



Opening Doors

How Low-Income Parents Search for the Right School

Paul Teske, Jody Fitzpatrick, and Gabriel Kaplan

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AUTHORS:

Paul Teske, Jody Fitzpatrick, and Gabriel Kaplan

Graduate School of Public Affairs
University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center

Center on Reinventing Public Education
Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs
University of Washington
2101 N. 34th Street, Suite 195
Seattle, Washington 98103-9158

www.crpe.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A critical question in school choice programs is whether relatively low-income urban parents have the ability to gather the information they need to make good choices for their children. Choice is expanding, particularly in American cities. Without good information, the benefits generated from expanding public school choice (via No Child Left Behind, charter schools, vouchers, and other programs) may not reach their potential.

The limited evidence developed prior to this study on parent information is mixed. On the one hand, most parents (including higher-income parents) do not have extensive and fully accurate information on “hard data” about schools, and lower-income parents have less. On the other, more positive side, many parents are sometimes able to utilize shortcuts to get “enough” information, which is often “softer” and more contextual.

This research asked 800 low- to moderate-income parents in three cities (parents in Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and Denver with incomes below \$50,000) about how they gathered information and how well informed and satisfied they are about their school choice. Parents report engaging in considerable information-gathering activities and feel quite well informed. Most parents visit the schools, talk to teachers, school officials, other parents, and others in their social networks as they make their choice. An important statistical relationship between information gathering and satisfaction exists: the more information-gathering tasks in which parents engage, the more likely they are to report high levels of satisfaction with their choice.

Generally, the new evidence presented here supports the more optimistic perspective on parent information.

More specifically, the highlights of these findings include:

- Parents choose from a small set of realistic school options.
- Parents who engage in more information-gathering activities report higher levels of satisfaction with their choice.

- Children are more often involved in the choice process than past research has shown, and the involvement of a child correlates with higher satisfaction.
- Many parents have definite ideas about the attributes of a school that will work best for a particular child and seek to make the best match they can.
- The lowest-income parents (those below \$20,000 in income) engage in somewhat less information gathering, report somewhat lower levels of satisfaction, and believe they would benefit most from access to a paid school counselor or parent information center.
- Parents feel well informed about their choices.

While Milwaukee and Washington, D.C., have probably the most advanced and “mature” school-choice systems in the nation, parents were also surveyed in Denver, where a less extensive and less well-developed system of school choice exists. Although there are differences in parental reports in each of the three cities, frequently related to income, education levels, or race and ethnicity, they are differences at the margin.

From the survey, as well as from two parent focus groups held in Denver, it is clear that parents want to visit schools and talk to other parents, to gather firsthand the “soft” information about school safety, environment, inclusiveness, culture, and leadership. These indicators seem to be closely related to notions of school quality for these parents. They value written “hard data” about test scores and other measurable outcomes, but it is not the key component of their choices.

Even when all parents are free to choose, which will provide “bottom-up” accountability, local officials will still need to monitor school performance and apply “top-down” accountability based on outcomes like test scores, student proficiency levels, and graduation rates. When parents are compared by income, education levels, and race and ethnicity, many aspects of information gathering and satisfaction are quite similar. However responses from very low-income parents (those with incomes of less than \$20,000 annually) indicate some substantial differences. (The results for parents with a high school education or less are similar.) These parents have smaller and less useful social networks (from which to gather information), feel less well informed, and more often prefer assistance from a “school choice counselor” or parent information center. Nonetheless, a high proportion of the lowest-income parents report being well informed and satisfied.

The lowest-income parents can make well-informed school choices, but they need some help choosing schools confidently. Access to well-informed advisors, whether provided by local school districts or nonprofit organizations, is crucial.