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Online or In-Person Instruction? Factors Influencing COVID-19 Schooling Decisions Among Latinx Families in Houston, Texas

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, families have faced a difficult decision between online and in-person instruction. In many school districts, a higher proportion of non-White families selected online instruction for fall 2020, but the factors influencing these patterns are unclear. Using a case study approach, I focus on the experiences of 21 Latinx families whose children attend the same majority-Latinx charter school in Houston, Texas, and explore the factors families balanced when deciding between online and in-person instruction. Drawing on 37 in-depth interviews with mothers and their children, I find that Latinx families made schooling decisions informed by their shared school context, the needs of family networks, and community infection rates. Health and safety concerns drove most families to select online instruction while acknowledging it was an academic sacrifice, but maternal employment and access to child care shaped their ability to make this choice. This study highlights the influence of nonschool factors in pandemic schooling decisions.

Keywords: *education, COVID-19, Latino/a, health, parents and families, work, sociology, qualitative research*

The question of how and when to safely reopen schools has been hotly debated since U.S. public schools closed for in-person learning in March 2020 in response to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. In fall 2020, school reopening was fragmented and contentious; in states like Texas, Arkansas, and Florida, schools were required to open their doors, while in many other states, these decisions were left up to local school districts (Henderson, 2021; Landivar et al., 2021; Waltens, 2020). A narrative of equity and racial justice was used to advocate that schools reopen, arguing that the most structurally vulnerable families, low-income and non-White, needed access to this vital service. However, when schools reopened in districts like New York City and Chicago, enrollment patterns did not reflect this reality. Instead, White families sent their children back to school at higher rates, and a higher proportion of Black, Latinx,[1] and Asian parents chose for their children to continue learning online at home (Kim, 2020; Leone, 2021; Shapiro, 2020). Similarly, in Texas, though 56% of students had returned for in-person instruction as of January 2021, these rates varied by ethnoracial group, 75% of White students had returned to school in contrast to 53% of Black students, 49% of Latinx students, and 31% of Asian students (Waller, 2021). This enrollment data highlights race-based divides in the decision between online and in-person instruction, but in-depth interviews are needed to deepen our understanding of how families are navigating schooling decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this article, I focus on the experiences of 21 Latinx families whose middle-school-aged children attend the same majority-Latinx charter school in Houston, Texas, as they chose between online or in-person instruction. Using an ecological framework, I situate pandemic schooling decisions for individual children within their school, family network, and community and ask: What factors did Latinx families in my sample weigh when deciding between online and in-person instruction for fall 2020?

Drawing on in-depth interviews with Latina mothers and their children, I find that concerns around health and safety drove most families in my sample to select online instruction for fall 2020 in order to minimize risk. However, maternal employment and access to child care shaped families' ability to do so. Latinx families contextualized the options provided by their school-online or in-person instruction-within high community infection rates and the needs and resources of their family networks. Ultimately, families prioritized the health and safety of family networks over an academic preference for in-person instruction. Before considering my case and data in-depth, I turn to existing scholarship on schooling decisions, perceptions of risk, and the Latinx community to situate my findings in the broader literature.

Background

Schooling Decisions and Risk Perceptions During COVID-19

Previous studies of risk and school selection highlight the way advantaged White parents conceptualize, contest, and manage perceptions of risk when enrolling their children in

urban elementary schools (Cucchiara, 2013; Kimelberg, 2014; Posey-Maddox, 2014). The parents in these studies had what Shelley Kimelberg (2014) called the "privilege of risk" because they had "a safety net of financial, human, and cultural capital that emboldened them" to choose urban schools since "by virtue of their resources" they could exit for private or suburban schools at will (p. 210).

In the context of COVID-19, conversations around risk and schooling have shifted from a focus on educational opportunity to the risk of COVID-19 infection posed by returning to in-person instruction. However, not all families have interpreted or reacted to the risk of returning to school in similar ways. In the 2020–2021 school year, advantaged families used their power and influence to advocate that schools reopen so that they could get "the best" education for their child, despite the potential health risks it posed to educators and the broader community (Cullotta, 2020). In fall 2021, support for mask mandates in schools was also racialized. A Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that 54% of White parents supported mask requirements compared with 76% of Latinx and 84% of Black parents (Hamel et al., 2021). This push for in-person return, alongside lower support for school mask mandates, suggests that White parents have a higher willingness to take on risks related to potential COVID-19 exposure in schools than non-White families. In the pandemic, this "privilege of risk" among White families may be tied to having a safety net, having little exposure to COVID-19, or simply having the resources to absorb the potential consequences of infection via spacious housing, remote work, access to sick leave, and access to health care—none of which are equally distributed.

The role of resources in shaping COVID-19 risk perceptions suggests that an approach that incorporates non-school factors is needed to understand pandemic schooling decisions. In previous work, an ecological framework has been used to argue that educational risks are a consequence of how a child is nested within their school, family, community, and broader sociocultural contexts, and how these contexts interact (Johnson, 1994). This framework highlights that educational risks are specific to a child and their family, based on these unique interactions, and should not be generalized to entire populations. In the case of COVID-19, an ecological framework situates pandemic schooling decisions for individual children within their school, family network, and community and draws attention to the interactive risks COVID-19 poses across these contexts. In Houston, schools provided families with two learning options, in-person or online. Then, parents had to consider how these options interacted with the risks of COVID-19 exposure within their family network and community to determine the best course of action. This ecological approach provides a more holistic understanding of how families made schooling decisions in the face of COVID-19 and contextualizes these decisions within broader structural inequality.

Work, Health, and Familism in Latinx Communities

COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated structural inequality along axes of race and class. In Texas, the site of my study, Latinx people make up 39% of the population but 46% of COVID-19 deaths as of March 2021 (The COVID Racial Data Tracker, 2021). While exact mechanisms of this disproportionality are unclear, structural inequalities related to work, health, and housing all appear to be playing a role.

Latinx men and women, particularly immigrants, are overrepresented in low-wage jobs that do no provide healthcare and are hypersegregated in manufacturing and service occupations that cannot be completed remotely, making them disproportionately vulnerable to COVID-19 (Catanzarite & Trimble, 2008; Gelatt, 2020). Cubrich (2020) predicted that the COVID-19 crisis would "impact low-wage workers more severely than all others" since many were left jobless, and others were forced to adopt the risks of in-person work with limited health benefits or protections (p. S186). In addition, Latinxs "have the lowest rates of health insurance coverage and are less likely to report having a usual source of care than other groups" (Ortega et al., 2015, p. 526). Low rates of insurance heighten the risks of low-wage work for Latinx families during COVID-19, as it compromises their ability to seek care if someone were to fall ill.

Though Latinx labor force participation is broadly gendered with higher participation by men than women (Catanzarite & Trimble, 2008), low-wage working mothers faced distinct challenges related to school involvement even before COVID-19. In their study of working mothers, Anna Haley-Lock and Linn Posey-Maddox (2016) found that low-wage workers, who in their sample were Black or Latinx, faced higher barriers and potential costs to school participation because their jobs lacked the scheduling flexibility or paid time off common among professional moms. In light of the pandemic and school closures, the burdens on working mothers have grown, given the gendered nature of child care and school support (Alon et al., 2020; Calarco et al., 2020; Sevilla & Smith, 2020). Mothers who work outside of the home are in a particularly difficult position given the increased emphasis on parental oversight in pandemic schooling.

Familism in Latinx communities may also inform COVID-19 schooling decisions. The social pattern of familism has attitudinal, behavioral, and structural dimensions that reinforce the idea that the welfare of the family network should be prioritized over the individual (Desmond & Turley, 2009; Steidel & Contreras, 2003; Zinn & Wells, 2009). Structural familism is reflected in multigenerational households and dense kinship networks within Latinx communities in the United States (Cohen & Casper, 2002; Sarkisian et al., 2006). These patterns of extended family connectedness and mutual support within familial networks may increase the availability of child care and the exposure of children to elders who are at higher risk of serious COVID-19 infection (Gilligan et al., 2020). These

structural realities, paired with a cultural value of prioritizing family welfare, may shift schooling decisions from what is best for an individual child to what is best for the whole family network.

While structural factors suggest that Latinx families may face unique COVID-19 exposures, risks, and networks of support, the voices and experiences of Latinx families are needed to consider how these realities influence decision making on the ground. Latina mothers can offer insights into the intersecting pressures of work, health, mothering, and familism as they make schooling decisions during a pandemic that has disproportionately affected their community. To explore how Latinx families in Houston, Texas, chose between online and in-person instruction in fall 2020, I conducted in-depth interviews with Latina mothers and their children living in a region with high levels of COVID-19.

Method

The Case and Context

In the summer of 2020, I interviewed parents and children at Houston College Prep Charter School[2] (HCP Charter) as they decided between online and in-person instruction. HCP Charter is a combined middle and high school campus that is part of a large charter school network in the Houston metropolitan area. The student population is more than 95% Latinx, and over 75% are economically disadvantaged. The school campus is spatially located in a region of the city that, like the school population, is majority Latinx. All families at HCP Charter have experience navigating school choice, as they applied to and accepted a spot in a charter school, but in fall 2020, they faced a new decision within the same school, whether to send their children to school for in-person instruction or remain online.[3]

As families made this decision, Houston was experiencing a surge of COVID-19 cases and deaths. Harris County, where Houston is located, had stable and low rates of COVID-19 in March and April 2020, when the pandemic began. However, the state ended local protective measures through the phased reopening of businesses in May, and by mid-to-late-June 2020, Harris County was experiencing a rapid increase in COVID-19 infections (Fernandez & Montgomery, 2020). In early July, the state halted reopening efforts, and the governor, who had previously resisted enforcement measures, ordered a statewide mask mandate. When I began my interviews on July 6, there were 37,776 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Harris County, and when I completed my final interview on October 3rd, there were 147,298 (*Social Explorer Coronavirus Case Data* 2020). During this surge in infections, Latinx residents in Houston were overrepresented in COVID-19 hospitalizations and positive tests, suggesting its disproportionate spread and impact within the Latinx community (Fink et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2020).

Approach and Data Collection

I adopt a qualitative case study approach that focuses on 21 Latinx families who were choosing between online and in-person instruction for fall 2020. I conceptualize each family as a "case" of the decision to return to school in person or remain online (Small, 2009). In controlling for the local region and school context, a case study can highlight how decision making played out in distinct ways for families even though they lived proximate to one another and attended the same school. I conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with 21 Latinx families between July 6 and October 3, 2020. These data were collected as part of a longitudinal qualitative study exploring charter school choice and schooling experiences of Latinx families.[4] As a result, this was my second interview with all 21 mothers, who had participated in an interview the previous summer when their child was entering HCP Charter, and my first interview with 16 of their children, who opted to participate in their own interview, for a total of 37 interviews. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish, took place virtually using video or phone calls, and lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and 45 minutes. Language and format depended on the interviewee's preference and availability of technology.

Interviews followed a semistructured format and explored the lived experiences of parents and students at HCP Charter during the past year. Given the pandemic context, I asked parents and students about their experiences with online instruction in the spring, how they were managing the pandemic as a family, and how they were thinking about the coming year and deciding between online and in-person instruction (see Online Supplemental Appendix A for select interview questions). At the end of each parent interview, I gathered demographic and household composition information, such as racial/ethnic identification, education, occupation, and family income. Each parent received a $20 cash honorarium, and each child received $10 in thanks for their participation and time. Following interviews, I typed field notes about the interview setting of video calls, prominent themes from the interview, and my interactions with interviewees.[5] Sequential interviewing allowed me to compare cases, track emerging themes, and incorporate additional question probes into my interview guide for subsequent interviews (Small, 2009).

Although interviews are the primary data collection tool, I also gathered data on HCP Charter's school-to-home communications during COVID-19. I downloaded all newsletters sent to families by HCP Charter between March and November 2020 and weekly family updates from the district website covering the same period.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in the language in which they occurred. I analyzed interview transcripts in MAXQDA using an iterative and flexible coding approach (Deterding & Waters, 2018). First,

I coded using an index codebook of broad themes that aligned with topics covered in each interview. Then, to focus on COVID-19 data, I wrote analytic memos for all 21 families using coded segments aligned to spring instruction, impact of COVID-19, and fall decision making. This allowed me to pair parent and child interview data and analyze the factors families considered when making their fall decisions. In addition, I recorded parent and child responses to COVID-19 questions in a matrix alongside family demographics to compare cases across participant characteristics. Italicized quotations throughout the article were translated from Spanish to English at this stage of analysis (see Online Supplemental Appendix B for the original Spanish language quotations).

After this initial round of coding and analysis, school, family, and community risk factors emerged as important contexts influencing the decision between online and in-person instruction. I then applied an ecological framework to consider how these varying contexts interacted to shape each family's fall schooling decision. I also coded school-to-home communications using three themes prominent in my parent interview data: academic options, health and safety precautions, and parent decision making. These steps of analysis allowed me to identify the school, family, and community factors that influenced the schooling decisions of participating families.

Participants

As shown in Table 1, all parent participants included in this analysis were Latinx women. While I use the term "Latinx," all but one participant was of Mexican origin and all self-identified as Latina or Hispanic. While 81% were married or partnered and 67% were employed, mothers were more evenly split along lines of parental nativity (57% foreign-born), educational attainment (57% high school, GED, or less), and household income (43% below $50,000). This heterogeneity provides an opportunity to center the voices of Latina mothers and highlight the range of experiences within this group. I did not ask participants about their documentation status, so this is an additional axis of difference I cannot speak to.[6] All participants had at least one child enrolled at HCP Charter in the 2019–2020 school year, and 10 families had more than one child enrolled. The rising seventh grader from each family was invited to participate in an interview, and 16 of 21 chose to do so. The mean age of child participants was 12 years old, and 56% were female (Table 2). This group is not intended to be representative of all families at HCP Charter or Latinx families in Houston. The goal of this analysis was to systematically explore the factors that Latinx families in this sample considered when deciding between online and in-person instruction in fall 2020.

TABLE 1
Parent Interview Sample (N = 21)

Characteristic	Count	Percentage
Race/ethnicity		
Latinx	21	100
Gender		
Female	21	100
Age (*M*)	39.4	
No. of children (*M*)	3.2	
Relationship status		
Married	14	66.7
Unmarried partner	3	14.3
Divorced	3	14.3
Single	1	4.8
Parental nativity		
U.S. born	9	42.9
Foreign born	12	57.1
Educational attainment		
HS, GED, or Less	12	57.1
Some college or associates	4	19.0
Master's	5	23.8
Household income		
Below $50,000	9	42.9
Above $50,000	12	57.1
Fall maternal employment		
Working outside home	12	57.1
Working from home	2	9.5
Stay-at-home mom	7	33.3

Findings

Using an ecological framework, I highlight that pandemic schooling decisions of Latinx families were nested within their school, family, and community contexts. I find that Latinx families in this sample primarily selected online instruction to minimize the health risks they believed a return to in-person instruction would pose to their family networks, given the high rates of COVID-19 infection in the community. However, maternal employment shaped the ability of families to select online instruction. In the section that follows, I first describe the shared school context of families in this sample; then, I turn to the two most prominent factors that influenced decision making: the perceived health risks of returning to in-person instruction and maternal employment.

Shared School Context

Families across my interviews reported high levels of communication from HCP Charter throughout the spring and summer. When discussing their thoughts about the upcoming year, parents referenced school surveys, weekly emails, and phone calls with school staff as the way they learned about

TABLE 2
Student Interview Sample (N = 16)

Characteristic	Count	Percentage
Race/ethnicity		
Latinx	16	100
Gender		
Female	9	56.3
Male	7	43.8
Age (*M*)	12	
Grade Fall 2020		
Seventh grade	15	93.8
Eighth grade	1	6.3
Parental nativity		
U.S. born	6	37.5
Foreign born	10	62.5
Household income		
Below $50,000	8	50.0
Above $50,000	8	50.0

their options and provided their opinions. All school communications were provided in English and Spanish and were discussed by English and Spanish-speaking mothers alike. Valeria, a Latina immigrant and partnered mother of two who works cleaning homes, told me:

> *Fortunately, the school has reacted favorably to us as parents. They have supported us with a lot of information about everything that is happening . . . They have been updating us, and they are making us take part in surveys, and for me this is excellent. They asked us what we as parents wanted.*

Surveys gave parents a space to express their preferences, while weekly updates informed parents about their options and emphasized parental choice, academics, and safety.

HCP Charter offered families two learning programs for the 2020–2021 school year: in-person at school or online at home.[7] School communications emphasized that the choice between learning programs was up to families. Writing in early July,

> We understand that each family has unique concerns related to returning to daily routines while coexisting with COVID-19. We want you to know that we will support you in making the decision that is best for you and your student.

In weekly communications, school leaders and district officials continued to emphasize the availability of options, bolding phrases like, "We will offer a virtual option for the entire school year."

Parents I spoke with recounted feeling deep relief when they found out that their child would have the option to participate in online instruction and that the choice was theirs. Elizabeth, a U.S.-born Latina and married mother of four who works in education, described her feelings this way:

> At first, we were very concerned, like, okay, what's going to happen? I kept telling my husband, "I won't send them to school because I'm—I'm just scared" . . . But they gave us all the information and the options of keeping them at home, and to me, that was great. . . . So, we went ahead and opted for the virtual.

Elizabeth illustrates the fear parents were feeling and their palpable relief at knowing they had an online option. Annalise, a Latina immigrant and married mother of six who is a stay-at-home mom, appreciated that the school gave parents the authority to make this decision on their own timeline. She shared,

> *I like that they gave me the option for him to be here until I choose, not the school. . . . If others want to return, they can return, but I am his mother, and I decide if my son is going to return. . . . I like that they give me the option to feel safer.*

This recognition of parental authority, and availability of online classes, provided relief in a time of high anxiety given the health risks of COVID-19.

Academics were a central theme of school communications, which outlined the new format of online instruction. In describing the new online offering, Maite, a Latina immigrant and married mother of four who is a stay-at-home mom, contrasted this new format with what the school had offered in the spring:

> *Last year the classes were recorded, and the teacher would put them online, but this year it will be classes from 8:30 to 3:45 with a schedule of classes. . . . They won't be recorded; they will be live. I think this is better because the teacher is there explaining it to them.*

Parents I spoke with were pleased with this change to the format of online instruction and the consistency it would provide. HCP Charter also instituted a standard schedule across both learning programs. Middle school students would take four core classes, made up of 45 minutes of live synchronous instruction, followed by 45 minutes of work time. Instead of encouraging parents to choose one option over the other, HCP Charter's communications were neutral and emphasized that "synchronous, full-day learning" would be available in both learning programs, giving families "two high quality school program options" for "a college ready education."

School communications during the summer and early fall all focused heavily on outlining the "stringent health and safety practices" that would be implemented for in-person school. In early July one weekly email included 14 bullet points about health and safety measures that HCP Charter noted were "beyond what is required by the state." Families referenced these communications and described these measures when we spoke; some were soothed, others were skeptical. Valeria, one of the few mothers I spoke with who planned to send her children to school in person, referenced this information as helping her feel confident:

> *In terms of that, I am calm because we have been informed of everything that the school has planned, and it is exactly what we*

> *have to do—wash your hands constantly, use sanitizer, use masks, maintain distance . . . I know that for many parents it is difficult but well, I trust that if I as a mother, my son as a student, and the academic authorities do their part, things can go well. . . . This is a small district. I think they have more control, more organization.*

While communication about hygiene measures left Valeria feeling reassured about return, this feeling of calm was rare. Other parents were skeptical, saying, "These are kids. They're not going to want to have their masks on 24/7" or "*I mean they can take your temperature, but there are asymptomatic people with no symptoms, so that isn't 100% safe*." These varying responses to the same measures demonstrate that school communications provide information that is then interpreted by parents and incorporated into their own decision-making processes.

Frequent communication provided families with information about the coming year and gave them a voice and a choice between two learning programs: online or in-person. HCP Charter aligned online and in-person instruction, so families had parallel academic options, and outlined safety protocols for reopening. The school's neutral messaging encouraged families to make decisions about the coming year based on their own "unique concerns" related to COVID-19. Indeed, the families I spoke with had unique health, work, and child care factors that influenced their concerns about returning to in-person instruction and their ability to choose online learning.

Health and Safety Concerns

Health and safety concerns were the primary factor informing the decision between online and in-person instruction. Families chose online instruction to eliminate the perceived health risks of returning to school while acknowledging that it was an academic sacrifice. This decision was shaped by high levels of COVID-19 infection in the community and health risks within family networks. These community and family-level health factors took priority over an academic preference for in-person instruction.

Community Infection Context and Experiential Knowledge. Parents directly referenced high rates of COVID-19 in the community when speaking about their decision to remain online. Cartalina, a Latina immigrant and married mother of three who is a stay-at-home mom, shared,

> *They sent us a survey about if we wanted the children to go back to school or not, and I mean, at this moment, I say no. There are so many infected people . . . I want the minimum contact and exposure to others and the virus that I can have so that they cannot bring it into my home, this is my concern.*

Daisy, a U.S.-born Latina and divorced mother of two who works as an accountant, shared that her perspective on in-person instruction had changed over time, "Before the second wave, I was like, whatever they need to go back, I'll be fine with it . . . But right now, with this wave, I just would prefer to have them at home. It's just safer." For mothers in this sample, high rates of community infection influenced their schooling decisions.

Other parents contextualized the risks of COVID-19 through their work or the work of family members. Annalise, spoke of the threat of COVID-19 in the context of her husband's job repairing heavy equipment. She told me, "*We have to deal with this chaos. We have to do it. In our home we've had three scares because men who work with my husband had it. One colleague died . . . It was very difficult*." Two of Annalise's adult children had also experienced COVID-19 scares at their workplaces, making the threat of infection very real. While high-wage workers transitioned to working at home, many low-wage workers did not have this option. Parents who worked in construction, manufacturing, and cleaning continued to work in person throughout the pandemic, and they experienced the risks of COVID-19 because of this work.

Experiences with familial illness also informed the way parents and children understood the threat of COVID-19 and their schooling decision. When I asked Angela, a U.S.-born Latina and married mother of four who works in education, how she was thinking about the coming year, she shared,

> There's a lot of nerves that are coming with this because we're not where we need to be as a state. And so the safety, I think it's gonna be a big, big thing for me. . . . My mom actually is just recovering from COVID, so it's even more, it hits you harder when it's your family member. She got discharged a couple of days ago, and she's recovering at home. And so, it's scary. Yeah. I mean, do I want to be sick? Or my children to be sick? Or just continue learning from home? But it's not the same instruction, you know, it's a hard decision.

Angela's daughter Maddie, a rising seventh grader at HCP Charter, was similarly shaken. She explained,

> For me as like a little kid, it's scary 'cause, like . . . a lot of people that we knew started getting sick or like, dying from it . . . We would always go over to my grandma's house and just drop things off, but we could never come into contact with her, which was scary.

Maddie noted the tension between this fear and the day-to-day reality of online learning, "It's still scary for me now, but I'm just trying to work through it—but it's hard to try and focus on schoolwork when you know there's something bigger out in the world." Maddie's fears and Angela's emphasis on safety reflect how community infection and familial experiences with COVID-19 affected pandemic schooling decisions.

Health of Households and Family Networks. When considering the health risks of returning to school, most decisions occurred at the level of household or family network, not individual children. The presence of family members who

were at high risk factored heavily into these decisions. Maite described her conversation with her own children, who wanted to return to school, this way:

> *Their first impulse is to go back. It would be better to be with your friends and go to school, but I told them . . . you have to be very realistic . . . I said, "You can take care of yourself and we can take care of each other here in the house. But what if a classmate of yours doesn't take care of themselves and they are next to you, that is it, it is a chain" . . . My in-laws also live with us, and I told them you also have to think of your grandparents, "Imagine that you have been infected and you come here to the house and they are here, that is it." . . . Yes, the school will have a lot of security . . . but whatever these measures are—right now, with the cases so high, it is better to be home.*

In her conversation with her children, Maite vividly illustrated the potential consequences of returning to school and demonstrates the ecological nature of schooling decisions which were nested within the safety measures provided by the school, the needs of a multigenerational household, and high levels of community infection.

Veda, a rising seventh grader at HCP Charter, worried about the health risk she may pose to her extended family network if she returned to school since her mother provides care for her elderly aunt. Veda explained,

> I mean, I want to go to school because, you know, I miss school . . . but also I don't wanna go because I don't wanna risk my aunt getting COVID. She's really old . . . I don't want to bring it home and then my mom gets it, and then she goes to my aunt and my aunt gets it.

To minimize this risk, Veda planned to "stay at home and do it online," putting the health of her family network over her desire to return to school in person.

Alejandra, a Latina immigrant and divorced mother of two, paired her schooling decision with other strategies of protection at work and within her family network. Alejandra works cleaning homes, and her oldest daughter has a disability that makes her high risk, so at the start of the pandemic, Alejandra had to think carefully about how to continue working and minimize risk. She told me:

> *I stopped a bit of cleaning when everything was closed, I was very afraid, and then little by little my clients, they weren't working either so that gave me confidence, they said, "Alejandra don't worry we don't go out either, we take precautions." Then I have some houses that I clean, and they have teenagers, and I stopped going to those houses. . . . For me it wasn't safe. They have children who drive and I would see them arrive home with food and then leave and enter again with friends, and I didn't like that . . . I talked to the mom and I said, "I'm sorry but you know about my daughter's condition, I cannot expose myself or my family."*

This decision, to only clean homes that took similar precautions as she did, led to less work but more protection for Alejandra and her family. Alejandra used a similar logic of protection when thinking about schooling decisions,

> *I would rather have her studying at home online, same for my other daughter, also for my nieces . . . until there is a vaccine . . . I don't want them returning to class with more people, even if precautions are taken correctly, I don't want to risk it.*

Alejandra expected a similar level of vigilance from her family members,

> *I told my sister the same thing, I told her . . . if you expose yourself, you cannot enter my house, you cannot work with me, because I have to take care of my daughters. . . . So, she is not going to send her girls to school either.*

Alejandra and her sister had to continue working outside of the home to support their families, but they minimized the risk of COVID-19 infection within their family network by making strategic decisions regarding the homes they continued to clean and by choosing online instruction for their children.

Prioritizing Health Over Academic Preference. In this context of high COVID-19 infection, parents described online learning as an additional strategy to minimize risk for their families while acknowledging that it was an academic sacrifice. When I asked Noelli, a U.S.-born Latina and married mother of four who works as a therapist, about her plans for the upcoming year, she responded, "Part of registration was the question. Do you want online or in person? And just health wise, we're going online, any way to minimize risk." Though Noelli made this choice, she was clear that it was a sacrifice, sharing, "I know there's going to be a gap. There's just no way to do online and everything goes smoothly." This decision to prioritize health while acknowledging the academic challenges it posed was common across my interviews.

Parents openly discussed the tension between their preference for in-person instruction and their decision to prioritize health by remaining online. Maritza, a Latina immigrant and married mother of four who stopped cleaning homes during the pandemic to oversee her children's schooling, shared her son Mario's belief that in-person instruction was preferable to online learning. She explained, "*They don't learn the same . . . Mario said to me, 'It is much better in person, mommy, we learn more in class, they explain it better.'"* This academic reality informed Maritza's concerns for the coming year but not her decision to remain home,

> *I hope that COVID and all of these virtual classes don't affect him too much. It's a year, right? It's more important right now that they are well, that they are healthy, but I do hope they continue learning and don't fall behind.*

Elizabeth articulated a similar tension between her academic preference and her actual decision in saying,

> I mean, of course, we would definitely want them to be in person. I think everybody has realized that in person is the best. But I did talk

> to both of them, granted they both say they want to be in person, and I told them, it's not going to be something permanent, but for the safety of everybody, we're gonna stay at home.

Maritza and Elizabeth explicitly recognized the tradeoff they were making between academics and health and argued it was a necessary and temporary sacrifice taken to protect the health of their children and "the safety of everybody."

In the context of COVID-19, the decision to remain online was a strategic choice to minimize health risks, nested in considerations of community infection rates, the health needs of those in their family networks, and strategies of protection families had been engaging in for months. In short, it was not just a decision about school; it was a family decision that prioritized what was best for the family network over an academic preference for in-person instruction.

Maternal Employment and Access to Child Care

While health risks were the primary factor leading families to select online instruction, maternal employment shaped whether families had access to this "choice." Stay-at-home moms did not have to factor child care into their decision, while mothers working outside of the home had to carefully consider who would provide child care if their children were not at school. As a result, mothers working outside of the home faced higher barriers to selecting online instruction.

Working Outside of the Home. Mothers working outside of the home faced the challenge of finding child care while they were working. Child age and household composition impacted the availability and type of supervision that was needed to facilitate online instruction. Children left home alone posed a challenge for working mothers. Anita, a Latina immigrant and partnered mother of two who works cleaning homes, worked during the day, so her youngest son, a rising seventh grader at HCP Charter, was home alone. Anita had felt uncomfortable leaving him alone to complete online schooling in the spring, and this lack of supervision was on Anita's mind when she considered her decision for the fall, she shared,

> *If the school says we are open for the children to come, I'm going to send him. . . because when you work, you don't know if they are doing everything on time . . . It is already difficult for me to leave him in such times. And then what if he doesn't connect? What if he gets distracted?*

Returning to in-person school would provide academic supervision for her son during the day and peace of mind for Anita when she was at work. Like Anita, the mothers in this sample who planned to send their children to school in person all worked outside of the home.

Other working mothers were able to activate familial networks and older children for child care. When I spoke with Elizabeth in September, she had returned to working in person and dropped her two school-aged children, a kindergartener and seventh grader, off at her mother's house on the way. This support was crucial to her ability to choose online instruction. She reflected,

> For me, it's doable, even though I work. Now, if I didn't have my mother (pause) . . . I don't know how that would happen—I mean, how that would work, right. You know, I'm thankful I have her.

Older children were another source of daily supervision, but when young children were involved, this was less viable. Mia, a U.S.-born Latina and married mother of four, continued to work full-time throughout the pandemic. When we spoke, she reflected on her family's experience in the spring this way:

> I work a full-time job Monday to Friday, and I have the four kids in school but thank God I have my oldest who is 15, so she is able to stay home with the kids and watch them while I go to work. I mean, she has her moments like, "They don't listen to me," the two little ones, but I mean, I got to go to work.

Though grateful her oldest daughter was able to supervise, Mia acknowledged the problems with this arrangement and was worried that her two younger children, who were in kindergarten and third grade, were not learning what they should. Given this child care reality, Mia planned for all of her children to return to school in person in the fall to "get the education they need."[8]

For working mothers with multiple older children, child care was less of a stressor. Though Noelli was returning to work outside of the home, she still selected online instruction for her son because he would be home with three older sisters who were also taking online courses. HCP Charter's new live format also created a mechanism of supervision. Noelli explained, "They are going to do live classes, and they're gonna actually check attendance. So that'll be different already, which I completely agree with." Though Noelli was relieved that attendance would be taken for each class, as she would be messaged if her son was not present, she still felt a strain between her job as a therapist and as a mom. She shared,

> It's a bit scary to just know (pause) that I'm so limited because I'm not at home . . . I kind of wish I had enough money to quit my job. Then I would be the supplement, like, "Hey, let's work on this' and 'I'll help you."[9]

Mothers working outside of the home, from highly educated professionals to low-wage workers, experienced tension between parenting and work and had to manage childcare logistics that other mothers in this sample did not.

Working From Home. Working from home allowed mothers to choose online instruction without finding additional child

care, but this was not an easy balance. When I asked Marie, a U.S.-born Latina and married mother of three who was working from home, how online learning had gone for their family, she responded simply, "Horrible. It was so horrible . . . . The little bit of hair that I have, I wanted to pull it out. I'm not a teacher." She continued, "I was trying to juggle work, getting set up at home . . . It's just overwhelming with my job calling me and trying to get these kids on point . . . It was a constant battle." Despite these challenges, Marie planned for her children to remain home in the fall because of the health risks she associated with returning to school in person. When I asked what measures would make her comfortable with returning to in-person instruction, Marie responded,

> To be honest with you, there's nothing that they're going to be able to do. I don't feel comfortable now, especially with this virus just out of control. It can be one student. That one student can be asymptomatic and what if he does have it?

Marie's family had experience with this asymptomatic threat; she explained,

> We've had a lot of family members get the disease. . . . My cousin got it and was around us for days prior to finding out. . . . So, we went to go get tested and my nine-year-old came back positive.

Though her son was asymptomatic, Marie had faced what other mothers dreaded, "It was very heartbreaking when I had to tell him. I had to make him put the mask on, and he cried about a good hour . . . he was devastated. He was like, 'I don't want to die.'" This experience informed Marie's decision to select online instruction, and the fact that she was working at home made this a viable, though not ideal, option.

Stay-at-Home Moms. Stay-at-home moms faced the fewest barriers to selecting online instruction because they did not have to factor child care into their decision or balance working from home with supervising online learning. In my sample, a higher proportion of Latina immigrants were stay-at-home moms than U.S.-born mothers,[10] so while these families had lower household incomes on average, they had the privilege of having a mother at home to support and supervise online learning during the day. Annalise, explicitly named this privilege when we spoke about her decision for the fall. Annalise was aware of the competing demands working moms faced, as four of her adult children were themselves struggling to balance work and child care, and connected her own schooling decision to the needs of the broader school community:

> *I told them at HCP Charter I prefer to keep him at home because I am at home. This is an advantage. I don't want to take a place that another woman who works needs because we are in a total crisis, and it wouldn't be good for teachers to have so many children. If you can stay home, you can give the time and the space to someone who unfortunately cannot . . . I don't want him to take a spot if it isn't necessary.*

When making her decision between online and in-person instruction, Annalise considered not just the needs of her own family but the needs of teachers and other mothers in the HCP Charter community.

While health factors drove most schooling decisions, access to child care shaped each family's ability to select online instruction. These families demonstrate how intersecting family-level factors—household composition, maternal employment, age of children, family networks—influence child care needs and pandemic schooling decisions. The mothers in this sample who were certain their child would return to in-person school all worked outside of the home, while no stay-at-home mom planned to do the same.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study adds the voices of a diverse group of Latinx families to the current conversation around the perceived risk of returning to in-person school due to COVID-19. Using an ecological approach, I demonstrate that Latinx families made pandemic schooling decisions informed by community infection rates, health risks within family networks, and maternal employment. HCP Charter's neutral school-to-home communications emphasized that this was a familial choice, and families acted accordingly, balancing perceived health risks with maternal employment and access to child care when deciding between online and in-person instruction for fall 2020. These findings shed light on how and why Latinx families may be hesitant to return to in-person school during a pandemic and provide insights into the ongoing debate over returning to in-person school in fall 2021.

In contexts where COVID-19 infection remains high, Latinx families across class and immigrant generation may prefer online over in-person instruction to minimize risk and protect the health of their children and familial networks. These findings suggest that assuming low-income families will send their children for in-person instruction because they are "disadvantaged" is flawed. This assumption ignores the complexity and context of each family's decision-making process and underestimates the familial and community resources economically disadvantaged families leverage to minimize risk. Recognizing these complexities is essential to avoid deficit thinking about low-income and minority parents as a desire to continue online instruction does not reflect a devaluing of in-person instruction, but a strategic and temporary tradeoff made by mothers to protect the health of their families and communities given their elevated exposure to and experience with COVID-19.

This case study highlights the importance of clear and neutral school communication and mode-of-instruction options that are responsive to the needs of all families. All mothers in

my sample were relieved to have a choice between online and in-person instruction so they could make decisions that worked best for their families. For working mothers who needed to send their children to school in person, clear guidelines and safety protocols for reopening were incredibly important. However, expecting all families to jump at the option of in-person instruction is unrealistic given the ongoing threat of COVID-19. Families who continue to face exposure to COVID-19 in other spheres of life, like low-wage work, may aim to control contexts in which they do have the choice to minimize risk, like schooling. Flexible school policies that recognize that families know their own situation best and ensure they have what they need for their children to continue learning are crucial to supporting families as the pandemic continues.

Despite optimism that schooling would return to normal in fall 2021, the rapid spread of the Delta variant has renewed parents' concerns about reopening. Some districts quickly adapted by offering all-virtual options and requiring masks, but other districts are offering neither (Miller, 2021). In Texas, where this study took place, a ban on school mask mandates and an end to funding for online instruction has limited the options families have for the 2021-2022 school year and the tools schools can use to keep children and staff safe while learning (Lopez, 2021). Requiring all students to return to school ignores the fact that for some families, the factors that made in-person school risky last year have not dramatically changed. Mandating return, particularly without adequate protections, requires structurally marginalized families to take on higher levels of risks as they may lack the health care, housing, or financial resources needed to effectively fight COVID-19 infection.

This study offers a single snapshot of family decisions during a surge of COVID-19 infection in the summer of 2020. A longitudinal approach is needed to examine how and why perceptions of risk and schooling decisions change over time as local infection rates fluctuate, data on transmission and school reopening becomes available, and pandemic fatigue sets in. Houston area school districts experienced an uptick in in-person instruction in January 2020, despite a new surge of COVID-19 infection (Webb, 2021). This trend suggests that the risk calculus of some families may shift over time, but further research is needed to explore why.

National debates that focus narrowly on reopening schools as the solution to recoup learning missed during the 2020-2021 school year ignore the fact that some families would prefer for their children to remain online and are entitled to high-quality and engaging online instruction. When the voices of advantaged families dominate the debate, in-person instruction is presented as an uncomplicated and necessary good without considering the position of privilege they are speaking from. When these voices are loudest, the debate is distorted. Amplifying the voices of parents in communities who have borne the brunt of the pandemic is necessary to balance the conversation about the pros and cons of online and in-person instruction and recognize the complex factors families continue to bring to schooling decisions as the COVID-19 pandemic persists.

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Notes

1. Latinx is used as a gender-neutral term instead of Latino
2. "HCP Charter" and all participant names are pseudonyms.
3. All parents in this study were charter school choosers, so these interviews cannot speak to how the factors influencing their schooling decisions may vary from noncharter school families.
4. These data were collected as part of a larger longitudinal qualitative study. The prior year I interviewed 31 families when their child was entering HCP Charter for middle school to consider their motivations and hopes at entry. I met and recruited participants in person at a welcome event in June 2019 and followed up by email, phone, and text message to arrange in-person interviews throughout the summer and early fall. I was given approval by the school administration to recruit at the school but did not have a larger role at the campus or charter network. One year later, in summer 2020, I invited all parents to participate in a follow up interview to learn more about their prior year at the school. I also invited the focal child, who had just completed their first year at HCP Charter, to participate in their own interview, for the possibility of one child interview per family. I conducted follow-up interviews with 24 families in total, 18 of these interviews consisted of an interview with the parent followed by an interview with the focal child, while 6 were just an interview with the parent. This analysis focuses on the 21 Latinx families who participated in interviews in 2020.
5. As a non-Latinx White woman, I had a different ethnic background than all the parents and children I interviewed. This difference may have limited the way participants spoke about topics related to race and ethnicity, although the fact that I had met and interviewed all parents the prior year helped with rapport and comfort, and the semistructured format allowed for an informal conversational feel. I was not making a similar mode of instruction decision for children at the time of interviews, as I am not yet a mother. Parents generously shared the reasoning behind their own decision, and most spoke openly about the challenges they had faced during the pandemic and their concerns related to return. To guard against bias in analysis, I shared hypotheses and emergent findings with colleagues, mentors, and a writing group to strengthen my analysis and seek out alternative interpretations of this same data.
6. Though I did not collect data on documentation status, a recent mixed-method study found that immigration status intensified the economic pressures and health risks of the pandemic for undocumented college students (Enriquez et al., 2021). This highlights the need for additional studies of pandemic schooling decisions that

explicitly speak to the role of documentation in COVID-19 risk assessments.

7. The school initially planned to offer three modes of instruction—in-person, online, and a hybrid of both. However, days after the school announced this plan, the state of Texas said it would not allow hybrid programs (Carpenter & Webb, 2020), so HCP Charter quickly informed families that the school would in fact be offering two learning programs in the 2020–2021 school year: in-person at school or online at home.

8. Child age determined the type and level of supervision that was needed. Just six mothers in this sample had children under the age of 6. One was already a stay-at-home mom, two relied on familial care, and three stopped working or altered their work schedules to provide care. Though not the focus of this study, these findings highlight the need for additional research focused on the parents of young children during the pandemic (Calarco et al., 2020).

9. Highly educated mothers like Noelli still felt a financial need to remain at work. Research on middle-class and second-generation Latinx families highlights the possibility of mixed education marriages in which women are more highly educated than their spouses (Rangel & Shoji, 2020), suggesting that dynamics of job exit, driven by who has the highest salary, may be less gendered for this group. In this sample, the mothers who stopped working to care for children during the pandemic all paused low-wage cleaning or temporary jobs, while none of the highly educated professionals in this sample did the same.

10. Half of the Latina immigrants in my sample (6 of 12) were stay-at-home moms compared to just one U.S.-born Latina (1 of 9). Immigrant mothers who stayed at home were all married, highlighting the interaction of marital status and maternal employment.

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