

## RESEARCH BRIEF

# Choosing Indianapolis Charter Schools: Espoused Versus Revealed Academic Preferences



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Much of the debate surrounding school choice in general and charter schools in particular revolves around the types of students who choose to leave their traditional public schools in favor of enrolling in charter schools and the possible effects of these choices on the schools that they leave behind (Dee & Fu, 2004; Henig, 1994; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). As noted by Witte and Thorn (1996), "Who chooses and why?" are important questions because school choice decisions may have implications for the overall educational landscape.

The current study aimed for a deeper understanding of the driving forces behind parents' decisions to enroll their children in charter schools. Researchers from the National Center on School Choice collected survey data from 2,493 parents (84 percent response rate) with children enrolled in 15 Indianapolis charter schools in the spring of 2007.<sup>1</sup> To validate survey findings, researchers also looked at data from the Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA)<sup>2</sup> growth research

database (GRD) of student testing records as well as the adequate yearly progress (AYP) status<sup>3</sup> of students' previous traditional public schools and current charter schools. Central research questions of this study were:

- To what extent do parents say they enroll their children in charter schools for academic versus other reasons?
- How do these espoused preferences compare to revealed (actual) preferences based on school-switching behavior?

The study compared parents' espoused reasons for choosing specific charter schools for their children (gathered from surveys) with their actual choices of charter schools (NWEA and AYP data of both the sending and receiving schools were examined). Of specific interest to researchers was whether parents actually made school choice decisions based on factors related to academic quality or whether there were other considerations driving their behavior.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Surveyed parents indicate that academics are a top priority in their choice of a charter school.
- Academics do not always drive decision making when parents change their children's schools.

### School Choice Debate

Opponents of public school choice argue that expanded school choice may lead to an increase in school segregation along racial/ethnic and socioeconomic lines (Henig, 1994, 1998; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000; Weiher & Tedin, 2002), exacerbate inequities based on special needs (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002), or lead to "cream skimming," whereby charter schools attract or target higher performing students from traditional public schools (Dee & Fu, 2004).

Proponents argue that parents will make rational decisions and "will opt for a school that can provide the best education for their child" (Berends & Zottola, 2009, p. 37), thereby increasing the likelihood of positive educational outcomes. This argument also assumes that competition will spur changes and innovation in traditional public schools that lead to improved student achievement.

<sup>1</sup> At the time of this study, the average charter school had been in operation for approximately three years. The newest schools were in their start-up years, and the oldest schools had been open for approximately five years. These schools range in size from approximately 100 enrolled students to 609 enrolled students, with an average enrollment of approximately 250 students.

<sup>2</sup> NWEA is a nonprofit student achievement testing company that tests students in Grades 2–10 in mathematics, reading, and language arts.

<sup>3</sup> AYP status is publicly reported every year for all schools under No Child Left Behind provisions and is a potential indicator of academic quality that could reasonably inform parents' perceptions of a school's academic quality.

### **When surveyed, parents indicate that academics are a top priority in their choice of a charter school.**

Sixty-three percent of parents reported that “academic quality” or “academic focus” was the most important reason for choosing the charter school their child was enrolled in. This finding is similar to previous survey research, which indicates that parents tend to report that academic quality of schools is at the top of their list of important characteristics (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Smrekar, 2009). The data from the current study show that, across grades, a majority of parents reported that academic factors were driving forces behind their choice of school. In addition, parents who believed the academic quality of their child’s previous school to be average or below average were more likely to report academics as a top priority. These patterns suggest that academic considerations are a strong component of parents’ stated preferences for choosing a charter school.

### **In reality, academics do not always drive decision making when parents change their children’s schools.**

Indeed, there is no clear pattern of students moving from lower performing schools to higher performing schools. Although some students do move from a lower performing school to a higher performing school, there appears to be an equal number of students who move from a higher performing school to a lower performing school. To illustrate, if school quality is a main driver of choice, one would expect that when students are moved from a traditional public school that did not meet AYP to a charter school, parents would choose charter schools that have passed AYP, indicating a move to a “higher quality” school. However, only one third of students on average were enrolled in a charter school that had passed AYP. The results were similar when average academic achievement of grade-level peers—as measured by NWEA achievement test scores in mathematics and reading—was examined.

## **Policy and Research Implications**

Because school choice has become a hotly debated topic in national dialogues on education, it is important to understand what drives parents to enroll their children in charter schools. Overwhelmingly, parents with children in Indianapolis charter schools indicate on surveys that academics are the main driver of their choice of a charter school. However, this study and similar previous studies

### **Common Errors of Survey Research**

A careful review of the surveys and interview protocols used by researchers to study the role of academics in parent preferences in school choice reveals a number of complexities in interpreting findings (Schwartz, Schwartz, & Rizzuto, 2008; Sudman & Bradburn, 1982). In terms of construct validity, it is not clear what the research is measuring when referring to academics as a preference for school choice because researchers tend to ask different questions, and the ways in which questions are worded vary from study to study, leaving open to interpretation what is meant by “academics.” A second source of confusion results from how the questions on the surveys or in interviews are asked. Some researchers ask which reason is the most important (Schneider et al., 2000), while others use open-ended questions, rankings, or a rating scale. Furthermore, survey research must always consider the threat posed by social desirability—the propensity for respondents to answer in self-serving or socially desirable ways. Social desirability suggests that respondents will want to represent themselves in a favorable way through their survey responses (Crano & Brewer, 2002). What parent will readily indicate that the first, most important reason for choosing a school is race or social status? Or what parent would not indicate that some type of academic consideration was a factor in choosing a school?

suggest that these results are due to biases inherent in the survey questions. Specifically, while parents often cite academics or academic quality as the main driver of their choice of a charter school, what is meant by “academics” or “academic quality” varies across studies. Such variations highlight the need to explore these terms in order to know whether parents are speaking about performance on standardized tests, particular curricula and pedagogies, the overall reputation of the school, or something else when they refer to a school’s academic quality. Researchers have noted that choosing “good” schools and choosing schools for academic reasons may be synonymous for parents. Academics may be a proxy for good schools, but good schools could include schools that are safe (fewer fights), have smaller class sizes (where the teacher knows the students’ names), or are in a neighborhood that is accessible and free from violence (Smrekar, 2009).

Despite stating that academics was a priority in their choice of school, parents do not always choose schools that have passed AYP, indicating a possible disconnect between perception and reality. If the education and policy communities believe that AYP and other achievement indicators are central to parent choices, renewed efforts to define and obtain information on these indicators are needed. If rational choice is the impetus behind school choice, and rational choices are construed to be switching to schools with higher or better academic achievement, then it is important to reconsider how relevant information is portrayed to parents so they can and will use it when making enrollment decisions for their children.

Finally, social desirability of responses, method bias, and the difficulty of asking pointed questions about race, ethnicity, and social class suggest that alternative ways of studying these important questions of parent choice are needed. Although the choice patterns presented here do not negate the parents' self-reports of academic quality as the main reason for choosing a charter school, they do provide evidence that there may be other processes operative in these choices that are yet to be measured.

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