

A Community-Based Parent Group's Collaboration to Inform School Choice in Detroit: Findings From the First Year

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Abstract

This community-based, participatory action research study examined the outcomes of parent participation in the Best Classroom Project, an organized group of parents in Detroit seeking the best school options for children about to enter kindergarten. These parents' residency and school choices have emerged against the grain of public schools that have racially charged histories (Carter, 2007) and decades of residential mobility trends. Examined are the ways in which parents collaborated during the group's first year and organized daytime public, private, and charter school visits to inform their school choices. Surveys, interviews, and observations captured in field notes illuminated parents' preferences and expectations for school characteristics across public, private, and charter school entities. Documentation in school evaluation checklists also reflected the characteristics of parents' preferred schools, particularly factors that satisfied parents' expectations. Documentation also showed participants' willingness to advocate and contribute resources to preferred schools. Field notes additionally revealed features of school and district entities and their efforts to collaborate with and attract parents.

Key Words: parent networks, participatory action research, school choice, child-centered practices, community-based collaboration, Detroit, families

Introduction

A phenomenon is emerging in the U.S., in which middle-class families are moving into gentrifying urban areas and pursuing housing preferences without regard for neighborhood schools. Instead of making the conventional move to the suburbs upon their children's entry into school, many families now favor an urban lifestyle and desire city schools that cultivate a connection to the community. The trend aligns with the formation of parent networks, in which parents collectively research urban schools, share information to inform school choice, and advocate for the betterment of select schools. In addition to promoting enrollment of peer groups with similar values, enrollment patterns have the potential to promote a racially and economically integrative effect on schools and promote educational equity.

This study investigated the national phenomenon of parent networks in revitalizing cities through the lens of a group of Detroit parents. The group known as the Best Classroom Project formed across racial and economic lines and worked together to select and advocate for city schools for their children born in or after 2009. The group was formed in order to (a) gather knowledge of what counts as an effective school, (b) contribute to the integration of schools, (c) gather knowledge of Detroit schools on a school evaluation checklist, (d) advocate for child-centered practices, and (e) identify desired characteristics in selected schools.

The Best Classroom Project was influenced by a similar group functioning in Detroit during the 1980s who collectively researched schools to inform school choice. The researcher's parents were among the critical mass who remained in the city and selected citywide magnet schools during a time when many families were moving to neighboring suburbs. Her multiracial schooling experiences were shaped by teachers who were rooted in the community and maintained high expectations for the students. This background guided school choice for her own daughter. Since the researcher's childhood, though, the educational landscape has changed dramatically, a consequence of high stakes testing pressures, school closures, residential mobility, schools of choice, and charter schools. Moreover, the presence of many low-performing charter and public schools has made public school selection a bewildering process in Detroit, which has among the highest number of school choice offerings in the U.S. (Mason & Arsen, 2014). The availability of so many options has not solved the problems with Detroit schools (Mason & Arsen, 2014); thus, members of the Best Classroom Project felt the need to advocate as a critical mass for equitable schooling opportunities on par with suburban schools. Parent engagement in the process of school selection can be a factor in improving

Detroit schools because (1) it brings an element of school accountability, and (2) it can lead to parents participating as leaders in the schools they select.

Strategies Guiding the Formation of the Best Classroom Project

As a response to concerns about the uncertain landscape of school choice, the Best Classroom Project originated from word of mouth and participation on a social networking site. The social networking site became the initial space for generating interest and membership in a parent group aiming to collectively research schools and inform school choices in Detroit. A core group of parents initially held a teleconference call to determine beginning steps, including schools of interest, factors guiding school choices, and willingness to organize and participate in school visits. The group agreed that a survey could help solidify parents' preferences and inform future steps. The survey was accessible to parents on the social networking site.

The group's first face-to-face meeting was held at the home of Lisette, a parent member (all names of people and schools used throughout are pseudonyms). Salient discussion topics included concerns about school quality in comparison with suburban counterparts, large class sizes, and limited extracurricular activities. Parents additionally voiced the importance of parent involvement to improve school quality and school accountability and determined a need to collectively advocate for selected schools in that endeavor. Although a short list of schools was identified in the survey, most parents displayed limited knowledge of the landscape of schools in the city along with limited knowledge of traits of effective schools. This led to discussion of a school reporting agency that provided school scorecards and measured school quality in Detroit based on a variety of factors, including test scores, safe school atmosphere, and innovative teaching practices. One core member organized a group meeting with the school reporting agency in an effort to gather support and resources.

During the group's meeting with the school reporting agency at a local church, agency staffers shared school scorecards pertaining to the top 31 schools in the city and advised that any school identified in the top 31 list demonstrated a calm school atmosphere with innovative teachers and engaged students. The scorecards included a variety of characteristics of effective schools, including safety; clean school grounds; descriptions of wall spaces in hallways, common areas, and classrooms; experienced teachers; strong leadership; and innovative teaching.

While the scorecards were helpful, parents wanted to examine the schools for and beyond the characteristics outlined in the scorecards, particularly to determine more specifically how teachers teach and how students respond, as well as to understand what the characteristics outlined in the scorecards look like in

a school setting. Consequently, the agency staffers made a recommendation for the group to make daytime school visits to make its own observations and to document them with school note-taker forms. Parents agreed to the daytime school visits because they wanted to determine whether they could envision their children fitting into any of the schools and because they desired to make informed school choices.

Additional discussion among core members about the matter of daytime visits brought up concerns about limited knowledge of school characteristics, given that most were not educators. These concerns led to the formation of the group's School Evaluation Checklist which served a dual function: to educate parents about characteristics of effective schools and to serve as a guide for documenting outcomes of school visits. Coauthors of the document incorporated characteristics outlined by the school reporting agency from their survey responses, but also included additional characteristics derived from research (see Appendix), including the presence of such practices as: multicultural education, balanced literacy pedagogy, literacy across the curriculum, as well as experienced, innovative teachers who have worked collaboratively in a school for 7–10 years. Parents agreed to document each school visit on the school evaluation checklist so they could share with others during parent meetings and on the social networking site for the purpose of informing school choices.

Purpose

Similar to nationwide trends (Lareau & Goyette, 2014), participants aimed to enroll their children in schools that are connected to the community and preferred to connect school choice with existing peer group relationships in their neighborhoods. Moreover, they intended to contribute to the integration of schools and support them in providing opportunities that are on par with suburban schools, arguing for the potential for quality schooling within city boundaries. In spite of good intentions, unintended consequences have emerged nationwide within the context of neoliberal urbanism, in which new liberal, urbanite parents move into gentrifying urban areas and contribute to revitalization efforts in the community and in urban schools (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014). Problematic is the manner in which revitalization in school and society privileges the middle class and marginalizes low-income communities of color (Lareau & Goyette, 2014).

The school evaluation checklist guiding the selection of schools in Detroit presents a new perspective that has not been explored in the research. This study investigated the role of the school evaluation checklists that guided the examination of characteristics of good schools during organized daytime school visits. In a similar vein, this study investigated the participants' preferred school

characteristics and perceptions of city schools, within the realm of broader issues surrounding urban school reform and confronting neoliberal urbanism in Detroit. The landscape of public, private, and charter school options were also examined.

In a climate of urban school reform and overabundance of school options, the research questions guiding this study included:

1. What are parents' desired schools and school characteristics?
2. What is the landscape of school offerings across public, charter, and private options?
3. What are parents' perspectives of schools with child-centered school practices?
4. What are parents' perspectives of participation in school reform efforts?
5. What are parents' perspectives about sustainable integration and the school and community connection?

Perspectives

As middle-class families are moving into gentrifying urban areas, the emerging trend is to pursue housing preferences without regard for the neighborhood school, but to rather give urban, citywide public and charter schools a try (Lareau & Goyette, 2014; Posey-Maddox, 2014). Thus, the increase of schooling options weakens the connection between choice of residence and school quality. As families seek school options, an integrative effect on city schools has emerged, along with the potential to reduce educational inequality (Lareau & Goyette, 2014). This shift in the process presents a stark contrast from the traditional convention of families with means choosing the most affluent suburban communities and the best schools their resources will allow, which has historically perpetuated inequality.

The influx of middle-class families into cities necessitates social networks as a key source of information to guide school choice. According to Neild (2005), parents prefer information gathered from parent networks over information provided from school districts. Ball and Vincent (2006) described information gathered from parent networks as grapevine knowledge. Thus, parents' choices are guided by the experiences and perspectives of friends, neighbors, children, and relatives already enrolled at select schools. Grapevine knowledge is socially constructed, and access is contingent upon class-related factors such as where one resides and social group membership (Ball & Vincent, 2006). Within the grapevine, middle-class newcomers may form social groups with like-minded peers and lean toward common schools.

While Ball and Vincent (2006) identified middle-class social networks acquiring sources of information to inform common school choices, they also

documented middle-class participants who rejected social pressures to choose common schools and acknowledged that one school may not satisfy every child's unique needs and interests. Bowe, Ball, and Gewirtz (1994) used the metaphor "landscape of choice" to describe the multilayered process of school choice. Ball and Vincent's (2006) findings revealed that school choice is multifaceted and families are guided by networks, school visits, and the needs and interests of their children. The matter of the school visit solidified parents' decisions, as their experiences confirmed or disconfirmed their knowledge acquired from discussions with peers. In spite of the knowledge acquired, the ultimate decision may become "unclear, contradictory, and inconclusive" (Ball & Vincent, 2006, p. 386). However, knowledge may inform advocacy efforts to ensure that desired criteria are being satisfied. According to Lareau and Goyette (2014), urban parents are more likely than their suburban counterparts to actively research schools as they rely on the internet and other sources of information to determine school options and preferences.

The conceptual framework guiding parents' advocacy within the Best Classroom Project was influenced by Giles's (1998) description of school reform strategies involving parent engagement. Related to this study, parents in the group desired to participate in the process of reforming select schools. Giles claimed that the most successful educational reform initiatives are collaborations between parents and schools that view the school and community as an ecology. According to Giles, school reform efforts are situated in relationship building. Giles documented organizers of community-school initiatives who nurtured trust as stakeholders shared concerns and information. Efforts led to a transformative effect on schools (Coleman, 1990). Reform efforts were dialogic as participants discussed beliefs about education and coconstructed curriculum with parents (Giles, 1998).

Embracing parent participation in urban school reform efforts presents a stark contrast from traditional parent and school relationships where urban parents are unwelcome (Carter, 2007). The body of knowledge surrounding "community-based parent organizing" (Mediratta & Karp, 2003; Warren, 2005) and urban school reform efforts is well documented. Collaborative efforts between educators, communities, community-based organizations, and parent groups facilitate systemic urban school reform efforts (Carter, 2007; Giles, 1998; Mediratta & Karp, 2003; Orr, 2003; Warren, 2005). Organized parent groups facilitate such reform by influencing, working within, and attempting to transform institutional hierarchies (Carter, 2007).

These efforts are a response to a failed educational landscape that is a consequence of historically constructed divisions of race and class (Carter, 2007). Failed school reform efforts in the city of Detroit have historically been grounded in the local political culture and mayors' inability to fully advocate for its

schools, superintendent turnover, and school board membership changes (Mirel, 1993; Orr, 2003; Sugrue, 1996). Concerted, structural, failed reform efforts on a local level are numerous, including site-based management, the advent of charter schools, schools of choice, and private management (Orr, 2003).

Carter (2007) examined the experiences and participation of parents who were knowledgeable of the urban schools serving their children. Such parents were ultimately able to mediate outcome and accountability. However, Carter identified disconnected relations that hampered full participation in reform efforts. At the national level, parental engagement provisions have been underfunded under the No Child Left Behind act, which suggests that parents have not been included in broader school reform agendas (Carter, 2007; CQ Congressional Testimony, 2007).

Effective school reform requires collaborative efforts on behalf of local stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and nonprofit organizations (Carter, 2007; Giles, 1998; Orr, 2003). Matters surrounding the local community must be identified and understood before taking action and conceptualizing solutions (Heckman, 1996; Lewis, 1997; Murnane & Levy, 1996). Parent group efforts have the potential to positively influence a child-centered school culture and academic achievement (Carter, 2007; Eccles, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Lewis, 1997; Murnane & Levy, 1996).

According to Kimelberg (2014) and Posey-Maddox (2014), parent engagement is a strategy to fulfill resource gaps. A critical mass of like-minded parents with shared values in relation to schooling supports school reform efforts, such as fundraising for school programs and staffing. Parent engagement toward school reform additionally undergirds multiple modes of participation, including volunteering in school and assuming leadership roles (Epstein, 1995; Posey-Maddox, 2014).

Many studies that identified a correlation between parent engagement and student achievement suggested a need for a common ground surrounding expectations for involvement to ensure successful parent-school relationships (Carter, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Lewis, 1997; Murnane & Levy, 1996). Parent participants in these studies demonstrated the potential to positively influence a child-centered school culture and academic achievement (Carter, 2007; Eccles, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Lewis, 1997; Murnane & Levy, 1996). They also supported school reform efforts, situated in relationship building (Giles, 1998).

However, in a study of White middle-class parents contributing to urban schools in a gentrified community, Posey-Maddox (2014) revealed the consequences of volunteerism that unintentionally marginalized low-income families and privileged middle-income families. As more middle-class families

sought home ownership in the community, fewer enrollment slots were available to low-income families. In spite of the desire for sustainable integration that encompassed schoolwide racial diversity and contribution to civic responsibility, school gentrification emerged and shifted the culture of the school in favor of middle-class families.

Stillman (2011) coined the term “tipping in” to encompass the phenomenon of middle- and upper-middle-class White parents residing in gentrified neighborhoods who enroll their children in segregated urban schools. Tipping in emerges as once-segregated schools gradually transform into integrated schools as a consequence of innovator parents who are willing to be the first among their peers to network and enroll in a segregated school. Innovator parents are followed by early and late majority parents who enroll their children after the group preceding them has changed the school to reflect a middle-class culture. Consequently, Stillman (2011) documented an integrative effect on schools but difficulty with long-term retention due to segregated schools not sharing the attributes of progressive schools and parents’ expectations ultimately not aligning with the integrating schools. Administrators experienced difficulty managing the cultural gap between longtime and newcomer families.

Context of the Study

Detroit has experienced residential flight to its neighboring suburbs, beginning with “White flight” in the 1960s, “Black flight” in the 1980s, and consequently a shrinking tax base and racially charged history defined by tensions and disparities of race and class (Grover & van der Velde, 2015; Mirel, 1993; Sugrue, 1996). The city’s population is currently 83% African American, disproportionately poor and working class, and resembles the demography in most of its schools (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016; Grover & van der Velde, 2015; KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007). By contrast, Best Classroom Project members represent low-income households along with moderate- to upper-income households that contribute to the city’s tax base.

As Detroit has emerged from the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history, Mason and Arsen (2014) argued that redevelopment necessitates the improvement of its public schools and that this may be possible with the portfolio model. The portfolio model, on behalf of the Detroit Coalition for the Improvement of Detroit Schoolchildren, calls for a district manager to monitor school performance and oversee school openings and closures in a manner similar to how investors would manage an investment portfolio (Mason & Arsen, 2014). The overabundance of school choice has been problematic because of residents’ limited knowledge of schools and lack of transparency and fairness in enrollment procedures (Mason & Arsen, 2014). While the portfolio

district approach is likely to gain support among diverse stakeholders and bring fairness to the educational landscape in Detroit, Mason and Arsen (2014) are concerned about the coalition's ability to promote an integrative effect in what Sugrue (1996) and Mirel (1993) claim is the most racially segregated city in the U.S.

Such concerns are embedded in neoliberal urbanism, centered around urban revitalization and development that privileges the middle class and marginalizes low-income communities of color. Neoliberal urbanism is inextricably linked to the larger movement of school reform in Detroit, particularly the racial and economic consequences of charter schools and privatization (Mason & Arsen, 2014). In a similar vein, Lipman's (2011) discussion of neoliberal urbanism in Chicago resembles the Detroit context, as urban development projects and policies have prompted gentrification and displaced working class communities from neighborhoods and schools. While the pattern of school displacement has not emerged as much in the Detroit context, residential inequality is a concern that poses implications for educational inequality.

Method

Site and Participants

The sample size from the first year of the Best Classroom Project was 22 participants ($N = 22$), a combination of longtime residents and newcomers. Participatory action research is a model that calls for researchers to collaborate on equal footing with participants facing a problem in the community in the endeavor of helping to resolve the problem (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This community-based, participatory action research study was guided by the researcher's ongoing participation, observations, and documentation of parent activism and organizing efforts in Detroit. In the endeavor of researching schools and sharing information to inform school choice, she has fulfilled a dual obligation as a researcher and parent member. The researcher, during the time of the study, was a first-time parent with a child entering kindergarten. She is a daughter of German and Jamaican immigrants. A lifelong Detroiter, she attended citywide, multiracial magnet Detroit Public Schools in the 1980s.

The climate of caring, nurturing teachers who were connected to the community and maintained high expectations for students during the researcher's upbringing was a significant inspiration in the search for a school for her own daughter. In the 1980s, Detroit families had the option of attending public, private, or religious school options. By 1999, when the researcher became a homeowner in Detroit, her historic neighborhood was noticeably devoid of families with young children, a characteristic of other longstanding stable

neighborhoods in the city. Many among the generation of children during that era either moved out of state or to neighboring suburbs, leaving a pattern of older households without school age children. But by 2010, the year her daughter was born, there was a precipitous increase of families with young children in the city's stable neighborhoods who desired to enroll their children and revitalize city schools. By the time of the study, her discussions with families with same age children revealed uncertainty and admitted lack of knowledge about schools and school entities in Detroit.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was informed by mixed-method design (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Quantitative methods included a closed-question survey to quantify participants' preferences for schools and characteristics, administered after the meeting with the agency and before the school visits. In addition, quantitative methods included documentation of school visits with the school evaluation checklist. School characteristics that guided the survey and were part of the school evaluation checklist included knowledge of subject matter, best practices, and additional considerations, including child-centered practices, sustainable integration, parent engagement and advocacy, and connection to the community.

Qualitative methods included open-ended questions included in the survey to document additional perspectives of school characteristics. Six participants were selected to participate in one structured interview each, based on their compelling responses to the survey or during group meetings. Interviews were audiorecorded. The survey and interviews were conducted to reveal school preferences and parent perspectives of desired school characteristics. Field notes of meetings and school visits were gathered to document parent views on the process of community organizing.

Integrated and excerpt style, coined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), informed the reduction of data analysis procedures. Integrated documentation included salient evidence from surveys pertaining to parents' school preferences. In addition, integrated field note documentation encompassed significant characteristics of schools that were captured during school visits and during interactions with school personnel. The reduction of data from integrated school evaluation checklists was guided by parents' preferred school characteristics and awareness of the landscape of schools. Excerpted documentation included significant excerpts from transcripts from the parent interviews. Integrated documentation and excerpted transcripts were read and manually coded line by line. Collectively, reduction of data was informed by salient emerging themes related to preferred school choices, child-centered practices, sustainable integration, and perspectives of conceptualized advocacy efforts.

Findings

Preferred Schools and Characteristics

Participants’ reported school preferences in the survey demonstrated their awareness of the landscape of top-ranked schools on the basis of information provided during the meeting with the school reporting agency. Nine top performing schools of interest included the following public schools on the East side: Canton and Knight (all names are pseudonyms). Preferred private schools included Sidney and Steinway, both on the East side. Religious School 1 was located on the East side, and Religious School 2 was located on the West side. Charter schools of interest included Preparatory Academy and Bigler, both on the East side. From the West side of the city, the one public school of interest identified was Dixon (see Table 1).

Table 1. Preferred Schools

School	Entity	Respondents
Steinway	Private	9
Canton	Public	8
Sidney	Private	7
Knight	Public	4
Religious School 1	Private	3
Preparatory Academy	Charter	3
Religious School 2	Private	2
Dixon	Public	1
Bigler	Charter	1

All public schools of interest were featured on the school reporting agency’s list of top 31 performing schools. Preparatory Academy was an identified charter school. Bigler, although not listed in the top 31 list of schools, was recognized as a new school of interest due to incorporating a place-based education model in its inception year. Because all private options of interest were evaluated with different summative exams, none were identified on the school reporting list. However, parent engagement and discussion centered around local knowledge, including the reputation of private schools and the new charter school, which prompted parents’ interest in researching the schools more closely. The west side public school of interest was listed as a top performing school on the school reporting list.

Surveyed respondents indicated the following desired school characteristics (see Table 2):

Table 2. Desired School Characteristics

Desired School Characteristics	Respondents
Diversity/sustainable integration	7
Academic rigor	6
Child-centered practices	6
Community involvement	3
Parent involvement	5

Survey data documented parents’ preferred characteristics and schools across public, private, and charter school entities, and therefore included criteria that would be outlined in checklists that would guide the evaluation of schools during school visits.

The Landscape of School Offerings—Public, Private, and Charter Entities

Participants’ awareness of top schools transitioned into confidence of school quality upon visiting schools. Integrated school evaluation checklists and field notes documented evidence of many characteristics identified by participants. Ultimately, participants were satisfied with daytime school visits and confident about public and charter options identified in the list of top 31 Detroit schools. Parents were additionally satisfied with private school options. School characteristics are outlined in Table 3.

Information sharing and school visits rendered the following hopeful perspectives as evidenced by these interview excerpts:

Lisette: So, I think I came into the parent group before we even went to a school or had the idea to tour schools. I was thinking, how the he** am I going to find a school for my child and not take him out to the ‘burbs to do it? I really thought he would be going to a school, public or private, in Grosse Pointe. But I was just hoping we could find something in the city proper. And now that we are involved in it, I see a number of options I would be happy with. So now it’s not a matter of how am I going to find a school, it’s how am I going to choose one?

Similarly, Kayla informed:

I didn’t know there were so many high-performing elementary schools in DPS, so, even though I have been a spokesperson [for reform], well, there are high-performing schools. Look at Baxter; I didn’t know about Canton and Knight and Dixon; I didn’t know there were so many. It gives me hope for all of the city kids, not just my own.

Stewart was additionally pleased with an unexpected abundance of choices:

I have learned of a lot of schools I never knew existed. I’ve met a lot of new people; I’ve gotten excited, too, met new parents. It’s a very interesting experience—for all of us, there’s a sense of hope that there are some choices to draw from. I felt a little hopeless last year. This is a benefit for me, too!

Perspectives on behalf of Lisette, Kayla, and Stewart represent confidence in city schools that would not have been realized without researching, conducting school visits, and sharing outcomes of visits to inform school choices. The school evaluation checklist and information sharing supported participant knowledge about characteristics of good urban schools. In addition to satisfaction and acquiring knowledge of traits of effective schools, parents became knowledgeable about the landscape of Detroit schools and confident about making informed school choices. The next section will elaborate on characteristics that guided parents’ selection of schools.

Table 3. School Characteristics

School	Entity	Traits
Canton	Public	1 (some flexibility) 2, 4, 5
Knight	Public	1 (limited flexibility) 4, 5
International School 1*	Public	1 (some flexibility), 2, 4, 5
International School 2*	Public	1, 2, 3 (diverse staff, not student body), 4, 5
Dixon	Public	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Baxter*	Public	1 (some flexibility) 2, 4, 5
Sidney	Private	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Steinway	Private	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Religious School 1	Private	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Religious School 2	Private	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Religious School 3*	Private	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Preparatory Academy	Charter	1, 2, 4, 5
Bigler	Charter	1, 3, 4, 5,

Notes. *=not specified in the survey, but visited due to new member interest

School characteristic codes:

1. Knowledge of subject matter and child-centered practices—not standardized test driven
2. High achieving
3. Sustainable integration
4. Parent engagement
5. Connection to the community

Child-Centered Practices

Child-centered practices were evident in all school visits. To reflect parents' concerns about reading curriculum, the discussion of child-centered practices will prioritize the characteristics of the reading curriculum. Of all schools, Steinway and Sidney demonstrated the most curricular flexibility. Private and charter schools demonstrated more flexibility to facilitate child-centered practices than most public schools that were constrained by paced curriculum. In some instances, public schools were afforded some flexibility.

Sidney school demonstrated considerable evidence of child-centered practices and literature-based instruction, situated in balanced literacy pedagogy and grounded in thematic units of study. Steinway additionally demonstrated child-centered practices; knowledge was documented in student-generated class books. Oral language development and teacher-directed storytelling guided reading instruction in the primary grades. Many parents were initially concerned that children's literature was not implemented into the reading program until the third grade. However, during the school visit, parents were relieved when school personnel explained about daily student participation in the individualized reading approach.

The visit to Religious School 1 revealed evidence of traditional practices, including worksheets and seatwork, in addition to literature-based instructional practices. Religious School 2 incorporated the use of workbooks within a reading series, in addition to literature-based instructional practices. Religious School 3 incorporated a literature-based instructional framework. All religious schools demonstrated traditional math instruction guided by a textbook.

The charter schools visited demonstrated teacher autonomy and child-centered practices. Bigler emphasized a place-based education model that encourages students to critically examine the circumstances surrounding their communities. Consequently, they participate in literature-based, interdisciplinary units of study to conceptualize and implement solutions to societal issues, including blight and prejudice reduction. Preparatory Academy employed an expeditionary learning framework that was child-centered, interdisciplinary, and project-based. The reading curriculum demonstrated some flexibility with balanced literacy practices. Of additional interest was a very focused principal who was a former teacher at a suburban elite preparatory school who desired to bring resources and knowledge surrounding inquiry-based practices to the inner city.

Many parents were concerned about scripted reading curriculum in the public schools. However, interactions with teachers and classroom observations revealed more flexibility than anticipated. Parents learned about two reading programs that were facilitated throughout the district. The program

“Imagine It” was a literature-based program with authentic literature, written by award-winning authors and designed around child-centered practices. The second program, “Success for All” included reading selections that parents believed were not authentic. Although the program included child-centered discussion components and collaboration, the reading selections were not regarded as discussion worthy.

Canton demonstrated some flexibility with the Success for All reading program. Teachers in the primary grades were additionally able to implement thematic literacy units and supplemental literature outside of the scope of the reading program. Knight demonstrated considerably less flexibility with Success for All. During the school visit, the second grade teacher confided to the researcher about limited flexibility to facilitate the scripted reading program, implemented to ensure all students learned how read by Grade 3. The visit occurred during the reading block, a time when the students report to different classrooms based on their reading level performance. Therefore, many of his second grade students reported to other classrooms for reading instruction, and he received students from a variety of grades who performed at a second grade level. While instruction was differentiated on the basis of students moving to higher or lower level grades based on performance, the teacher expressed concerns about the quality of stories in the reading program and the limited time available for the students to read authentic children’s literature outside of reading program.

Teachers at International School 1 were required to implement the Imagine It reading program and were afforded flexibility to integrate supplemental, self-selected literature. Of particular significance for International School 2 was its dual immersion foreign language focus using language cohorts formed and centered around Spanish, French, Chinese, or Japanese. The children became proficient as they received instruction from native language speakers and acquired content in their second language. For more challenging academic content, students acquired instruction in English from their grade level English teacher counterpart. The Imagine It program was additionally facilitated with some flexibility.

Dixon Elementary school is known for its micro-society framework, integrated with the curriculum, in which students orchestrate businesses of interest and develop an economic and market system. Teachers facilitated the Imagine It program with some flexibility. The experienced teaching staff, averaging 15 years of experience, were sometimes known to retire then return to volunteer at the school.

Baxter is a gifted and talented school where students must apply and take a test as part of the admissions process. The curriculum is paced one half year

above grade level, and the instruction was somewhat high stakes test driven. Situated on Detroit's West side, the school has demonstrated a longstanding tradition of high academic achievement. The Imagine It reading program was implemented at Baxter with some flexibility.

Interview excerpts revealed participants who desired child-centered and project-based teaching practices. According to Kayla:

I want him [son] to be academically challenged. I myself did a lot of years of schooling, so I expect that he will be thinking creatively, working hard. I teach my classes in a way that encourages critical thinking, so I'm always going to want that for him. I'm not going to want rote memorization, and I want him to be able to do group projects and work on investigating his world.

In a similar vein, Sharon discussed what she did not want, and she was not confident about primary schools and their ability to provide experiences that would follow up on the progressive prekindergarten offered for her daughters at their university lab school:

Sharon: There's what I would like and what I can reasonably expect. I would love an experience like they have now that is a child-directed, exploratory, building-on-experience sort of school experience, but I know they won't get that after they leave here.

Interviewer: You can hope for it—you might advocate for it, too, but that's what you'd like to have.

Sharon: It's easier to talk about what I don't want—I don't want rote work, seatwork; I want my girls to be engaged, to be able to use their imaginations. I fully expect the schools will be following the state standards and meeting those expectations.

Interviewer: It's a place where the instruction is engaging and hands on, but also meeting the standards in an interesting way without teaching directly to the test.

Sharon: Teaching to the test is—but I don't know how realistic it is that they're not going to have that, but that's what I would like.

Sharon preferred a school that would satisfy requirements outlined in the Common Core State Standards, without being constrained by pacing guides. Paige shared a similar perspective while also desiring differentiated instruction, particularly within the realm of individually challenging students or providing additional support, as necessary:

I think something that will be a balance between being challenging enough for our child, but also willing to be supportive and follow him

wherever he's at. I'm not sure if that's specific in terms of curriculum, but that's what I generally think, but also something that is rigorous and to standards—math and science, social studies, history.

Sharon and Paige represent the perspective of desiring a curriculum that is rigorous, differentiated, and satisfies the standards, while promoting student inquiry and creativity. Their expectations align with Ball and Vincent (1998) within the realm of choosing schools where curriculum will meet the needs and interests of their children and eventually prepare them for postsecondary education. In addition to desiring child-centered practices, another factor influencing school choice included expectations for diversity and community.

Perspectives About Sustainable Integration and School Community

Most private school options consisted of racially diverse student populations, with the exception of Religious School 3 with a predominant enrollment of African American students. Although not initially surveyed, Religious School 3 was identified based on the interest of West side parents who joined the group after the initial survey was proctored.

Steinway and Sidney schools maintained multiracial student populations, which attracted many parents desiring multiracial schools. However, teachers at Sidney were more racially diverse than the teachers at Steinway. A diverse faculty and student body was evident at Bigler, in addition to multiage classrooms averaging 15 students. A diverse faculty was additionally present at Preparatory Academy, with a predominantly African American student population and class sizes averaging 25 students.

A diverse faculty was complemented by gradually increasing student diversity at Canton. While Canton is nestled in a family-oriented, multiracial residential area, all families with the exception of one bypassed the school in favor of private options during the time of the study. One neighborhood family selecting the school suggested the reason for others' reason for bypassing Canton was likely a consequence of a school demography that was predominantly African American and their desiring greater diversity that was present at the private schools. The family aimed to influence others to consider Canton in order to reflect the diversity of the neighborhood and to better connect the school with the community.

As in the case of Canton, the diverse faculty at Knight was complemented with increasing student diversity. However, more families in the multiracial historic district where the school was located were willing to give Knight a try and build relationships with the school community, wishing to reflect the diversity of the neighborhood. The predominantly African American student body of International School 2 did not reflect the diversity of the teaching staff,

but the overall culture of the school embraced world cultures and languages. Of all public schools visited, Dixon demonstrated the most diversity, largely due to its location near Hamtramck, an enclave with a large immigrant populace, particularly from the Middle East, India, and Eastern Europe. Thus, the diversity of Dixon reflects its borders.

Participants were aware of the racial and economic composition of the schools. When asked about their preferences for racially integrated schools, their responses encompassed a sense of community and their own experiences. Sharon grew up in a small Michigan town and desired a neighborhood school, similar to her schooling experience, albeit desiring a racially integrated school:

Sharon: Well, my experience and what is offered here are totally different. I grew up in a small town with an almost uniformly White student body, um, and I'm not looking to duplicate that (laughter). I couldn't even if I wanted to. The landscape has completely changed. Since I went through school, school choice has upended everything.

Interviewer: It's dismantled a lot of our options.

Sharon: The neighborhood school? That's all there was when I grew up. And the parents in my neighborhood don't even consider the neighborhood school an option. And even in the suburbs, I talk to suburban parents—so this does get to your question, I would like my daughters to have the experience of growing in a neighborhood with kids they also go to school with and having that community with the school, home, community gang, and that is, so I guess I'd be lying if I said I wasn't looking for that. My friends in the suburbs raising their kids there tell me, that doesn't even exist the suburbs because you have many, many families who are opting for other options there, and they are also not going to the neighborhood school.

In addition to desiring diversity, Paige stressed a connection to the community:

I do think that it's important to be intentional about being in a socioeconomically diverse environment and learning environment and to know that that's [as much] a part of his education as the books, so I was incredibly involved in school activities and community activities that brought us out of our school and into the community—so I think that's a value I would try to replicate.

Sharon mentioned a similar sense of community: "It's important to be in a place where they foster a sense of community and responsibility."

Sharon and Paige represent the perspective of Detroiters who desired schooling that nurtured belonging and a connection to the community, similar to families cited by Giles (1998), Lareau and Goyette (2014), Posey-Maddox

(2014), Stillman (2011), and Ball and Vincent (1998). Prospective school choices have the potential to contribute an integrative effect in city schools, as identified by previous research (Lareau & Goyette, 2014; Posey-Maddox, 2014; Stillman, 2011). In addition, the one family who selected Canton as an option demonstrated their role as innovator parents in a manner similar to Stillman (2011) and a beginning space to contribute an integrative effect on the school. The next section will demonstrate parents' perspectives for contributing resources and advocating for child-centered practices, given their knowledge of the landscape of school offerings.

Perspectives of Reform Efforts

Parental involvement efforts were significant at Canton and International School 2. Strong parent involvement and leadership at Canton school made possible other extracurricular activities, including unofficial gym and an award-winning chess team. At International School 2, parent involvement afforded multiple afterschool sports teams and clubs.

Participants' enhanced knowledge of the school landscape was evident in confidence about prospective school choices and awareness of parent-led afterschool resources. However, such knowledge also prompted awareness and reflection surrounding concerns about high stakes testing pressures. Participants voiced perspectives about reforming schools within the vein of offering time and resources during the school day. Lisette's perspective considered the potential for guided reading groups that would otherwise be a challenge with one teacher and a large class:

I would definitely contribute my time; that's a given. I was a teacher for four years before having my babies (laughter). I feel really comfortable with helping with reading groups if I needed to do that, all the way to if the teacher wants me to put up new bulletin boards, I'd be happy to do that. I love to do that kind of stuff, I love the creativity part of the classroom. I love small groups because when I was a teacher that was a fantasy to have that kind of time that I could work with groups.

School reform efforts were also viewed as opportunities to influence administrators against teaching to the test. According to Kayla:

That's my biggest concern with Baxter. I spent some time on their website and found the word creative all over it—we use creative methods, our students are creative in the classroom—but I have a hard time believing that with the standard DPS curriculum, that they would be able to do that, so that is a main thing that I will be able to do between now and then, to find out if there are avenues for them to use more creative opportunities for students, especially if they're teaching to the test a half

year ahead, more of that will limit opportunities for group work, project-based work, things that allow students to develop at their own pace...It's a constant juggling act. If there was a space to help the principal to work toward less teaching to the test, it would be my preference.

Lisette and Kayla represented Kimelberg's (2014) claims about parents' willingness to contribute to reform efforts by giving time and resources to fulfill resource gaps and promote educational parity. They demonstrated the potential to positively influence and promote a child-centered school culture and academic achievement (Carter, 2007; Eccles, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Lewis, 1997; Murnane & Levy, 1996). Further, they supported school reform efforts situated in relationship building (Giles, 1998).

In addition to contributing time and resources, participants voiced perspectives about the nature of community-based organizing efforts guiding participation in the Best Classroom Project. The dominant perspective encompassed making informed school choices based on school characteristics, otherwise known as information sharing to inform the best school choice. This perspective functioned against the grain of what parents termed a mass enrollment perspective, which called for numerous families enrolling in a common school and contributing resources. Parents who favored the information sharing perspective were concerned that one school may not be the best fit for every child, educationally and socially. In addition, they voiced concerns about parent leadership roles from a mass enrollment perspective that might unintentionally marginalize low-income families. According to Lisette:

Lisette: Not one of us wants to be perceived—there's nobody in this group who wants to be perceived as a White group of parents [planning] to rescue a school. Nobody wants to do that.

Interviewer: I think that was the original—

Lisette: There were two viewpoints—one was, if we all go in together, we can save a school—and the other was, let's research together and each make the best choice for our child, and I'm glad that that mentality won. There can be a lot of resentment if you were to enter a school like that.

Interviewer: Exactly, and I'm not one to say our perspective was better; there are different perspectives, but I didn't want to be regarded in that way, of a takeover.

Lisette: There were quite a few people who said they were gonna leave the group if that was gonna be our goal.

Similarly, Kristen informed:

I've been working on this school thing, and I'm feeling more positive about the group, so that at the very least and at the very best you might

get another parent who's like-minded and likes the same school. I don't see us all making a massive push into one school, because everyone has different priorities.

Paige voiced the following perspective:

Yeah, a lot of the different perspectives about newcomers coming to Detroit, too, and just the perspective that this is the new Detroit, the blank slate. That's totally disrespectful, and that's not to say it lightly, you know?

Conversely, within the frame of being a part of a school community, Stewart offered:

I'm excited about what we can do as a group, and I would hope we would have a transformative effect on the schools we're considering; I'm finding I'm becoming a part of these school communities, too.

Although Lisette, Kristen, and Paige preferred the information sharing perspective, their concerns, similar to consequences identified by Posey-Maddox (2014), contrast with the faction of families in the group who were encouraging everyone to mass enroll and take over one school. Such a perspective was a concern because it assumed a deficit perspective of the school's existing culture and student body. Although participants' responses reflected the desire to promote an integrative effect on select schools indicative of tipping in as coined by Stillman (2011), their perspectives differed concerning the issue of the potential cultural gap between longtime and newcomer families, as Posey-Maddox (2014) identified. Respondents did not want to succumb to the social pressures of attending a common school as identified by Ball and Vincent (1998). Instead, they preferred to promote an integrative effect and offer support within the parameters of a select school and were critical of parents desiring to mass enroll and change the culture of the school to reflect the blank slate that Paige was concerned about. Moreover, families who assumed the information sharing perspective recognized that one school is not the best fit for each child, similar to Ball and Vincent's (1998) findings. From Stewart's perspective, the group could promote a viable contribution to a school community, with the existing school community, in a manner that reflects the collective orientation identified by Giles (1998) and Cucchiara and Horvat (2014).

Conclusion

The discussion in the field surrounding urban schools is centered around high stakes testing pressures, social control, and lack of teacher autonomy as an impediment to school reform efforts and high quality educational offerings.

As scholars voice concern over what can be done to reduce inequality and promote educational parity in urban schools, the phenomenon of the portfolio model identified by Mason and Arsen (2014) and parent engagement (Giles, 1998) may factor into the solution.

School evaluation checklists, daytime school visits, and information sharing through meetings and social media raised awareness about child-centered practices and about a significant number of quality Detroit schools. Thus, the parents who participated became more knowledgeable about good schools and were committed to enrolling their children in an endeavor to contribute to an integrative effect in Detroit Schools. Participants were willing to contribute time and resources in order to fill resource gaps, but in a manner that was inclusive with the existing school community.

Many Best Classroom Project families have the resources to live elsewhere but desire to participate in organized reform efforts to promote educational parity in the city, not only for themselves, but for all students who attend the selected schools. Many members have the option of choosing private schools, but there are members with resources too limited to pursue the private school option. Across economic boundaries, enhanced knowledge of school characteristics provided access and opportunity to quality schools, across all school entities. Parents engaged in dialogue surrounding the changing educational landscape and realities of school offerings across public, private, and charter school entities.

Similar to recommendations on behalf of Giles (1998), parent engagement has become a mechanism guiding school reform. Moreover, parents are recognizing the potential of influencing curricular decisions to inform child-centered practices in Detroit schools.

Since its seminal year, many Best Classroom Project families have enrolled their children in public, private, and charter school options that are connected to the community. They are contributing to the integration of schools, offering time and resources, and have identified good fit schools for their children. Participation in the group helped parents become more knowledgeable about school characteristics and confident about making informed school choices. Reform is emerging as schools are attempting to satisfy parents' expectations. Moreover, acting as partners with the administration and with teachers provides for the common good, such as filling resource gaps, that may otherwise not be feasible. Reform may additionally emerge as parents insist upon teacher autonomy to implement innovative teaching practices, against the grain of high stakes testing pressures. Conversely, unintended consequences are possible if volunteerism and factors surrounding neoliberal urbanism marginalizes low-income families, an emerging trend identified by Lipman (2011) and

Posey-Maddox (2014). While many working class families have been displaced in communities in Detroit, displacing families from its schools has not become a trend. Ultimately, sustainable integration and inclusive volunteerism, the aim for core group members, intends to promote educational parity. As families continue to select Detroit schools, the matter of sustainable integration trends will be examined.

Continued Steps and Implications for Future Research

Collaborating With School Entities to Attract Parents

Best Classroom Project families captured the interest of Detroit Public School officials who initiated meetings with core group members and proctored a survey in an effort to determine factors influencing parents' school choices. District officials additionally requested a draft of the school evaluation checklist. The collaboration between parents and district officials led to deliberations about incorporating project-based learning and reading across the curriculum in an effort to attract families. Parents' expressed concerns about large class sizes led to discussions about the potential of utilizing student teachers and pre-service teachers from a local university to reduce the teacher to student ratio. In addition to satisfying concerns surrounding ratios, preservice and student teachers would benefit from pursuing fieldwork in successful urban schools and might potentially gain incentives to teach in Detroit Public Schools. Ongoing research will document students' experiences and parent satisfaction and advocacy efforts on behalf of families who have enrolled their children in Detroit schools within the scope of the educational landscape as it evolves.

The Uncertain Future of Detroit Public Schools

Uncertainty resonates surrounding the public and charter entities' ability to meet parent expectations. Group membership continued to increase during the 2015–16 academic year in spite of a succession of teacher sickouts in Detroit Public Schools, a process in which teachers collectively organized school closures to gather in protest and raise awareness about poor working conditions and the district's inability to pay teachers beyond the end of the year (Higgins & Matheny, 2016). The district was operating at a considerable deficit while a reform package to sustain the district was approved by the state Senate and under debate with the Michigan House of Representatives (Higgins & Matheny, 2016), which was eventually passed by the legislature prior to the 2016–17 school year.

The approved reform package or House plan called for splitting Detroit Public Schools into two districts. The old Detroit Public Schools remains for

the purpose of paying off the district's debt, while the new Detroit Public Schools Community District operates from remaining transition costs (Gray, 2016). Some transition costs were allotted for innovative programming, including the offering of Montessori programs in three of the district's schools which have attracted families from the Best Classroom Project.

As the uncertain future unfolds, continued research will center around parents' perspectives of the approved House plan, particularly the Montessori program enrollees. Whether schools will meet parents' expectations, retain students, and ultimately inform reform efforts presents opportunities for future research. Future directions include revisiting participants' perspectives of Detroit schools after their children have been enrolled, their advocacy efforts for select schools, and documenting the perspectives of generations that follow the originating families.

Recommendations for Organizing a Parent Network

Revitalizing urban centers throughout the U.S. necessitates parent networks to provide support and sources of information to inform school choice, within the broader scope of a bewildering landscape of school offerings and neoliberal urbanism. Unlike other studies, this study offers the perspective of the role of a school evaluation checklist as a mechanism to educate about and document characteristics of quality urban schools. More than ever, regardless of school entity, parents must know what to pay attention to during a school visit. If a Best Classroom Project parent was asked by another parent group in another context for suggestions to guide school choice, responses would likely include (1) use a school evaluation checklist to educate and inform about school characteristics, (2) organize daytime school visits, and (3) share outcomes of school visits during meetings and on a private social networking site.

The following elaborate on these and provide additional recommendations for parents desiring to move to or remain in urban centers in the U.S. and pursue options for their school-aged children:

- Establish a network and critical mass based on shared goals.
- Incorporate shared goals into a school evaluation checklist, and recruit parents who are educators and knowledgeable about quality schools and the landscape of schools. Utilize local agency score cards as a guide (see also Appendix).
- Utilize the school evaluation checklist to educate about school characteristics and document school visits.
- Establish a social networking site (e.g., Facebook group or page) for announcing meetings, school visits, information about schools, and application procedures.

- Post positive information about all schools on social media. To sustain trust and continued visits, refrain from posting anything negative about schools that have welcomed families into their schools.
- Establish a private social networking site (e.g., Big Tent) for more sensitive information, such as posting outcomes on school visits.
- Arrange parent meetings at schools, then follow up with daytime school visits.
- Invite district officials to meetings to share information about curriculum, programming, enrollment procedures, and other areas of interest.
- To accommodate childcare needs during parent meetings, arrange for a classroom and childcare provider.
- Engage with parents of older children who have been through the process.
- Be aware of volunteerism efforts that are inclusive of middle- and working-class populations. Engage in discussion of these issues with parent members and look for evidence of inclusion in schools.
- Remain respectful during school visits, whether families agree or disagree with the school culture and nature of instructional practices. The school may not be a good fit for one family, but may be a good fit for another family.
- Be respectful of parents' differing motivations. While many families may desire to form a critical mass and enroll a group of children into a common school, families may also select other schools based on social, educational, and emotional factors.

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Appendix: The Best Classroom Project—School Evaluation Checklist

	Comments
Administrators and Teachers ¹	
Professional, Caring, and Nurturing	
High Expectations for All Students	
Build Positive Relationships With Parents and Community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the staff find ways to work with parents such as adjusting practices and programs to ensure success for all? • Other 	
Community Engagement (From Excellent Schools Detroit [ESD] Community Reviewer Notetaker) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a parent room utilized? • Is there access to information about school news, programs, policies, and student achievement? • Do there appear to be regularly scheduled meetings with parents? 	
Knowledge of Subject Matter, Best Practices, Classroom Management, and Child Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do teachers use multiple strategies to present information? • Do teachers consider the child’s age when planning lessons-i.e., are lessons developmentally appropriate? • Is the teacher’s classroom organized? Are practices child-centered, engaging, and authentic? 	
Professional Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do teachers and administrators participate in professional development to support curriculum goals and innovative teaching? 	
Work Collaboratively <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do teachers work with one another to refine and reflect on teaching skills? • Do the faculty and administrators work together to make decisions and address issues? 	

Curriculum	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligned to standards and teachers' best practice (not high stakes test driven)² 	
Curriculum (Other)	
Balanced Literacy¹	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do teachers offer students opportunities to read multiple ways? For example, ... • Do teachers provide access to books children can read independently? Do teachers instruct with appropriate instructional materials? Do teachers read aloud books children cannot read on their own? • Do teachers use supplemental texts with the existing curriculum? • Do students write about what they read? Do students write formally and informally? (e.g., process writing and journaling, respectively?) • Do teachers integrate word study into instructional reading and writing? • Do students discuss what they have read? Do they participate equitably during discussions? • Do teachers maintain an attractive classroom library with high quality literature? • Is there a balance of fiction and nonfiction?³ 	
Early Childhood/Emergent Literacy⁴	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do teachers have a strong background in early childhood? • Do teachers nurture young children's inquiry? • Are teachers knowledgeable about emergent reading and writing? The alphabetic principle? The link between oral language and reading? • Do teachers engage emergent readers in balanced literacy pedagogy described above? 	
Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum⁵	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do teachers integrate reading and writing strategies to support students' acquisition of content (math, science, social studies)? • Do teachers teach math everyday? • Do teachers offer science regularly? Social studies? 	
Multicultural Education⁶	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do teachers integrate content from diverse cultures and groups in the teaching of concepts? • Do teachers help students understand how culture influences the construction of knowledge within and across content areas? • Do teachers foster equitable educational opportunities for students across racial, cultural, social-class, and language groups? • Does the whole school embrace the idea of multicultural education? • Do teachers have a respect for students, their culture, and heritage? 	
Conflict Resolution⁷	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the school have a zero tolerance for bullying? • Does the school devote time to teaching students how to build positive relationships with others? • Do teachers/staff model appropriate peer relationships? 	

PARENT GROUP INFORMS SCHOOL CHOICE

<p>Academic Service Learning⁸</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are student-initiated projects that address a concern in the community/ social issue facilitated? • Is academic service learning integrated into traditional and nontraditional teaching strategies? 	
<p>Circle any of the following the school offers:</p> <p>Music Library/Media Center Art</p> <p>Dance Foreign Language Physical Education</p>	
<p>Assessment⁹</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does authentic assessment inform authentic instruction? • Are varied, formative assessment strategies implemented in a manner that is authentic and ongoing? (e.g., If spelling tests/grammar exercises are used, are the same words/skills monitored in daily writing? If multiple choice tests are given, do students also write extended responses? Are students evaluated for verbal responses that demonstrate understanding?) 	
<p>School</p>	
<p>School Is Safe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the school have an effective school safety policy? • What procedures/policies are in place to ensure student safety? 	
<p>Class Size Is Manageable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance is provided when class sizes are large 	
<p>Low Staff Turnover</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have staff members worked for 7–10 years at the school? 	
<p>Diverse Staff and Student Body</p>	
<p>Recess/Outdoor Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do teachers offer ALL students recess? • Do students participate in recess daily? 	
<p>School Surroundings (ESD Community Reviewer Notetaker)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the neighborhood surrounding the school safe? • Are school grounds, parking lots, and recreational equipment maintained? • Are school signs visible? • Are school grounds clean and free of litter and graffiti? • Do you feel safe and welcome? 	
<p>School Entrance and Lobby (ESD)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there safety procedures at the entrance of the school? • Is the school mission/vision visible? • Is the entrance clean/free of graffiti? • Is information for parents available? • What's on the wall, floor, ceiling, windows? • Do you feel safe and welcome? 	

<p>Hallways, Stairs, Restrooms (ESD)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does everything work in the restrooms? • Are there ample restroom supplies? • What’s on the walls, floor, ceilings? 	
<p>Common Areas 1 (Gym, Cafeteria, Auditorium) (ESD)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is equipment up-to-date and well maintained? • Are food service areas clean before and after mealtime? • Facilities are clean and utilized by students? 	
<p>Common Areas 2 (Art/Music Room, Science Lab, Library/Media Center) (ESD)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do these common areas have needed materials? • Is equipment up-to-date? • Do computers and other equipment work properly? 	
<p>Classrooms (ESD)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What’s on the walls? • Are students engaged with staff and with peers? • Is the furniture in good condition? • Are students motivated? • Are classrooms equipped with technology? • Are students given leadership opportunities? 	
<p>Other</p>	

Notes. ¹(Allington & Cunningham, 2007). ²(Hollingworth, 2007). ³(Duke, 2003). ⁴(Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003). ⁵(Ruggles Gere, Lillge, Toth, & VanKooten, 2011). ⁶(Banks, 2007). ⁷(Covey, 2004). ⁸(Billig, 2003). ⁹(Ruggles Gere et al., 2010).

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