hand in hand with the parents desire to have consistent and constant control of the children and the environment of a classroom or the school as a whole.

Participants Responses to Common Themes

	Convenience	Parent attended Durban	Size of District	District Response	Discipline	Chaos	Gathered Information	Student Enjoyment is Important	Child Participated in Decision
Interview 1	X	X	X	X	X	No	No	X	No
Interview 2	X	X	X	X	No	No	No	X	X
Interview 3	X	No	X	X	X	No	X	X	X
Interview 4	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	No
Interview 5	X	X	X	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 6	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Interview 7	X	X	X	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 8	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Interview 9	X	X	X	X	X	No	X	X	No
Interview 10	No	No	X	X	X	No	X	X	X
Interview 11	X	No	X	X	X	No	X	X	No
Interview 12	X	X	X	X	X	No	No	X	No
Interview 13	X	No	No	X	No	X	No	X	No
Interview 14	X	X	X	X	X	X	No	X	X
Interview 15	X	X	X	X	No	X	No	X	X
Interview 16	X	No	X	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 17	X	No	X	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 18	X	No	X	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 19	No	X	No	X	X	No	No	X	X
Interview 20	X	X	X	X	No	No	No	X	No
Interview 21	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Interview 22	X	No	X	X	X	X	No	X	No

X = theme played a role in the decision

Figure 4.1

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