Parent and Student Experiences with Choice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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The University of Arkansas

was founded in 1871 as the flagship institution of higher education for the state of Arkansas. Established as a land grant university, its mandate was threefold: to teach students, conduct research, and perform service and outreach.

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

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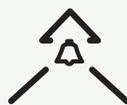
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SCHOOL CHOICE
DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Scholars, advocates of various positions, and policymakers have fiercely debated whether the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), also known as the voucher or "Choice" program, has been a godsend or a scourge for the city's children. Wisconsin policymakers, concerned about that question, identified the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) as the organization to help provide the answers.[1] The SCDP is a national research organization, based in the University of Arkansas's Department of Education Reform, dedicated to the comprehensive, objective, and nonpartisan evaluation of school choice programs. We are drawn together for this project by the opportunity to examine what effects the mature MPCP is having on the students, parents, taxpayers, schools, and communities of the city and state. Our shared commitment is to carefully and faithfully follow the evidence, wherever it may lead.

As a research team we are committed to performing a "mixed method" program evaluation. Many of the 36 individual reports we plan to release through the course of our five-year evaluation will be informed by quantitative data regarding student test score gains, school-level characteristics, and financial aspects of the MPCP.[2] Other reports, such as this one, are based largely upon qualitative data obtained from Milwaukee parents and students participating in annual focus groups we are hosting. These focus groups are valuable because they allow us to hear and report, first hand, what families are experiencing within the MPCP or Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). Because the participants were drawn randomly from our carefully matched research panels of MPCP and MPS 3rd- 9th grade students, [3] the participants are likely to be similar to each other in many respects, except the fact that one group has enrolled in the school "Choice" program and the other group obtains their educational services from MPS.[4]

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1   Wisconsin Act 125, enacted on March 10, 2006, which primarily modified Wisconsin Laws 119.23.

2   For an overview of the project, see Patrick J. Wolf, "The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Baseline Reports, School Choice Demonstration Project," University of Arkansas, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #1, February 2008, available at: http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html. For examples of quantitative baseline reports issued by the project see John F. Witte, Patrick J. Wolf, Joshua M. Cowen, David J. Fleming, and Juanita Lucas-McLean, "The MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Baseline Report, School Choice Demonstration Project," University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #4, February 2008, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html; Robert M. Costrell, "The Fiscal Impact of the MPCP in Milwaukee and Wisconsin, 1993-2008, School Choice Demonstration Project," University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, SCDP Milwaukee Evaluation Report #2, February 2008, available at http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Milwaukee_Research.html.

3   Parents of elementary and middle school students were selected to represent their children's experiences in the focus groups. The 9th grade parents and students were selected as a family unit. Given our interest in understanding the dynamics associated with parental choice, all the families with 9th graders were actively involved in school shopping the previous year. In addition, a focus on 9th graders at this stage of the study will allow us to reengage these families and assess their experiences with the high schools their children now attend and gain some general insights into their post-secondary aspirations. Parents with children in grades K-8 attended the focus groups without their children.

4   All of the parents, students, and schools that are participating in any aspect of the longitudinal evaluation have been promised complete anonymity. None of the information that they share with us can be reported in a way that connects the information specifically to them, by family name or school. These arrangements are consistent with the standard procedures for conducting research involving actual people, and help to ensure that no one is harmed as a result of participating in our study and that participants feel free to share their opinions with us without hesitation.

The central purpose of this component of the comprehensive evaluation is to *assess and describe the parental choice experiences of families with children attending MPS and MPCP schools*. This translates into our basic research questions: *How do low income families exercise parental choice in Milwaukee?*, and, *What are the similarities and differences in the families' experiences with the schools they chose?*

Based on the first year focus group and polling data, the following is a summary of key findings:[5]

- Both MPCP and MPS parents demonstrate a good basic understanding of the various school options available to them in Milwaukee. However, interested stakeholders could do more to improve awareness among families, especially the students, about the full range of school options they might be eligible for in Milwaukee.

- The majority of parents across both sectors seek a school with a strong reputation. The 9th grade families, in particular, seek schools with an expressed commitment to college preparation.

- When seeking information about schools, MPS parents and students were more likely to learn about schools through informal sources of information provided by friends and family versus MPCP families who appear more likely to consider formal information provided by schools. On the other hand, very few families cite other parents and the internet as sources of information.

- Among 9th grade families, MPS parents are more likely than their MPCP counterparts to involve their child in making the final decision about which school the child will attend.

- MPS elementary parents and MPCP 9th grade students are least satisfied with their school selection, while MPS 9th grade parents and students are most satisfied. MPS 9th grade students, in particular, enjoy positive relationships with school faculties and administrators, and they find this aspect of their schools most satisfying.

- Parents and students across sectors reported that "multiplex schools" and reduced funding are the most unique changes in Milwaukee, and both parents and students are mostly dissatisfied with these changes. The parents expressed concerns about program cutbacks, "hidden fees," deteriorating school facilities, and staff shortages.

- Generally speaking, once parents have made their school selection, they appreciate schools that communicate often and openly with them about their child's progress.

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5   Future reports will present research findings and draw conclusions that will include families with children attending Milwaukee public charter schools. Readers should note that Latino parents who chose to participate in the focus group discussions in English are not included in this report. See Appendix A – Research Methodology - for more details about this matter.

INTRODUCTION

Parental choice is a relatively new approach to improving outcomes for students.[6] Established in the early 1990's, the term "parental choice" is used to describe a variety of education reform initiatives that are designed to provide families, particularly low-income families whose children may be attending low performing schools, greater access to and involvement in selecting the schools their children attend. As more low income families are given access to quality school options, whether public or private, parents and students (or what we call here "families"[7]) will be challenged to assume new roles and responsibilities in the education marketplace.

Why should we be concerned about better understanding parental choice in Milwaukee? For starters, when most people think about "parental choice," Milwaukee, Wisconsin comes immediately to mind. This prominent Midwestern city is home to arguably the widest set or variety of contemporary school options available to low income parents in America. For example, Milwaukee's voucher program has grown over the past 17 years to be one of the largest of a dozen voucher initiatives across the country. Through the MPCP, low income families living in Milwaukee can use tax-supported vouchers to send their children to private school. Participation in the program has grown from 341 students in seven schools in 1990-91 to approximately 19,538 students who are enrolled in over 100 private schools in 2008-09. A total of 56 public charter schools operate within the city's boundaries, enrolling 16,152 students last year. Even parents with students attending Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) have a variety of magnet, community, open enrollment, and inter-district school options available to them.

However, with the exception of a series of reports authored by John Witte in the early 1990s,[8] there have been few attempts to understand the practical implications of "parental choice" in Milwaukee from the perspective of the families that have been exercising it. This is explained in part by the fact that parental choice remains a relatively un-researched element of education reform. Given the fact that Milwaukee, Wisconsin represents one of the most advanced models of school choice in America, it provides an exceptional opportunity to assess the significance of parental choice.

This study, as a component of the larger mix-methods School Choice Demonstration Project evaluation, is a rare effort to describe, as well as to compare and contrast, the lessons learned from families who have pursued different school options, among them traditional public, public charter and private schools that accept publicly

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6   The theory behind parental choice was strongly influenced by the economist Milton Friedman who argued that vouchers could improve public education by promoting competition. He suggested that a highly competitive "market" for schools would eliminate the need to otherwise attempt a workable method of accountability for results, and school vouchers would allow parents to select and pay any school, public or private, with public funds currently allocated to local public schools. See: Milton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education," in *Economics and the Public Interest*, edited by Robert A. Solo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955).

7   We use the term "family" to include anyone with legal guardianship with regard to the students affiliated with this study. In some cases, family includes the student when they play an active role in the school selection process. (This suggests that the definition of "parent choice" needs to be expanded to include "student choice.")

8   For a summary of the five reports produced by Witte, go to http://epa.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/20/4/229. For additional information, see also: John Witte, *The Market Approach to Education: An Analysis of American's First Voucher Program* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

funded vouchers. Over the course of roughly four years, this study will use a variety of qualitative methods to explore the following questions:

- Are families aware of the full range of schools options available to them in Milwaukee, and how do families assess and choose the schools their children currently attend?

- What sources of information about school options were available to families, and, in retrospect, how helpful was that information to families?

- What major changes have parents and students noticed in the education system in general, and what do they like most and least about the school their children attend in particular?

- What were the unexpected experiences and consequences of choosing the schools they selected, and what recommendations would families make about improving them?

- What is the source of families' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the schools their children now attend?

This report will elucidate the demand side of school choice – from the perspective of parents and students – and use their insights to expand our understanding of parental choice. In the first year of the study, which was launched in the spring of 2008, we attempted to establish a relationship and build trust with the families, as well as gain a baseline understanding of their experiences within two of three major school sectors in Milwaukee.[9] This first year report reflects the responses of families with children attending MPS and MPCP schools. A second round of focus groups with participating families is scheduled for the spring of the 2008-09 academic year, and a third and final meeting during the spring of 2010-11. Subsequent reports will be expanded to include the experiences of families with children attending public charter schools.

The research design and data collection methods, which are described in greater detail in Appendix A, were intended to be flexible, exploratory and customized for the target population. Focus groups are the primary information gathering technique used here because they allow the respondents to comfortably share their individual and collective experiences. However, as a data gathering technique, focus groups have both limitations and benefits that we would like to briefly note here.

First, we acknowledge the limitations of the qualitative methods used here. Participating families are self-selected in a number of ways, including their desire to enroll their children in either MPS or MPCP schools. The experiences and statements of the families in this study are not necessarily representative of all MPS or MPCP families or the broader population of low income families in Milwaukee. The observations and findings reported here should be understood within this context.

In terms of benefits, unlike other information gathering techniques, focus groups allow the participants to drive the discussion. This is an important feature because we assume many participants have not thought deeply about some of the topics that are broached during the discussion. Focus groups give them an opportunity to

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9   We use the term "school sectors" to describe the three major groups of school options in Milwaukee – traditional public, public charter and private.

think out loud and benefit from listening to the experiences of other participants. Their collective responses help to provide a comprehensive perspective on the topics at hand.[10]

In light of the strengths and limitations of focus groups, we also use interactive polling devices to supplement them. The polling devices offer parents and students anonymity with regard to questions that are less appropriate for group discussion, and they allow us to cover a large number of questions in a shorter period of time. They also allow us to thoroughly track the individual responses. Overall, we are confident that the focus groups and other qualitative methods we used will generate valuable insights about parental choice.

OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS

The sample of 52 participants – 37 parents and 15 high school students – was randomly drawn from households that participated in the 2006-07 MPCP School Voucher Sample Parent Survey and the MPS Matched Sample Parent Survey. These parents agreed to participate in follow-up focus groups.[11] In total, 253 families were selected as targets to participate in the focus group study; however, only 37 families attended the focus group event.[12] These 37 families will remain in the study over the five-year evaluation and will be invited to participate in future focus groups to continue the dialogue through 2011.

Due to the challenges of recruiting study participants, several methods were employed. In the spring of 2008, families who agreed to participate in the focus groups were sent a letter informing them of the details associated with the focus group, and requesting that they confirm their participation via either a toll-free or local Milwaukee telephone number. Eligible participants who had not confirmed their participation received a follow-up telephone call. Several days before the event, all parents who agreed to participate received a follow-up telephone

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10   Also, focus groups have been used as an effective tool for assessing the impact of public policy. See for example: Caroline Dyer, "Researching the Implementation of Educational Policy: A Backward Mapping Approach," *Comparative Education,* 35:1 (1999), pp. 45-61; D.L. Morgan, *Focus Group as Qualitative Research.* 2nd Ed. (London: Sage, 1997); D.W. and P.N. Shamdasani, *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice* (London: Sage, 1992).

11   The surveys were administered by Westat, a partner in the School Choice Demonstration Project evaluation.

12   About two-thirds of the telephone numbers on our contact list were either disconnected, wrong numbers, or were never answered in spite of repeated calls to the number. Among the 64 English-speaking targeted families who were actually contacted during the recruitment phase, 44 promised to attend the session. The final version of the report will also include the total number of parents who confirmed that they would participate in the focus group study but were not present on the day of the event.

call to remind them of the event. The families were also sent a confirmation postcard that provided detailed information about the event date, time and location, and the promised financial incentive.

Seven focus groups were conducted with five subgroups of parents and two subgroups of students. Specifically, the focus group sample was comprised of parents of elementary school students enrolled in schools operated by the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) and the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS); parents with 9th grade students currently enrolled in schools affiliated with the MPCP and the MPS; 9th grade students currently enrolled in MPCP and MPS schools; and, a Spanish-language group consisting of parents of elementary and high school students enrolled in MPCP and MPS operated schools. While the sample was divided into seven distinct subgroups, as shown in Figure 1 below, 20 MPCP and 17 MPS families are represented.

The 9th grade parents and students were selected as a family unit. (Figure 1 shows the exact number of participants within each subgroup.) Given our interest in understanding the dynamics associated with parental choice, the families with 9th graders were actively involved in school shopping the previous year. These families could draw from their recent experiences with school selection to answer many of the questions that are fundamental to this study. In addition, a focus on 9th graders at this stage of the study will allow us to reengage these families and assess their experiences with the high schools their children now attend and potentially gain some general insights into their post-secondary possibilities and aspirations.

FIGURE 1
Focus Group Sample Size – Spring 2008 Cohort
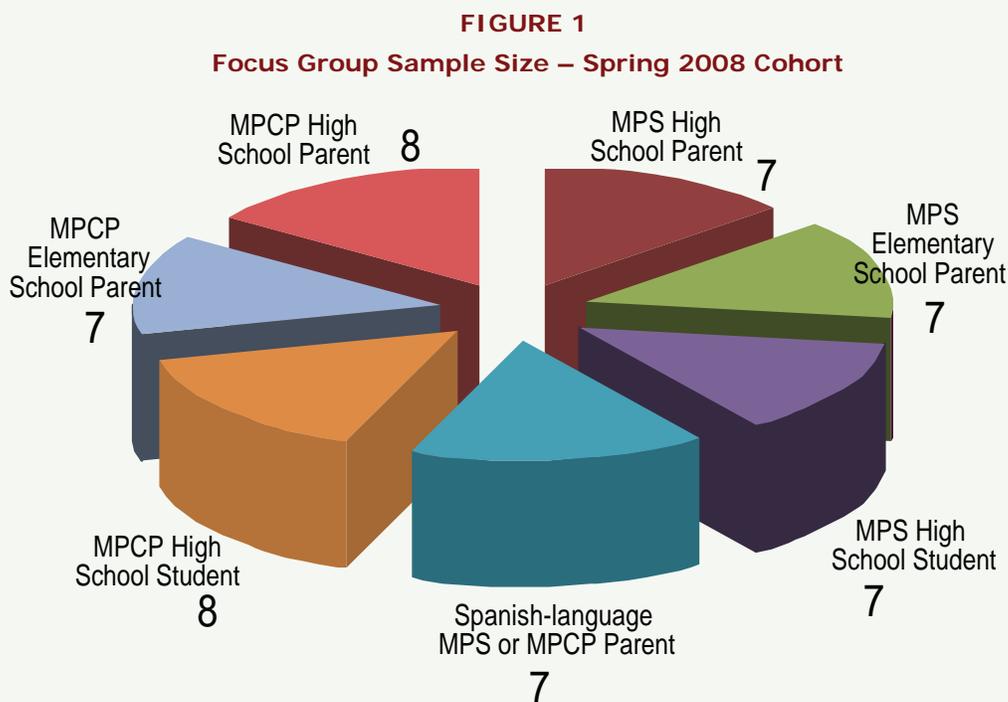
FOCUS GROUP AND POLLING FINDINGS

In this section, we provide a summary of the key findings from the focus group data and, when applicable, we provide additional information based on the polling data. These findings offer preliminary insights into five general areas: (1) families' assessments of noticeable changes in Milwaukee schools; (2) the factors that influenced their school selections, including which family members were involved in the selection process; (3) the source of their satisfaction (or lack thereof); (4) what they learned from their school selections; and (5) suggestions they would offer to improve their experiences. In an attempt to share the actual voices of the participants, we frequently include direct quotes from the focus groups.

1. What are the most noticeable changes in the Milwaukee education system?

One of the major observations we discerned across both sectors of parents and students is the sense that public and private schools in Milwaukee are perceived to be under-funded. The examples participants used, particularly the parents who previously attended schools in Milwaukee, suggest that many schools are investing less in many of the areas parents and students care about most. For many participants, declining teacher quality, lack of books and other resources, and programmatic cutbacks all stem from inadequate financial investments. For example, following is one exchange between two MPCP parents during the focus group discussion about this topic:

> Parent1: Teachers don't get paid that much.
>
> Parent2: That's why they say that they are nonchalant. Them kids didn't get their money's worth.
>
> Parent1: There [are] some teachers that care.
>
> Parent2: Oh, yes, [some] go beyond…
>
> Parent1: Sure, but I'm just saying come on. The government even said--I even heard the President [Bush] say that teachers [are] underpaid…
>
> Parent2: But, what you gonna do about it? Quit talking about it. Do something about it. Raise their pay…
> [MPCP elementary parents]

This observation is further supported by comments made by 9th grade parents from both sectors who are concerned about "hidden fees." They shared examples of schools that cut programs, similar to commercial airlines, and later proposed them to parents as a special offer for an additional fee. A small number of students also voiced concerns about the quality of their dining facilities (or the lack thereof) and the quality of the food offered by their school as possible examples of resource challenges.

Teachers emerged as the single most significant topic during MPCP elementary parents' discussion. They generally agreed that the quality of teachers appears to be diminishing. Yet, there was considerable debate about the reasons why. One parent expressed concern that some teachers do not seem to care whether students are completing and comprehending their assignments:

> You know, they want you to pay attention and do what you doin' when you're in class, and do your work or whatever, don't act up or whatever. But then, when--whether or not you've done your homework whether or not you're actually getting it, they leave that on the parents in public schools. [MPCP elementary parent]

Funding issues aside, the parents note that schools in both sectors appear to be making a strong push for smaller class sizes. Along with quality teachers, a smaller class size is very important to most students and parents. However, a small number of parents from both sectors complained that some schools have classes with more students than advertised.

Multiplex schools and space sharing were commonly cited changes, as well.[13] Generally speaking, it is not clear if the multiplex schools and the space sharing described by parents and students is a progressive approach to improving education outcomes or a cost-saving measure schools must pursue in reaction to competition and funding challenges.

During the polling session, we moved from a general discussion about the noticeable changes described above to a few questions about the participants' awareness of their school choice options. The overwhelming majority of the focus group participants (thirty-five out of forty) were aware that public schools were not the only options for low income families in Milwaukee. However, they did not fully understand the meaning of both charter schools and the MPCP.

The MPCP parent participants were better informed about the voucher program compared to the MPS parents. For example, when asked if the MPCP, also known as the "voucher program," is open to all families at or below a certain income threshold, eight out of twelve, or two-thirds, of MPS parents and 12 out of 14 MPCP parents answered the question correctly. On the other hand, MPS parent participants better understood that charter schools are public and not private schools. For instance, when asked if a charter school is a private school, ten out of thirteen MPS parents, compared to seven out of thirteen MPCP parents, answered the question correctly.

Student focus group participants, overall, were not as well informed about the educational options in Milwaukee. In fact, in response to the question about the voucher program being open to families below a certain income threshold, all seven of the MPS high school students who responded to the question answered "unsure." Four out of the eight MPCP high school students answered "unsure" to that question and three others answered incorrectly. The only exception to the student awareness about school choices was the MPS students' response to the question about charters. Five of seven MPS students answered correctly that charters are not private schools compared to four of eight of the MPCP students.

In Milwaukee it is conceivable that selecting a school can be a daunting experience. Based on these findings, it appears that parents generally know that they have multiple schools options, but they do not fully understand what they are. Students, on the other hand, are not as informed as their parents about their school options. Generally speaking, it appears that interested stakeholders can do more to raise family awareness about their school choice options in Milwaukee.

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13 Multiplex schools are facilities shared by two or more schools. The multiplex high school redesign concept, introduced in Milwaukee in 2003, was implemented to help convert large comprehensive high schools into smaller schools. Source: Telephone and email correspondence with Martin Lexmond, Director of School Innovation, Milwaukee Public Schools, July 17 and August 4, 2008.

2. What factors influence family school selection?

During the focus groups, we engaged the participants in a discussion about the key factors that influenced their families' school selection. Parents from both sectors were generally looking for the best school options for their children. A wide range of factors seemed to influence their decisions and only two observations seemed to be common among them. First, MPS high school parents used the term "reputation" often to explain their selection. "Reputation" seemed to suggest that some parents rely upon a school's past history to inform their decision. Following is an example of how one MPS parent used a schools' reputation to make her decision:

> The main influence is statistically the number of kids succeeding in that school. I would look at…the percentage of the graduation rate on this school, or the percentage of… the attendance, good attendance at this school, and the grade point average for this school. I looked up the standardized test scores. Compare them to, like, the … national average. [Yet they] standardized test scores were only part of it. It's because of the exposure that they get when those test scores come out. So, the dedication of teachers and the exposure they're getting from different things that some schools wouldn't have is why I chose it.
> [MPS elementary parent]

Some MPCP parents used their personal experiences (or what might be considered a "sector preference") as a framework for thinking about a potential school option for their child. For instance:

> Basically, what I'm saying is … I can see the same opportunities I had in [that school] versus a Milwaukee public school education. I could see that down [at the private school his child now attends], and I love it.
> [MPCP elementary parent]

MPS elementary parents identified numerous factors they considered when selecting the best school for their child. For one parent, finding a school that offered a year-round academic calendar was important, while, for another parent, finding a school where she would be able to enroll all four of her elementary-age children was a primary factor. A school's ability to expose students to diversity in its various forms – cultural, social, language – was also cited as important:

> My child's school is very diverse. It has a lot of different--every nationality. I think that's important, too, for younger kids, you know, so they…can learn different things about other cultures and stuff like that.
> [MPS elementary parent]

When asked to identify the most significant influence on their decision to place their child in the school they currently attend, MPCP 9th grade parents provided a range of responses, from the specific characteristics of a school (i.e., inputs) to what they hoped their child would gain from attending that school (i.e., outputs). From

an input standpoint, they referenced the importance of quality teachers and small class size. Two parents noted the importance of accurate information about the schools (a topic we discuss in greater detail below), and most of them relied upon brochures and other written information provided by the schools. From an output standpoint, most parents in this subgroup noted that they were looking for a school that could offer their child support with and preparation for college. For example:

> Not going to college is not an option in my [house]. So, it's all about pre-college and [being] prepared for college. [MPCP 9th grade parent]

MPS 9th grade parents stated many factors that influenced their decision to enroll their children in the school they currently attend. Included among them were the school's proximity to their home, the recommendation of family and friends, a parent's familiarity with a particular model of learning (i.e., Montessori), a school's reputation as a safe school environment, and a school's reputation for high quality teaching, strong academic programs, and opportunities for one-on-one instruction. Parents also discussed the important role that a strong college preparation curriculum played in their decision-making. Reflecting on his decision-making process, one father recounted that the decision to select the school he chose for his sons was based, in part, on having observed numerous high school students visit the university where he is employed.

> My sons go to the [name of school]. They pretty much specialize in, like, pre-college programs. And I work at the university as a counselor, and I have noticed, over the seven years that I've been there, you see these groups come in doing [college] tours. Every time I ask, 'What school do you go to?' it's always this school. [MPS 9th grade parent]

When MPCP students were asked to describe the most significant influence on their decision to attend the schools in which they were currently enrolled, most of them reported that they were not involved in the school selection process or making the final selection. However, two students suggested that, though not always comfortable with their parents' final choice, they felt their parents were making decisions that would be in their best interest. Still, when asked during the polling portion of the focus group session whether their school was currently meeting their needs, four out of eight MPCP high school students said they were not.

Two students indicated that having a different experience was one of the primary reasons they were interested in the MPCP. These students suggest that breaking away from certain expectations and relationships, mostly with peers, was important to doing better in high school.

> Student1: --I kind of picked it because I didn't want to go to no public school…
>
> Facilitator: But, what kinds of things did you think about? Did you--what was important to you?
>
> Student2: Making--having a new start, a new fresh start… [MPCP student]

One of these students later reported that, although she was excited about the "new experience" and the opportunity to do better academically, she could not give her new peers the impression that she had a positive relationship with her teachers.

> I just don't like to have issues with school, 'cause I don't want people to say, 'Ooh, you a teacher's pet,' and all that. I don't want that all the time. So, like, if I got a question with a paper or something, then I go talk to 'em,

but it's--if I see them in the hallway I say hi to them, but I won't sit there and have no 40 minute conversation about--with them about the latest book that they read or something like that. [MPCP student]

Who is involved in the school selection and decision making processes?

In addition to what factors influenced their school selection, we discussed who in the family is involved in the decision making process. Based on their responses to a polling question about this topic, across school sectors and grade levels, parents agreed that ultimately the school selection decision was theirs to make. The exception was the MPS 9th grade parents, who were evenly split between making the decision on their own and conferring with their children. Six out of seven MPS students indicated that they collaborated with their parents when deciding on a school, compared to three out of seven of the MPCP students. The MPS students (three out of seven) were also much more likely than their MPCP peers (one out of seven) to indicate that they were very involved in selecting the school they currently attend. Six of seven MPS 9th grade parents polled reported that their child had some level of involvement in the school selection process. When asked who in the family is most likely to select the school the child attends, three of six MPCP 9th grade parents reported that the final decision was theirs alone to make. MPCP parents appear to have more influence over what schools their children attend, and MPCP high school student responses in the focus groups suggested that some of them understand the control that their parents have over this decision.

Students from both the MPCP and MPS groups reported that family had a strong influence on their high school selection. Five of seven MPS students reported being involved and influential in the school selection process, and the other two students reported being involved but not influential in the final decision. These students reported a number of factors that influenced their decision to attend their current high school. When asked to rank order them, college preparatory curriculum/activities, job placement programs, and the school's sports reputation were cited as the top three reasons they have enrolled in the schools they now attend. They also cited the school's close proximity to their home, summer programming, and community service activities (linked to job training opportunities) as additional factors influencing their choice of schools.

The importance of information

The polling session provided us with another opportunity to explore what factors influenced the families' school choice selection. Based on what we know about the importance of reliable information, we presented the respondents with a series of questions about sources of information they used. When seeking information about schools, parents across sectors and grade levels reported obtaining much of their information from school-generated sources. Brochures and other information provided by the school, along with teachers and school administrators, were the two most often cited sources of information for most parents. The MPCP elementary parents also relied upon their church members, their friends or neighbors, and some "other" unidentified sources of information. Four out of seven of the MPS students said that their main sources of information about schools were their family members and their friends/neighbors, suggesting that they rely heavily upon their social networks when considering schools. Unlike their MPS counterparts, a number of the MPCP students get school information from the Internet, radio or television and some "other" unidentified sources of information.

While it is important to know what sources of information parents and students value, it is also helpful to understand what sources of information were not mentioned. Several organizations in and around Milwaukee have developed online resources for parents seeking information about schools. However, 34 out of 40, or 90 percent, of the parents and students from both sectors indicated that they do not look to the Internet as a main source of information about schools. Additionally, though friends and neighbors were cited as a source of information, "other parents" were never cited as a source of information by either group of parents. It is not clear why some parents do not have access to or take advantage of the Internet and other parents as a source of information about school options.

3. What is the source of family satisfaction?[14]

Nearly all school choice programs report high levels of parent satisfaction with their children's schools, and we assumed that would be the case here for both groups of families. Thus, we used the focus groups to explore what discrete factors best explain the families' satisfaction. The families across both sectors appear pleased with what we generally categorize as the school environment and home-school relationships, specifically their interpersonal relationships with teachers and administrators. Several parents cited satisfaction with the way the school communicates with them and the timely sharing of information. Though some students expressed challenges with teachers, most of the students across both sets of schools note that their relationships with teachers were good.

MPCP students placed a stronger emphasis on new friends and diversity than did their MPS peers. Given the fact that most of the MPCP students were not actively involved in the school selection, their expressed areas of satisfaction appear to be more like pleasant surprises. Aside from jokes like "the end of the day" or "when the final bell rings," MPCP students cited friends, access to non-cafeteria food options, and several classes or extracurricular activities such as photography and yoga. Additional probing sparked an animated discussion about diversity that consumed most of the time the students spent discussing this topic. A small number of students explained the importance of diversity within their schools, and discussed the ways in which cultural diversity is incorporated into school activities.

Student1: I like how diverse my school is--.

Student2: Oh, yeah, that's so awesome--.

Facilitator: You like how diverse your school is?

Student1: I like how diverse our school is because, like, if you walking down the hallway, [you're] just not going to see a group of African-American girls hanging out with each other. You're not gonna see just the Hispanic girls, or you're not gonna see just the girls who wear the hip wrap and there's some girls— you gonna see us, like, mixed up, mushed up together in a pack. Like, if you go to our lunchroom, you're gonna see—.

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14   We discovered after the focus groups that this was a challenging question for the facilitators because many of the participants felt they had provided a response to this question earlier in the discussion. However, there was a distinction between Question 2 (which asked what families were looking for prior to enrolling their child in their current school) and Question 3 (which asked what they found most satisfying once they selected the school). Because of the different ways participants responded to the questions, it is difficult to provide a thorough cross-sector comparison.

Student2:   So much diversity.

Student1:   We learn about new cultures.

Facilitator: You learn about new cultures?

Student1:   We just had our Culture Week performance or whatever, and it was so cool. Like, you should have been there.

Facilitator: Oh, tell me why. Tell me--.

Student1:   I performed three times. That's why--.

Facilitator: Okay. Well, what is that? What's a cultural--?

Student1:   It's where girls--well, certain girls that can try to perform, like, a dance from their background or whatever, like a Native American dance or a Hispanic dance or an African dance, or... an Asian dance. They're, like, really cool. And they've been doing it for like 27 years. [MPCP student]

On the other hand, of the seven MPS students polled, six students reported that the school they attend meets their needs. When asked what specific aspects of their school they find most satisfying, positive relationships with teachers and school administrators was a common response that emerged. Several students discussed in detail relationships with teachers who establish a positive rapport with students in the classroom. The following is one example:

> I would say that I like my school because the teachers are like your friends. They don't talk to you as a teacher. They always want to be at your level. Some of them be as friendly as one of your best friends… People are like your friend. They won't stand in the top of the class. They'll sit at your level and look at you in the eye and talk to you like that… understanding you need help. They'll come and explain everything to you so you understand how [to complete the task]. [MPS student]

Another student described teachers as accessible and available when students are in need of extra support, and often willing to offer students multiple opportunities to achieve. In her words:

> [L]ike they stay after school with you and help you out. And like sometimes if you don't get a good grade on your project, they'll let you redo it for a better grade. [MPS student]

According to some students, this positive rapport extends beyond academics in the classroom to social situations outside the classroom walls. Students appeared particularly pleased with teachers and administrators who demonstrate a willingness to listen to them, especially when intervening to resolve conflicts among students. One student described in positive terms the effort some teachers devote to helping students plan beyond high school with an eye towards college and workforce preparation:

> I think that the teachers do anything they can to help us achieve. [MPS student]

It is worth noting that while the majority of the MPS students described their views of teachers rather positively, this opinion was not unanimous:

> [S]ome teachers at school they don't care about us. They just want, you know, they just want their paychecks. [MPS student]

Parents were asked, "What aspects of your child's school are you most satisfied with?" Both MPCP and MPS 9th grade parents identified better communication with teachers and administrators as a source of satisfaction. They appreciate the use of technology to share information between school and home. MPS parents also expressed satisfaction with school programming and instruction.

The MPCP 9th grade parents spent a significant amount of the time allotted for this question on communication. Most of them shared feedback suggesting that their current school provided timely and balanced communication (though one parent did question: "Why do I always get the call when there's something wrong?"). One parent appreciated the fact that her school uses "PowerSchool," a web-based system that parents can access to obtain information about their child's academic progress. She noted that her school uses it to post attendance reports, homework assignments and important information about her child. Though most of the parents in this focus group subgroup had not heard about PowerSchool, they thought it was a great idea. One parent noted that it appeared to be an effective way to address long-standing communication challenges that result from schools using students as messengers. He shared the following personal experience:

> When I was in school, they gave us letters – mine never made it home. [MPCP parent]

Parents' opinions vary regarding whether or not the school their child attends meets their needs. Of six MPS Elementary school parents polled, half strongly disagreed that the school meets their child's needs, while one-third strongly agreed with that statement. Given the difference in opinion on this question, it is not surprising that parents' views vary regarding which specific aspects of their child's schooling experience they find satisfying.

As a case in point, on the topic of parental involvement, MPS elementary school parents had different experiences, which shaped their views of whether or not the school their child attends promotes a welcoming atmosphere for parents. One parent described the request for parent volunteers in classrooms and during extracurricular activities as a welcoming gesture. According to this parent, this invitation has had the effect of encouraging her to become more actively involved in the school. A second parent, whose child attends a school that discourages impromptu visits from parents, expressed the opinion that by not supporting an open door policy that allows parents to drop in unannounced, the school signals that it does not welcome parents.

Two MPCP elementary parents engaged in a lengthy discussion about the "double standard" they have experienced as a result of their child receiving a voucher to attend their respective private schools. According to these parents, the schools treat the parents differently according to how their children's education is funded.

Parent1:   Now, at my daughter's school, it seems the problem I have--the one problem that I have with them is that the government is paying money out for my daughter because I'm in low-income, but this school still expect for me to do some, you know, cleaning up after certain things. And I have a friend that goes there, and she pays cash according to her income, and they said that she can supplement it by doing some volunteer service to make up for the tuition. Now, [they're] paying for my daughter's tuition in full. I'm not trying to clean up anything. Why would they want me to clean up and do all this volunteer cleaning up and the government's paying full tuition for my daughter? I'm just keeping it real.

Parent2:   You know what? At my son's school, they do that, too. Like, you go to the library or--you know, I think really what that is that you're developing relationships with people there. You're getting to know them. They're getting to know you. It's a bad way to do it, but--and I really think they shouldn't do it that way. Say, well, 'we're gonna have a potluck,' then, or 'we're gonna have a spaghetti fest,' or, you know, do different things. They don't have to do it that way. Nobody wants to go and work like Cinderella just to get to know you or you get to [know] me. I know I wouldn't, 'cause I don't do nothing, just go talk to them.

Parent1:   I don't mind helping on some things, even on clean up. I don't mind, but I want to volunteer. Don't put me down for stuff, and the other person is not--my daughter's tuition is paid in full by the government. That's my point… I'm just a person that… I am a helper, so I don't mind doing it, but don't send me no note, no mandatory--making it mandatory for me to do anything, 'cause my tuition's paid in full. [MPCP elementary parents]

Though these parents describe this situation as a "double standard," the reality may be that they are being held to a different set of expectations than the one they were use to, and this may in fact be a transitional challenge versus unfair treatment.

4. What suggestions do families offer for improving the schools their children attend?

Instead of asking participants to describe what they found to be dissatisfying, respondents were presented with a question that attempted to indirectly reveal concerns and to solicit recommendations for improvement. Many of the changes participants noted above under "Noticeable Changes" are the source of the recommendations they would make for improving their schools. The multiplex schools, hidden fees, and need for more programs or extracurricular activities were areas the families would most likely change. In addition, improved communication between school and home, including more advanced notice, were other recommendations the parents mentioned.[15]

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15   Time did not allow the facilitators to explore why these areas were of greatest concern to the participants or exactly how they would change them.

When parents were asked, "If you could change one aspect of your child's school, what would it be?" the responses of the two groups show few similarities; parents in the MPS group offered many more suggestions than the parents in the MPCP group.

When discussing changes parents would make if they could, one MPS 9th grade parent reported wanting her child's school to do a better job of retaining a principal. Another parent expressed a desire for teachers to dress in a more professional manner and refrain from using slang when communicating with students. Still another MPS parent suggested that schools pre-test students to ensure they are placed in the appropriate classes at the start of the academic year.

Some MPS elementary school parents also discussed what they view as the negative impact of grade-span reconfiguration on the elementary school experience. One parent opposed the recent reconfiguration in the school her child attends on the grounds that the new K-8 design denies 5th and 6th graders the opportunity to participate in a elementary school graduation ceremony, an event that she argued is important to the student and the student's family. Another parent expressed the opinion that not only does grade reconfiguration and the co-location of students of different developmental and maturity levels in one building expose younger students to a level of peer pressure they are unprepared to handle, it creates a safety issue for younger students.

MPS parents whose children require special education services cite a school's unwillingness to solicit information from parents, listen to parents' feedback about their children's abilities, and consult them during Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings as particularly dissatisfying. According to one father:

> [I]nstead of listening more about what I had to say and valuing my opinion more, and saying, 'Well…this child's his, he knows his child, maybe we ought to consider what he's saying more seriously,' … [T]hey didn't, so I had to go [to] four IEP [meetings] for the same child, you know, because they wouldn't listen to my opinion. And eventually, in the end, they said 'Well, okay, he's right.' But it took four meetings for them to understand that I was right, that you should have listened to me first. [MPS elementary school parent]

A mother, who has more than one child with special needs enrolled in the district's elementary schools, reiterated the point that parents must remain staunch advocates on behalf of their children to ensure they receive the educational resources due them:

> You know, my kids are--they're in special ed… They're borderline. They're mostly mainstreamed. So, because they're not in the classroom all day, they get neglected a lot. To the point that I had to tell them the next phone call is going to be from an attorney. 'Get it going.' Now, my son gets help. It took me three years of fighting. [MPS elementary parent]

The MPCP students' suggestions for improving their schools all focused on various aspects of their day-to-day experiences in the realm of teachers, extracurricular activities and student discipline. Two items were very pressing for the students, and they discussed these issues at great length. First, one student mentioned the stigma associated with uniforms in the broader community surrounding her school. Second, the students launched into conversation about lunch time. One student noted his school does not have dining space and another student mentioned that her school's cafeteria was inadequate. Two other students complained about the "horrible food" offered at their school. One student described a typical meal at his school in the following manner:

It tastes – like if we had breadsticks or something for like a lunch years ago. They take those breadsticks out like pour cinnamon on them or something and serve them to us for breakfast. [MPCP student]

When asked what they would like to change about their school, MPS students reported being dissatisfied with various social aspects associated with the high school experience. For example, student conflicts resulting from gossip and popularity contests were each cited as issues students did not enjoy about high school. Students attending schools in multiplex school configurations reported dissatisfaction at having to share the school building with another school, particularly when that school is comprised of students in the elementary grades. MPS high school students also reported a lack of programs, unhealthy and unappetizing cafeteria food options, and an unexpected extended school day as things they would change if they could.

MPCP high school parents cited as recommended improvements better bus safety and student discipline, less restrictive cell phone usage policies that would allow students and parents to communicate as needed during the school day, open communication about hidden fees, and more information about the school's strategy for achieving academic success for its students. Of these general recommendations, the parents were most vocal about improved communication between the school and home regarding hidden fees.

It appears that managing the use of cell phones is a major challenge for some MPCP schools. Based on the parents' comments, students are not allowed to use them during the school day and, in some cases, students cannot take them into the school. Parents find this problematic because they cannot monitor their children's whereabouts.

While quite positive about their child's high school experience, MPS 9th grade parents cite several areas where they would like to see improvements. Parents are particularly dissatisfied with a set of student fees they are required to pay to support driver's education and other programs they expected the school district to fund. They also indicated a preference for in-school (as opposed to out-of-school) detention policies, security enhancements on public buses to monitor students and curb violence during their commute to school, and regulating (as opposed to prohibiting) cell phone usage among students once in the school building.

5. What have families learned from their direct experiences with schools?

What have the experiences with the schools taught the parents and students? Part of the motivation behind this question was to discern if parents and students would share information that suggested they learned something about their school that they should have discovered through informed research.[16] Generally speaking, with the exceptions of one MPCP student who did not know her new high school was a K-12 school and one MPCP parent who admitted that she had not done adequate research about the school her child currently attends, the vast majority of the participants responded to this question in a manner that leads us to conclude that both groups of respondents are relatively well informed about the schools they selected.

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16   This was the last focus group question of the day and not all facilitators were able to address this question in the time allotted. Thus, the responses to this question may have been constrained by time.

The students shared that some schools are becoming "strict" in the areas of discipline, dress codes and the use of cell phones. Several students complained that the quality of the food offered at their school was questionable. Finally, one student raised concerns about hidden fees:

> If I knew that they was gonna come up with these crazy rules, like every year there's new [inaudible]. Whatever, we have to spend more money to buy uniforms or spend money to buy shoes that match what they say. [MPCP high school student]

Most of the MPCP students' comments suggested that they knew very little about the schools prior to enrollment. This is consistent with their responses to a polling question that asked how involved they were in selecting the school where they are currently enrolled. Only two of eight students reported that they were involved in the selection process compared to those who said they were either somewhat or not involved.

Although the MPS students primarily focused on the various social aspects of schooling they found to be dissatisfying, at least one student articulated being surprised and disappointed to find that the school he attends has failed to deliver and maintain the academic rigor that was promised. For example:

> I guess they advertised the school like it was gonna be a high standard school, but now it's kind of like they're accepting anybody. …Like some of the people who like don't deserve the attention from the teachers get it.… [T]here's people that just go to school just to go to school. Like they don't do their work and I do my work and sometimes that interferes with what I want to do. [MPS high school student]

Parents offered two general sets of responses. First, several parents who expected smaller class sizes commented that the class sizes within the schools they selected were much larger than advertised. One parent noted:

> I want to… put this on the record – there was 30 kids in her classroom. So, I talked to the principal and I told her, 'what is this?' When it was all Caucasian kids, you had 11 and 12 kids in the classroom. Now, that it's the 220 Program,[17] and you all getting this free government money, you packing these classes with 30 kids. And now, the education – the quality of the education is not up there like it was with all Caucasians. [MPCP elementary parent]

Second, parents also reported being surprised by the increased responsibilities and financial cost associated with providing direct academic support for their children. Two parents noted that the MPCP elementary schools placed greater demands on them and one of these parents described the additional responsibility in terms of the types of special skills needed to help her child complete the assignments:

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17   The Chapter 220 Program was enacted in 1976. The purpose of the program is to facilitate the transfer of students between schools and school districts to promote cultural and racial integration. The program provides funding for Milwaukee minority school children to attend suburban schools and it allows non-minority school children outside of Milwaukee to attend Milwaukee public schools. Enrollment in the program has declined since a peak of 5,981 students in 1993. The state's budget challenges have prompted legislators to look at the Program with a critical eye. For more details, see: Johnson, M., "Future of Chapter 220 in Jeopardy," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 3 Feb. 2003. Also: Kava, R., "School Integration (Chapter 220) Aid," Informational Paper 28, Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, January 2007. Accessed 8 January 09 at http://schoolchoicewi.org/dada/k12/281.pdf.

So, when I have to run all over Milwaukee trying to pay somebody to do some typing the way that they want it typed up in a folder with 12 pages typed up…. I don't type at all, so they [teachers] should ask you: 'Do you type?' [MPCP elementary parent]

Ultimately, parents and students are concerned about whether the schools are meeting their needs. When asked if the school their child currently attends meets their needs, the majority of parents from both sectors and both student age groups (22 out of 26) indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. However, three out of six MPS elementary school parents indicated that they strongly disagreed with the statement that their child's needs were being met at their current school.

When the students were asked about their needs being met, there were some striking differences between the sectors. Three of six MPCP high school students reported that their school was meeting their needs; however, the remaining half either disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement. Among MPS students, six of seven agreed or strongly agreed that their needs were being met at their current school. Interestingly, the MPS students who reported being more actively involved in the school selection process also reported being more satisfied with their choice of school. This suggests that "student choice" is an important component to parent or family choice.

V.   SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

We began this study with one fundamental goal: "*To assess and describe the parental choice experiences of families with children attending MPS and MPCP schools*."   The objective in the first year was to position the experts – the students and parents who participated in the focus groups – such that they could reflect upon and share their experiences with the various aspects of selecting and attending the school of their choice.

Though we were very pleased with the turnout, level of engagement, and general satisfaction the participants expressed with the focus groups, drawing definitive conclusions about their experiences would be premature. Instead, this report describes the baseline findings from the first year of engagement with families. While the first year report is primarily a descriptive document, we expect that subsequent reports (2010 and 2012) will include more in-depth analysis and will likely evolve into a more prescriptive assessment of parental choice.

Based on the positive feedback we received from the spring 2008 cohort of participants, who were polled about their focus group experience at the event's conclusion, we are optimistic that we are connecting with families in a manner they find valuable. For example, the polling data revealed that an overwhelming majority (in this case 38 of 41 or 93 %) of participants plan on attending the second year focus groups compared to 7 percent who indicated that they were not sure whether they would return to participate in future sessions.

Going forward, the second year of the study will build upon the relationship initiated with the families during the spring of 2008. During the second year of the study (spring 2009), the research team will engage participants in more focused dialogue about their experiences with parental choice and will further develop the research agenda introduced in the first year. Among other topics, we hope to engage the families in a discussion about "What mind and skills sets are necessary to effectively exercise parental choice?" The conversations with the students seem to suggest that a greater emphasis should be placed on "student choice" as a component of parental choice. We will also extend an invitation to the charter school community to share their experiences, as we believe the families attending these schools can provide additional insights about parental choice in Milwaukee.

APPENDIX A: Research Methodology

This section describes the research methodology used to prepare this report. It provides a description of the focus group administration and data analysis; describes unforeseen challenges the research team faced when conducting the focus groups; and offers a general profile of focus group participants.

Focus Group Administration and Data Analysis

Focus groups were conducted on a Saturday morning in May of 2008. The target size was eight to ten participants per group, although as many as 15 were recruited to allow for cancellations and no-shows. Each focus group was facilitated by a member of the research team skilled in conducting focus groups and familiar with the protocols. Focus groups ranged in size from seven to ten participants, with an average of seven. In total, seven focus groups were held with 52 participants (37 adults and 15 students).

 The research team used a hybrid data collection approach to conduct the focus groups. An audience response system employing interactive keypad technology was used to poll individual participants about their responses to 21 closed-ended questions pertaining to their Milwaukee schooling experience.[18] Among other topics, the polling questions explored the school selection process and decision-making influences, satisfaction with the school choice, and views of school and neighborhood peer influences on student achievement. Participants were also asked a set of questions to assess their basic understanding of public and public charter schools, as well as the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Traditional focus group discussions were also held using a semi-structured protocol consisting of five open-ended questions. The open-ended questions asked participants to reflect on the noticeable changes they have observed in the Milwaukee school context over the past two to three years, the most significant influences affecting their school selection process, and their satisfaction with the schools chosen.

Specifically, the five open-ended focus group questions were:

1. In the past two to three years, what have been the most noticeable changes in the education system in Milwaukee, particularly the schools?

2. What was the most significant influence on your decision to place your child in the school they are currently attending?

3. What aspect(s) of your child's school are you most satisfied with?

4. If you could change one aspect of your child's school, what would it be?

5. Have you learned anything about your child's school in the past year that you wish you knew before enrolling them in their current school?

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

The overall session lasted a total of 80 minutes. Approximately 55 minutes was spent engaging the participants using open-ended questions in a traditional focus group format.[19] Digital recorders and note-takers were used to document the focus group discussions, and these data were later transcribed and coded. The balance of the time (approximately 25 minutes) used closed-ended questions to solicit additional information from the participants. The participants used keypads to communicate their responses, which were captured in real time and later documented in an Excel report.

The unit of analysis is each of the seven distinct subgroups. Due to the small sample size, the polling data are reported in actual numbers rather than in percentages. Keypad polling data represent actual responses given and does not include data from non-responders. Thus, the keypad data are not always representative of the total sample.

Participants were provided a financial incentive to join the focus groups: parents received a cash payment of $50 and high school students received a cash payment of $20.[20] Refreshments were provided before the focus group sessions, and on-site day care was provided for those parents who requested the service.

Unforeseen Challenges with the Focus Groups

In this section, we discuss two challenges which may impact the report findings. The first involved a parent who chose to participate in the student focus group discussion with her child rather than to participate in the assigned parent group. The transcript and note-taker data indicate that this parent did not dominate the discussion; however, we do acknowledge that this parent's presence may have directly or indirectly influenced the discussion in ways that were not captured in the focus group transcript or in the note-taker's notes. Nevertheless, for future focus group sessions, parents will be restricted to participation within their designated parent group.

The second challenge pertains to the group of parents classified as Spanish-language speakers. Because the total number of parents who chose to participate in Spanish was very small (n=8), all of these parents – regardless of school sector (i.e., MPCP or MPS) or school level (i.e., elementary or high school) – were placed in the same discussion group. While this decision proved efficient when administering the focus group, it confounded the data analysis making it difficult to differentiate and attribute comments made by a given participant according to his or her respective school sector or school level. Consequently, initial data for the Spanish-language speaking parents are not included in this report. However, these parents will remain in the study, additional Spanish-language parents will be recruited to participate in future focus group sessions, and their collective experiences will be documented in future reports.

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19   Given the longitudinal nature of this study, the first year focus group engagement was intentionally designed to last no longer than 90 minutes. As stated above, it was intended as an introduction to the focus group concept and planned as an opportunity to build rapport with the participants. Future focus groups will be designed to allow more time for in-depth dialogue.

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

Profile of Study Participants

We used the polling component of the focus groups to secure some general demographic information about the participants. Table 1 presents select characteristics of the 29 English-language focus group parent participants, as indicated by the self-reported polling data. As the table indicates, the sample is predominantly female and mothers are the largest group of adult participants. The majority of the families reported having at least two school age children in the home and the majority of parents reported being educated in the public school system. Though not reflected in Table 1, all student participants were in the 9th grade.

TABLE 1: Select Characteristics of Focus Group Participants, by Parent Group

Characteristic	MPCP Elem.	MPCP 9th Grade	MPS Elem.	MPS 9th Grade
Familial Relationship				
Mother	4	8	5	4
Father	1	1		
Foster Parent	1			
Grandparent	1			
Number of school age children				
1	1	2	2	1
2	1	2	2	2
3	1	4	1	2
4 or more	1	2	1	2
Type of K-12 school parent attended				
Public	2	7	6	5
Private	1			
Public and private	2	2	1	
Sample size	5	10	7	7

TABLE 2: Case Study A: MPCP Parent and Student Focus Group Summaries

	Elementary Parents	9th Grade Parents	9th Grade Students
What noticeable changes have you observed…?	• Poor teacher quality; teachers underpaid • More opportunities to afford and attend a religious-affiliated school • Smaller class sizes • Extended day opportunities for youth after school	• More multiplex high schools • Not enough books • Program cutbacks • Greater parent involvement • Charter schools seem to be having problems • Challenges with student discipline • Poor teacher quality	• Stricter enforcement of discipline • Stigma associated with student uniforms
What was the most significant influence on your decision…?	• Parent's personal schooling experience • Strong teacher quality • Smaller class size	• Teachers care about student learning • Smaller class size • College preparation programs and opportunities	• **Some students reported they were not involved in selection process but trust their parents' decision • Student seeking a "fresh start"
What aspects of your child's school are you most satisfied…?	• More support from school administration • Responsive teachers and administrators • Extended day programs	• Better communication with teachers and administrators • Timely communication with parents about "good" and "bad" news • Sharing information via web-based systems • Student academic progress	• New friends at school • Ability to have a "fresh start," to establish self as better student • A school's diversity
If you could change one aspect of your child's school, what would it be?	• Provide advance notification of activities, etc. • "Double standards" (i.e., unfair treatment of families based on tuition funding source)	• More information/better communication about school's approach to student academic progress • Lift restrictions on student cell phone usage • Address inconsistent approach to student discipline • Hidden fees for extra-curricular activities	• Increase the number and type of extra-curricular activities • Strict dress code/ uniforms • Poor cafeteria meal options
Have you learned anything about your child's school…?	• Class sizes larger than advertised • School more demanding than parent realized	• Student handbook specifying expected family contributions • Better or more consistent enforcement of the student code of conduct	• School grade configuration • Student discipline issues • School diversity • "How much I like it"

TABLE 3: Case Study B: MPS Parent and Student Focus Group Summaries

	Elementary Parents	9th Grade Parents	9th Grade Students
What noticeable changes have you observed…?	• Smaller schools & smaller class sizes • Grade-span reconfiguration • Implementation of metal detectors • Budget cuts/school funding deficits impacting curriculum and school staffing	• More school choice options, especially charter schools • Small schools initiative • Teachers' higher expectation of students • Welcoming environment for parents	• Increased violence in large comprehensive high schools • Budget cuts/school funding deficits and deteriorating school infrastructure
What was the most significant influence on your decision…?	• Year-round academic calendar • Strong academic reputation • Diverse student body • Pedagogical model	• School's proximity to home • Recommendation of family and friends • Reputation for safe school environment • Reputation for strong college preparation curriculum	• College preparation programs/activities & job placement programs • Strong sports reputation • School's proximity to home • Summer programming & community service activities • Parental and family influence
What aspects of your child's school are you most satisfied…?	• Welcoming environment for parents	• Teacher quality • After-school and extracurricular programming • Project-based instruction • Individual attention per student • Positive rapport between faculty and students • Better communication with teachers and administrators	• Positive relationships with faculty and staff
If you could change one aspect of your child's school, what would it be?	• Less than welcoming environment for parents • Turnover among school leadership (i.e., principal) • More professionalism among school staff • Grade-span reconfiguration • Multiplex design (i.e., space sharing/co-location) • Improve upon adversarial relationship between schools and parents of Special Education students	• Hidden fees for extra-curricular activities • Out-of-school detention policies • Lift restrictions on student cell phone usage	• Social aspects of schooling (i.e., gossip, etc.) • Multiplex design/space sharing issues • Improve school facilities • Extended days (i.e., too long) • Poor cafeteria meal options
Have you learned anything about your child's school…?	• Question not specifically addressed (due to time constraints)	• Parents not surprised by anything in particular	• Lack of academic rigor

Parent and Student Experiences with Choice in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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