SCHOOL CHOICE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A CASE STUDY ON PARENTAL DECISION FACTORS FOR HIGH SCHOOL SELECTION IN THE COVID-19 ERA

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ABSTRACT

School selection options place parents at the center of the school choice sector and create market forces that shape schools and impact students. High school selection in a school choice environment has ramifications for parents, students, school leaders, school marketers and policy makers. An understanding of the factors that parents use to make their high school decisions is important for all stakeholders in a high school choice environment as selection factors may shape the educational landscape of communities. Using a mixed-methods case study approach, this study sought to determine the primary marketable factors that parents in a mid-sized urban public school system use to make high school selections, the sources of information they rely on to make their decisions, how their perceptions of public schools may influence their selection, the types of choice perspectives they employ in selecting schools, and whether COVID-19 responses by the schools impacted their decisions. Parents in this study most often used the primary selection factors of social and specialized programs and athletics and academics and college and career readiness, followed by school safety, respectively. Parents most often used the perspectives of rational choice and social capital in their decision-making. Parents also focused greatly on their child's needs and desires in making their selections, tried to ensure the success of their child by selecting schools with preferred peer influences, and sought a school that "best fit" their child. Further research should be considered to determine the connections between student needs and desires and parent selection and the outcomes of their selections. Further research may also include expansion to private school and cyber and virtual schooling parents.

This dissertation is dedicated to my first and most important teachers

-my mom and dad-

and to all of those who taught, coached, counseled, and mentored me

along my path.

And to Emily, Kaelyn, and Bradon,

who inspire me anew each day.

"Climb the mountain not to plant your flag,
but to embrace the challenge,
enjoy the air and behold the view.
Climb it so you can see the world,
not so the world can see you."
– David McCullough Jr.

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of school choice predates the foundation of the United States. In their earliest form, schools were largely created independently by local churches, charity organizations and communities (Carpenter II & Kafer, 2012). In essence, the earliest schools were created in the populations they served by groups with a vested interest in the community itself. Larger communities would have been served by greater numbers of localized groups. School choice was a natural outcome of the system of the time and the scale of school choice options would have varied by the size of the city about as much as it does today. With the addition of "Common Schools," the first state funded school options and the precursor to the large public school system of the present, parents now had the added complexity of choosing neighborhoods in which to live and send their children to school along with selecting either public, private, or independent schools. The mid-twentieth century mindset shift to neoliberal approaches in education reforms using vouchers and charter schools, as a way of providing competition for students and funding further increased the complexity of the systems of school choice and added more options for parents to navigate in the selection of schooling for their children.

In the present, as the United States continues to wrangle with the rapidly-changing atmosphere around schooling and the shift from the Trump to the Biden administration. This occurs concurrently with the efforts to continue to unravel and understand the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the pandemic, national and local policies, and the changing political landscape are driving school choice decisions that affect both public and private school systems in a myriad of ways. The

shift to online instruction caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic has triggered an increase in independent school enrollment (Dee & Murphy, 2021). Public schools are facing staffing shortages, for teachers, bus drivers, and other school personnel (Cooper & Martinez Hickey, 2022). The number of public school teachers who are retiring or leaving the profession is increasing and colleges and universities are continuing to see declining enrollment in education majors. These factors may be placing additional strains on public schools, potentially creating an environment that could contribute to declining public school enrollment in favor of other options.

One of the chief tenets of school choice, most often attributed to the work of Milton Friedman, is the concept of the market and competition. The competition for students and resources is typically considered the primary driver for public and private schools as they create programming and curricula from which parents and students select their schools of choice. The COVID-19 Pandemic has increased pressure on schools to provide the pandemic safeguards, new instructional models that accommodate remote learning , and curriculum that can help at-home learners (Huck & Zhang, 2021). From a school choice and marketing perspective, this increased pressure amplifies the need to understand the dynamics of choice in a rapidly changing environment around K-12 education.

Understanding the implications of school choice programs is of great importance in shaping the debate points and approaches used by both advocates and opponents of school choice. As school choice continues to increase as an accessible option for parents, public opinion of school choice is likely to evolve and the ongoing debates over school choice and the options provided for school choice will also continue to evolve. Continual

educational research spanning the types of options available, the types of options used, the efficacy of school choice as a driver for school improvement, and of the growing number of options for schooling that are becoming available are all necessary for shaping education policy at the national and state level.

Potentially of equal importance, however, are the impacts of school choice and decision-making at the local level, in the far more numerous smaller communities that are spread out across the country. A more nuanced, contextualized, and micro-level understanding of school choice is necessary to fully understand the connections between policy, practice, and the effects on families in our schools. Studies at the local level have the ability to drive local decision-making and, in aggregate or meta-analyses, build a more robust and rich understanding of the factors that influence or shape the larger political context of school choice issues. It is at this level that the current study takes place. Because it is localized, this research aims to inform local practice and add to the nuanced discussions around school choice with the addition of research in a mid-sized city during the COVID-19 Pandemic with regard to high school selection.

Theoretical Background

Rationale

With recent shifts to a focus on college and/or career readiness, magnet programs, and certification programs, high schools have become a major battle ground in the school choice debate. School choice advocates argue that parents know what is best for their children and are the persons best suited to make educational decisions for their children (Morris & Perry, 2019; Potterton, 2019; Oberfield, 2020). School choice

opponents often state that school choice weakens public schools and creates inequity (Larabee, 2000; Serbulo, 2019). Parents often are not making decisions based on academics or school merits alone, but must also weave in the complexities of their positionality, while navigating complex and often opaque school choice systems (Ellison & Aloe, 2019). Using choice is often a way of fleeing public schools that tend to be older and less-well funded (Thompson Dorsey, & Roulhac 2019; Ellison & Aloe, 2019). As parents are the main school choice targets, better understanding their needs and motivations in making school choice decisions is of paramount importance in laying out the groundwork to help policy makers understand how rational choice theory plays out in school selection and school leaders improve their marketability for parents. A detailed understanding of the decision-making processes of parents in school choice situations is necessary from a policy-making standpoint, a school marketing standpoint, and for the purposes of school improvement, for both public and private schools. Of great importance to schools are the decision-making factors that parents use when choosing school options for their students. The present study focused on the decision-making factors that parents use when making determinations for high school programming for their students. The methodology used was a case study approach through a combination of surveys, artifact collection, and in-depth interviews. This approach was implemented to gather parental decision information about the six most often selected high school options in the City of Erie, Pennsylvania. The City of Erie is Pennsylvania's fourth largest city and has similar demographics to the state in terms of race and ethnicity percentages, but has a higher degree of poverty and lower overall education attainment than the state as a whole (worldpopulationreview.com). This context was chosen because

of the range of options it would provide, which include a college preparatory city magnet school, a comprehensive city high school, a large, traditional suburban high school, a high school charter network, and two parochial high school options. The current options in the City of Erie include all of the most typical high school options within a limited geographical distribution and without oversampling from one type of option or another.

Forms of School Choice

From the onset of public schooling in the United States, major forms of school choice included decisions between public and private schools in the vicinity of one's home. Because options for schools were, and are, heavily dependent on location, school choice options have traditionally been driven by the neighborhood in which a family resides or in their choice to move to another location and utilize the public school options available in that area. This form of school choice inherently limits equity, in that residential mobility is not a form of choice that residents with fewer means can take advantage of to the same degree that their counterparts with higher socioeconomic status are able. Simply stated, it is more expensive to live near the best schools (Burgess, Greaves, et al., 2011). Property taxes, the cost of rent or a mortgage, travel, and other cost of living expenses can limit the ability of less wealthy individuals to take advantage of residential mobility as a means of school choice.

In the current state, the types of school choice most often studied and debated are charter schools and vouchers for private schools. Vouchers are public funds used to cover a portion or all of the tuition to a private institution. They may also cover or be limited to

the provision of transportation. In some states, vouchers are available to all students, regardless of income, while in others, they are limited to students with economic need.

Charter schools are another prominent form of school choice. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are not constrained by typical school zone and district boundaries. Initially, they were promoted as a method to promote innovation and experimentation through varying curricular approaches or the emphasis of particular areas of study such as STEM or the arts, or on a particular population, such as English learners or special education students. They operate under the guide of an authorizer, which will vary by state. Authorizers may include an independent charter board, the local school district board, state education agencies, higher education institutions, a non-educational government agency, such as a mayor's office, or a non-profit organization (Prothero, 2018). Some state laws allow charter school selection only within districts; in other states, parents can choose charter schools outside of their district. Charter boundaries may be limited to areas within a city or open state-wide, which is most commonly true within the online charter school setting.

Within the public sector, other forms of school choice have also become available. Some examples include magnet program choices within schools or districts, magnet options that allow students to cross public school boundaries, cyber schools (private, public, and charter), and cyber options within schools and districts. While both mainstream and yet less common, magnet schools became a third major form of school choice in the late 1960s. These magnet school options may include specialized schools or programs for STEM education, the arts, humanities, sports-focused programming, career and technical education, college preparatory education, computer-based education,

and education abroad, among others. Some states allow students to attend nearby programs or schools in other districts, creating school choice options between districts, which may or may not involve tuition exchanges. Others allow for free inter and intra-district choice options which allow students to attend public schools outside their zoned district school. Another option used by some states is direct tuition payment, wherein parents may choose to pay the tuition for their child to attend a public school in a district in which they do not reside.

With more recent advances in technology having been thrust onto schools due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, remote learning using teleconferencing tools as a school choice option may be yet another option on the horizon. This varies from traditional cyber schooling in that classes are taught by teachers using teleconferencing platforms with live interaction rather than through an interactive program where the teacher may provide email, chat, or occasional teleconferencing support. As many schools are increasing their capabilities in this field and some parents and students may find success in this new form of schooling, this is a likely advance for both cyber schooling and traditional schooling.

A Brief History and Analysis of School Choice

Dating back to the colonial period, parents who chose to send their children to school had options for schooling consisting of a patchwork of autonomous schools scattered throughout the colonies and cities that were forming. The advent of public school options caused a shift in educational offerings and spurred most parents to take up public schooling options. Charity schooling and compulsory school laws expanded greatly in the states at about the time of the Revolutionary War, adding yet another

component to the range of school offerings. As the United States approached the Civil War era, states began to collect taxes for "Common Schools" and supported the creation of the first public school systems.

The early to mid 1900's set forth an upsurge in both creation of private schooling and battles over the shape of the public/private schooling landscape and parent school choice. Independent schools from Catholic, to non-sectarian Christian, Jewish, and non-sectarian private schools all increased dramatically over the first half of the 20th century (Carpenter II & Kafer, 2012).

The Introduction of Magnet Schools

The impacts of the events of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) prompted both the increase in voucher efforts and the Civil Rights Era idea of way of providing an option for voluntary desegregation through the formation of "magnet schools" which would attract students from across traditional attendance boundaries (Wang & Herman, 2017). Magnet schools could also offer an attractive alternative to private schooling. The first magnet school efforts were made in Virginia in the late 1960's (Kafer, 2012; Wang & Herman, 2017). Funded in part by the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA), which targeted efforts to desegregate schools, magnet schools continued to grow significantly through the 1970s. By the early 1980s, the targeted ESAA funds were cut by president Ronald Regan, but in the mid-1980s the formation of the Magnet School Assistance Program (MSAP) as a part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provided funds for magnet schools and reshaped them to become schools that provided a specialized curriculum to appeal to and attract students from across the

spectrum of diversity (Wang & Herman, 2017). The magnet school growth trend is yet continuing, although growth may be slowing somewhat, with 2014 estimates at around 2.5 million students.

The Voucher Revolution

Although the basic choice to homeschool, utilize private schooling, or public schooling options has been present in the United States for most of its history, the idea of school choice was widely popularized by the work of Milton Friedman in the 1970s and 1980s. Friedman is most often thought of as one of the "fathers" of school choice due to his works "The Role of Government in Education" (1955) and the "What's Wrong with our Schools" segment of the PBS documentary *Free to* Choose (1980) work on the neoliberal views of market theories and rational choice theory. Friedman made the argument that governments could act in a limited role to provide a basic standard of education by partially funding private schooling in ways that benefitted the students or families and not the schools, opening up access to private schooling to more of those in need (Carpenter II & Kafer, 2012). He titled the vehicle for these funds using the borrowed term "voucher," paving the path for the first voucher program in the United States, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (1989).

The 1980's also brought a number of federal initiative attempts and landmark court cases that shaped the political landscape of school choice. President Ronald Regan's fondness for voucher programs produced several voucher initiatives, with mixed success and also started the first federal legislation for tax credits for parents to put toward private education. His successor, president George H.W. Bush followed suit by

borrowing from the tax credit idea and rebranding it as a scholarship program for low SES students to use toward private education. These initiatives, along with Friedman's work, led to the formation of the Milwaukee Voucher Program, which has been marked as the first large voucher program and has generally shown positive results (Carpenter II & Kafer, 2012, Hoxby & Hoxby, 2013; Abdulkadiroğlu, Pathak, &Walters, 2018)

Since the advent of these programs, school choice options have expanded many times over and throughout the country. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are 25 voucher programs in 14 states as of 2017 and the number of charter schools has increased from approximately 2,000 in 2001 to 7,200 in 2017-18, with 44 states having approved charter school legislation (National Center for Education Statistics 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab4_7.asp). As a result of Friedman's work, the United States is currently in a state of relatively rapid expansion of school choice options with a future that may include increasing development.

The Rise of the Charter School

Linked with the windfall of 1980s court rulings, the Regan Administration's push for vouchers and tax credits, as well as "A Nation at Risk (1983)," the political stage was set for a shift in thinking around public education. University of Massachusetts professor Ray Budde's "Education by Charter" (1980), which argued for more teacher control over the design and curriculum of schooling, Chubb & Moe's *Politics, Markets & America's Schools* (1990) which argued against the bureaucratic institution of schooling and for the market-driven, parent-choice bound schooling model, and with the work of 1980s era American Federation of Teachers President, Al Shanker, laid the groundwork for the first

charter school program. The confluence of ideas from these thinkers evolved into first charter school, City Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1992. This original charter school concept was devised as an way for innovative teachers to create an "education laboratory" and had the backing of teachers unions. Based on the neoliberalist ideas of Milton Friedman, the charter school idea was developed as a way to reduce bureaucratic interference and free charter schools from regulation while providing pressure for innovation through competition and greater accountability through a revocable charter that would hinge on the success of the school.

The proliferation of charters continued rapidly throughout the 1990s, with 19 states passing charter school legislation by 1995, and nearly 80% of states having passed charter school legislation shortly after the end of the millennium. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barak Obama, and Donald Trump all provided supports for charter school legislation following the initial upstart in Minnesota. The continued supports added for charters through the legislation in *No Child Left Behind*, the *Every Student Succeeds Act, Race to the Top,* ensured the continual growth of charter schools, and as of 2015, there were over 7,000 charter schools in 43 states, with a total student population of just over 2 million students (Miron, 2017).

An offshoot of charter schools, the cyber charter school has recently added yet another option into the school choice marketplace. The first online charter school, K12 Inc. launched in 2000, and the second, Connections Academy followed suit in 2001, opening up opportunities throughout the U.S. and producing 30 states with fully online programs by 2014, reaching over 315,000 full time online students, and many more in blended learning environments (Clark & Barbour, 2015). Specifically in Pennsylvania,

the history of cyber charter schools can be traced to 2002. In the nearly twenty years since the previously mentioned ruling, Pennsylvania has accepted 14 charter schools governed by school districts and for-profit management organizations, enrolling over 35,000 students from 405 of the 500 districts in the Commonwealth (DeJarnatt, 2021).

Research Questions

As stated, the focus of this study is to better understand school choice markets and parental decision-making. Because parental choice is the primary driver for school markets, a thorough understanding of the factors that influence parental school choice should benefit four groups of stakeholders in the education landscape. First, policy makers need a comprehensive understanding of the factors that parents use to make decisions for their students. Understanding whether parents are primarily choosing schools based on elements such as test scores, academics, sports, or proximity will have important implications for developing policies meant to improve educational outcomes. Policy makers may need to know whether the primary parental selection factors are in agreement or work against current models for school improvement and how those dynamics may intersect. Second, school leaders need to understand the desires of parents. Whether they feel they should choose to participate in school markets or not, a growing portion of a school leader's job is to provide the kinds of school programs and services that parents are seeking. The mere option of local choice pushes school leaders to begin to develop competitive programs based on parent desires and work to improve their current schools. School leaders need tools to both understand growing trends and analyze their local context to make important decisions for their school systems. Third,

the small but growing school marketing community relies on understanding the desires of parents and how those desires will affect their school. Fourth, families will benefit when schools gain a better understanding of parent needs in order to better align programing to their desired goals for their children.

Researchers have developed four major social perspectives on school choice. These social perspectives: market theory or rational choice, social organization of schooling perspective, institutional perspective, and social organization of schooling perspective represent varying lenses by which school selection may occur (Berends, 2019). The four perspectives attempt to derive both who makes the school choice selection and the ways in which the decisions are made. Although this study is framed from the market theory or rational choice perspective, analysis of interview data is conducted openly so that the parent perspective may be studied through each of these lenses in an attempt to determine the dominant perspective used by parents in their selection of schools.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic adds one final element to the understanding school choice. In light of all of the changes that schools have had to make in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, an oversight to conduct this study without consideration of the effects of COVID-19 on the parent selection process. Therefore, special consideration and attention has been paid to understanding the effects of the pandemic, the response of the schools, and parental reactions in making decisions through the school selection process. In this study, the research questions I sought to provide insight for were:

1) What are the primary marketable factors that parents use to make high school selections for their children?

2) What sources of information do parents rely on to make school choice decisions as their children enter high school?
3) How do parents' perceptions of *public schools* influence their high school selection?
4) Which school choice perspectives are parents employing when selecting a local high school option for their student?
5) How have parents factored COVID-19 and local schools responses into their decision making?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Perspectives for School Choice

From its early roots, the idea of school choice as a means to improve educational outcomes has been at the crux of arguments both for and against choice. Commonly cited among researchers who investigate school choice are the ideas of autonomy, innovation, and accountability, and that these ideas will produce more desired outcomes in learning, curriculum, and instruction (Berends, 2019). Based on the work of Berends (2019), the rationale for school choice can be divided into four social perspectives which will be out lined below. Berends' social perspectives provide a frame of reference for the examination of school choice using models of the social structures and processes found within the context of education, in schools, classrooms, and within families. These perspectives are useful in thinking through the reasons for, and effects of, school choice on student outcomes.

The first social perspective is perhaps most commonly associated with school choice, market theory, or rational choice. First introduced by Milton Friedman, the market theory of school choice argues that schools can be improved through market competition, just as many industries have been. This perspective situates parents as well-informed, rational decision-makers who thoroughly research and select schools based on the interests and educational needs of their child (Chubb & Moe, 1990), for whom it is assumed, the parents are the best-positioned to make the decision (Berends, 2015). In this perspective, parents are rational, active decision-makers and seek out the best schools and

situations for their students. In doing so, they create market pressures that force schools to improve their services and drive innovation. As parents select schools with innovative programs and services, competition and consumer choice in the market create pressure for schools to create improvements in programming, curriculum, teaching, learning and school organization in order to continually attract students and parents and producing better outcomes for both (Betts, 2005). In the rational choice perspective, students, and consequently their parents, are the currency needed to both stay afloat and to build the business of schooling. Creating innovative solutions to educational problems and attracting students through desirable programming and school options gains a school more students, and therefore more revenue, increasing the school's ability to thrive. Conversely, failing schools and schools that are undesirable should attract fewer students and therefore garner less funding, eventually leading to pressure to innovate or close down.

The second social perspective is the institutional perspective. This perspective was developed over several decades by John Meyer and his colleagues (Berends, 2015) and contrasts rational choice in that it does not assume that parents know their children best or that they are rational and informed decision-makers. Instead, this perspective centers the institution of the schools as the primary drivers for school choice as they create similar rules, routines, programming, and other structures as well as providing steady guidance for parents, who generally lack the specific knowledge to navigate selection decisions and follow the routines outlined by the school or those around them. In this perspective, parents learn to look for schools that have all of the expected or desired traits of their institutionalized ideas of the "best schools." In doing so, districts

are forced to keep up with nearby districts when new innovations are taken up and parents continue to look for those elements as a key piece of the schooling institution.

Researchers in this perspective also point to the similarities between schools of all types as being a product of years of bureaucratization of school rules, customs, and rituals that produce "ritual classifications" and become hardened into the institution of schooling (Meyer & Rowan, 1978). Ritual classifications are adopted by nearby schools and, over time, pressures for schools to adopt similar ritual classifications produces isomorphism (Berends, 2019). In this perspective, parents are passive consumers of local options and leave most decision-making to the systems and institutions within the school. They defer to the expertise of administrators, teachers, coaches, and guidance counselors in matters of selection for programming options, coursework, and secondary educational advice and opportunities. They also defer to these entities in matters of school choice, following their guidance on the selection of honors programming, career and technical education opportunities, magnet school opportunities, and other secondary school choice options. Lastly, the institutional perspective posits that students in charter schools are unlikely to see contrastingly large, positive gains, since the isomorphisms that exist between traditional public and charter schools are both consistent and tightly bound. To some degree, this has been shown to be accurate in (Huerta, 2009), where he found that most charter schools match traditional public schools in their traditional structure related to class structures, staffing, and academics. The great majority of charter schools are unlikely to be significantly different than traditional public schools, and therefore will perform about the same (Berends, 2019). If charter school performance is about the same as public school performance, it may suggest that parents are typically looking for

something other than simple academic performance and that parents may be using idealized concepts of the school as an institution in making their selections.

The third perspective is the social organization of schooling perspective. This perspective situates classroom instruction and student/teacher and student/student relationships as the "nucleus" of the school. Proponents of this view see a rigorous curriculum, strong discipline, and a communal atmosphere as the drivers for school improvement (Bryk et al., 1993). These elements are both sought after and created through the choices of the teachers and school professionals. Again, in this perspective, parents tend to be more passive in their selection, and select different sources of information to make decisions, preferring to defer to positions of authority associated directly within the school community such as teachers and guidance counselors, but add the input from networks such as PTAs, booster organizations, school affiliated social organizations to the mix as a means to help guide them through decision-making. In this context, parents pay attention to the authority and expertise of the school, but also try to gain a greater understanding through formal and informal organizations within the school community in making educational decisions. The systems used for partitioning out students into regular, honors, and AP courses, for example are trusted by parents and students alike, and studies indicate that the trust is rewarded with better outcomes (Hallinan & Ellison, 2006). Parents begin to advocate more for their individual child's needs and desires, but partner with or acquire greater knowledge from both the people groups within the school and its surrounding social organizations in finalizing decisions.

Social organization of schooling perspective can be contrasted from the institutional perspective by the social structures and people used to gather information and make

decisions. Parents using the institutional perspective seek out formalized positions in authority and school communication formats for information, while comparing the information they receive to their own idealized version of a school. Parents using social organization of schooling perspectives seek out formal structures within schools and use both those in formal and informal positions of authority as sources of information, building their concept of the school out of the information they gain from these sources.

Lastly, the social capital perspective is situated around the school as a community. In this view, strong social relations help to form functional communities built on trusting relationships that are sometimes generational in nature. This social structure provides stability in the communities and allows for greater resources in producing goal attainment by students and parents. This perspective insists that choice increases social capital, and therefore produces better schooling and better outcomes for students. Researchers in this field indicate that social capital increases trust between parents and teachers (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Social capital has been linked to positive outcomes for non-academic student outcomes such as discipline, volunteering, safety, and engagement (Hallinan, 2010). In this perspective, parents make decisions based on community networks surrounding the school such as boosters, and PTA organizations, but go well beyond their knowledge and are informed by local informal networks associated with the community, both past and present. They also involve themselves in these organizations, actively seeking to be a part of the school community. Parents using social capital perspective are more likely to make their selections based upon the potential benefits of networks. This may include peer, parental, coaching, guidance, business, and post-secondary institutional networks, all which may provide advantage to the student. They are also social capital

more likely to rely on the histories given by neighbors, relatives, and their local or neighborhood social networks as they create a narrative about local schooling options as a way of building a contextual framework from which to make their school choice decisions.

This study is situated within the market theory/rational choice perspective. This perspective is most representative of the historical trends, political influences, research perspectives, and major milestones in school choice movements that have led to the current context. This lens is used to analyze parental decision-making and each school's ability to provide marketable programs and incentives for the parent-consumers to select. While rational choice is the lens through which I am conducting analysis, all four perspectives were identified and coded in the data analysis. The presence of indicators were further investigated to gain a sense as to the fit of rational choice as an appropriate model for parental decision-making related to high school selection.

Overarching Factors That May Influence School Choice

Research has shown that there are a number of large scale factors that may affect parent decisions in regard to school choice. From a rational choice perspective, parents would likely choose schools that have their desired characteristics or produce their desired results, increasing competition between schools and improving the school marketplace along the lines of the parent selection criteria. Student achievement may be one of the most often studied elements of school choice, and it is logical that student achievement would have an impact on school selection. Results from studies on the effects of school choice on achievement often vary, with many studies showing positive

results for some populations, and others showing negative results for the same groups, but choice has been shown to produce other benefits as well. In the aggregate, these studies likely show small positive achievement gains for students who participate in school choice options and also some small positive effects of choice for those students who remain in their home schools. Although these effects are small, they do tend to be consistent in the literature. On the whole, there are two additional primary benefits to school choice where the data are much more clear. First, school choice options tend to show positive results for measures of both student and parent satisfaction (Gill & Booker, 2015), (Oberfield, 2020). Last, market options tend to create greater incentive for improvement and innovation in schools. As academic achievement, parent and student satisfaction, and program improvement and innovation may each drive parent selection, the literature of each of these benefits is reviewed in the following sections.

Satisfaction

Parental satisfaction and school choice are inextricably linked. As parents are the primary "consumers" of school choice, satisfaction becomes a primary driver of change and innovation. In a large-scale, longitudinal study of parent satisfaction, Oberfield found that parents in charter schools exhibited higher rates of volunteering and parent satisfaction, even when controlling for observable differences and parent self-selection (2020). Hamlin & Cheng (2019) found a significant increase in parent satisfaction and volunteering among charter and private school parents and the act of choice through residence in district-run public schools increased satisfaction. Links to satisfaction and school choice may be contextually dependent, however, as a recent, similar study

conducted in Korea found no significant differences in parental satisfaction or participation and that satisfaction was most linked to higher parental education and income (Kim & Hwang, 2016).

It is possible that parent satisfaction of a school is linked to their child's school satisfaction. These factors are likely more closely related at the elementary level than at the high school level. For elementary students, Jacob & Lefgren (2007) used parent requests of teachers to determine that parents preferred teachers who best promoted student satisfaction and placed lower value on the teacher's ability to raise test scores for their children. Using data from the large-scale survey Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England (LSYPE) and school test scores, it was found that parental satisfaction with school choice is largely determined by test scores while student satisfaction is more closely tied to happiness and well-being (Gibbons & Silva, 2011). For high school parents, test scores may be a greater influence on school selection, but this is certainly not the only element factored into high school selection.

Furthering the argument for contextualization in understanding parent satisfaction is the work of Forman (2005), whose research on parent satisfaction posits that parents place a higher value on factors that are immediate to their child such as school safety, teachers and facilities than more distant factors such as curriculum, administrative capacity, and parental involvement. Consequently, student satisfaction is also a likely driver for parental school-choice decisions.

In a 2008 Nashville study of magnet school parents, Goldring and Phillips found that parent satisfaction varied by income distribution and that higher income parents were less satisfied with public schools than lower income parents, and that White parents in

Nashville were less satisfied with their public education options than minority populations (Goldring & Phillips, 2008). However, they could not extrapolate the data to provide reasons that parents may have chosen private or magnet schools, instead noting the difficulty in studying parent satisfaction as it relies on prior experience- 'Satisfaction is almost always relative. While surveys usually ask questions about satisfaction as if it were an absolute, people can only answer relative to what they know or expect' (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum 2000, 129). As satisfaction is likely relative, determining parent satisfaction based on demographic data may be a more difficult, yet still important, phenomenon to study than other factors. It should be noted, however, that multiple studies show links between parent satisfaction and parent volunteering and participation (Forman, 2005; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Jacob & Lefgren, 2007; Kim & Hwang, 2016; Oberfield, 2020). Parents may be actively seeking out opportunities for involvement in the schools they select, or may at least be looking for an environment where many parents are involved in the school.

Achievement

Studies to determine the effects of charter school choice on achievement have generally produced mixed results, with some studies showing students making large gains (Hoxby et al. 2009; Abdulkadiroglu et al. 2009), while many show mixed results or little effect (Gill & Booker 2007; Furgeson et al., 2012; Clark et al. 2015; Gleason, et al. 2010, Zimer et al., 2012) and yet others show negative effects (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; CREDO, 2019). In all, it is difficult to make any clear assertion as to the effectiveness of charter schools on the whole, but there are certainly some highly effective charters and a share of

ineffective charter schools and it is likely that the ability of some charters to break away from the institutional models of schooling to create some innovations that help students succeed (Berends, 2009) and these may be the sorts of choice options that parents are looking for.

Jeynes (2012) in a meta-analysis of 90 studies, found that religious schools showed overall positive effect sizes ranging from -0.07 to + 0.68, with just one study showing a negative effect. The range of effects for charter schools was much greater, -0.87 to +0.75 and 53% of studies showing negative effects. Adjusting for socioeconomic status showed that religious schools produced better behavior and achievement outcomes than TPS. Overall, charter schools were found to perform about the same as TPS.

Gill & Booker (2015) conducted a meta-analysis to determine the effects of voucher programs on students from Florida, Milwaukee and Chile. In each case they found either small positive or positive effects on math and reading scores, primarily through high stakes testing. The threat of vouchers may have a positive effect on nearby public schools receiving poor ratings. Similar studies have been completed in Sweden, which in the 1990s made national efforts to produce decentralization and choice in schools. These studies found small positive effects on achievement for most students (Bjorklund et al., 2005).

Although the evidence on school choice generally does not show large significant effects on achievement, exceptions are sometimes found for minority and low SES students who participate in voucher programs, particularly in large cities where schools are considered to be failing. Some studies have shown positive effects of vouchers for

African-American students (Howell & Peterson, 2002; Myers et al, 2002; Zimmer & Bettinger, 2015). Chingos & Peterson (2012) found positive effects on college attendance for African American students using vouchers in New York City. As the general effects of voucher programs are mixed and vary by state, city, and school, summarizing the effects of vouchers on achievement as a whole is tenuous. Studies from the Florida program by Chingos, Monarrez, and Kuehn (2019) seem to closely match results by Wolf, Witte, and Kisida (2019) showing small, significant increases in graduation rates and secondary educational attainment by voucher students compared to like peers in public schools.

The results of studies of the effects of charter schools on achievement are less clear than studies of voucher programs. Gleason, et al. (2010) assessed longitudinal student-level studies, representing 10 different states to determine the competitive effects of charter schools on students in nearby schools in math and reading. Five of ten studies showed some positive effects for students in schools near charter schools. Three showed no effect, one showed a negative effect, and one had mixed results. Other researchers have found similar results.

A series of studies ranging from 2009-2019 completed by Stanford University's Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) found a number of mixed results related to charter schools and effectiveness. Commonly, CREDO findings indicate that charter schools do about as well, on average, as their traditional public school (TPS) counterparts (Washington, 2019, St. Louis, 2019, Camden, 2019, Pennsylvania, 2019, South Carolina, 2019, California 2009, District of Columbia, 2009, North Carolina, 2009) with some notable exceptions. Charter Management

Organizations (CMOs) and Education Management Organizations (EMOs) also show mixed results, often by state. Charter schools may significantly outperform or underperform when compared to state averages of TPS schools (District of Columbia, 2009, 2019)

Like vouchers, charter schools may produce larger effects for students in TPS schools that are considered failing. Clark et al. found large, positive impacts in charter schools serving populations of more disadvantaged, lower achieving students. The study also concluded that charter schools serving higher achieving, more advantaged students had large, negative effects and that the overall effects of attending a charter school were small and negative, although not statistically significant (2015).

Graduation rates as a result of charter school choice have also . Booker et al. (2011) found that charter school students in Chicago and Florida showed graduated at rates 7-15% higher than TPS students and were 8-10 percentage points more likely to attend college. Furgeson et al. (2012) found that some CMOs significantly increased both graduation rates and college attendance. Deming et al. (2014) found that charter school choosers showed significant gains in grades, college-preparatory courses, and graduation rates, and a 14%increase in the likelihood of completing a college degree, but these effects could only be seen with girls and were most significant for students leaving low quality neighborhood TPS. No difference could be measured between the charters and high quality neighborhood TPS. They also noted that because peer effects could not be extrapolated, they may have some explanatory power over these results.

A unique feature of charter schools, the mandatory closure of ineffective schools, has been shown to have significant positive effects on student achievement in math and

reading for students who exited failing schools prior to their closure. Carlson & Lavertu (2015) studied charter schools in Ohio after the implementation of a mandatory school closure law took effect. They found that in the poorly performing schools, where students typically scored about one standard deviation below the norm, students who exited and attended higher performing schools made gains of 0.2- 0.3 standard deviations in reading and math up to three years after exiting. Contrary to market theories, states such as Ohio that limit parent choice to charter schools that show higher achievement by closing down failing charters may be facilitating school improvement through artificial market corrections, especially if parents are selecting those schools for factors other than achievement.

Market Influences

Advocates of school choice argue that market-based approaches, such as charter schools and vouchers, are best suited to drive school improvement (Potterton, 2019), and cite rational choice theory as their evidence. It is based on the belief that humans make rational decisions about their own self-interests, and as a group, their collective decisions have positive benefits on the economy as a whole. When this logic is applied to school choice, the reasoning is that parents will make decisions about the best schools for their children to attend, and the market pressures created by the parent selection processes will put pressure on schools to improve. This is one of the primary arguments made for school choice to this day (Serbulo, 2019). At the micro level, parents have an important role in school choice as they can have a significant impact on school network structures (Reinoso, 2008).

VanderHoff (2008) analyzed achievement and waitlist sizes to create a parent valuation models for New Jersey charters and found that a 10% increase in achievement scores on state testing led to a 60-100% increase in the number of students on the school waitlist. Schools stressing academic excellence on websites and in mission statements had waitlists that were about 75% larger than comparable schools that did not emphasize academic excellence. These findings support the idea that parents value academic achievement and the concept that markets and choice can improve outcomes for students if parents are selecting better schools for their students.

Indeed, several studies have found that competition has a positive effect on student achievement, but these effects tend to be small and positive (Jabbar, et al., 2017). Studies have shown that markets and competition can have a positive effect on TPS in the local vicinity. Studies of Texas charter schools by Booker et al. (2004) and Hanushek et al. (2007) showed that competition from charter schools led to increased test scores for students in TPS. Similarly, in a study of New York City Schools, Cordes (2017) completed a large-scale ITT analysis of students in grades 3-5 and the spillover effects of charter schools on traditional public schools within a one-mile radius. This study again showed small positive effects on English Language Arts scores and math scores, as well as small positive effects for grade retention and attendance. Hoxby (2008) found increased scores for students in TPS in a more nationally representative sample. Hoxby (2013) studied the Milwaukee vouchers and charter programs in Michigan and Arizona, finding that the competition from both voucher programs and charter programs increased achievement and productivity in TPS in those areas. The increase in productivity was attributed to changes in programming and improvements in systems.

Markets and competition have also been found to improve charter school costs and efficiency, as well as the efficiency of surrounding schools (Burger & Bifulco, 2019). Additional effects for slightly increased attendance rates (Cordes, 2017) and a reduction in retention (Cordes, 2017; Cohodes & Parham, 2021). There is some evidence from Florida that market pressures created by charter schools can lead to shifting instructional practices to improve test scores in nearby TPS (Rouse et al., 2013). Charter pressures may also increase test scores, college enrollments, and decrease risky behaviors for some populations of urban youth (Cohodes & Parham, 2021).

In contrast to the results from charter school analyses, Jabbar et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of school choice studies and found that although the results were inconsistent, competition from charter schools did not show improvements in achievement of TPS, however competition from voucher programs in the study were showed significant impacts on student achievement in TPS. They found their analysis of the effects of voucher competition on TPS yields similar results to other studies (Cowen, 2008; Greene, 2001; Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999; Howell, Wolf, Campbell, & Peterson, 2002; Rouse, 1998; Wolf et al., 2013) (23).

Competition for schools and students may also increase parent and student effort, align parents with schools based on philosophy, and provide benefits to both parent and student communities. Private and charter school parents tend to volunteer at higher rates (Goldring et al., 2008; Oberfield, 2020) which was connected to higher parent satisfaction (Oberfield, 2020). Competition for schools may increase student participation in extra-curricular activities and emphasize a greater focus on academics (Wu, 2011; Holmes Erickson, 2018). Choice may facilitate philosophical alignments,

aiding the match between parents/students values and priorities at home and those of the school, which in turn may have effects on engagement and or achievement Cheng, Trivitt, & Wolf, 2016; DeAngelis & Holmes Erickson, 2018).

School Level Factors That School Choice Parents May Value

An array of factors may prove to influence positive achievement affects seen in some charter school studies and add to their appeal to parents. Because charter schools have greater autonomy over their form and function, noted differences in successful charter schools have been found in a number of studies, potentially unlocking some of the key factors in their gains over traditional public schools. Berends (2009) found five characteristics (longer school days, a schoolwide focus on achievement, school behavioral policies, coaching and teacher feedback, data-based decision-making) that may be causal in the success of some charter schools or CMOs. Longer school days, a schoolwide focus on achievement, and school behavioral practices may be attractive to parents looking to more tightly manage the type of school their child attends. It is less likely that parents are selecting schools based on coaching and teacher feedback, or data-based decision-making, as these would likely not be as noticeable to parents unless advertised by the school.

Related to parent preferences and philosophical matching, the concept of peer choice sets may also benefit chooser students and families. Parents may choose schools based on peer selection as a way of attempting to improve outcomes for their child (Bernal, 2005; Lemhoff et al., 2020; Booker, Zimmer & Buddin, 2005; O'Shaughnessy, 2007), or because they want to influence the child's social group through private school

selection (Prichard & Swezey, 2016). Often driven by admissions standards in private schools, peer effects combined with admissions standards can significantly impact student body characteristics and achievement (Parker et al., 2007; Schneider et al., 2012). In fact, peer choice sets and peer selection may have a significant impact on private school test scores and student outcomes, as demonstrated by studying peer choice itself (Booker, Zimmer & Buddin, 2005, O'Shaughnessy, 2007) and by studying the effect of removing peer selection as an outcome (Somers, McEwan & Willms, 2004; PISA in Focus, 2011; Deming et al., 2014; Elder & Jespen, 2014; Sakellariou, 2017). Studies have also shown that some peer selection may be responsible for some achievement effects of charter schools (Hoxby, 2001; Carlson et al., 2016) and magnet schools (Goldring & Hausman, 1999).

Geographical choice for neighborhood schooling often promotes social adhesion and community (Billingham, 2015); choosers of private schooling note similar ties to community (Jeynes, 2012), gain social capital as a result of private schooling (Jeynes, 2012; Coleman, 1987; Colmean, 1988), and benefit from parental support groups (Ajuwon & Bradshaw, 2009). Lastly, school choice, especially private school choice, may improve parent perceptions of empowerment in their child's education (Hamlin & Cheng, 2020).

Critiques of the Effects of School Choice

Critiques against school choice come in several forms. Some studies indicate that school choice may negatively affect achievement of both choosers and TPS students. Researchers often state that school choice weakens public schools and creates inequity,

(Larabee, 2000; Serbulo, 2019). The weakening of public schools can be from "cream skimming" in the case of both private school vouchers and magnet and charter schools whose purpose is to target high performing students, or by pulling resources from public schools to fund charter schools. In addition, arguments are made that school choice initiatives may increase segregation by race and ethnicity or by socioeconomic status (Altrichter, et al. 2011; Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Stein, 2015; Haughen, 2019). The literature on the negative effects of school choice are expounded upon in the following sections.

Achievement

One of the most significant findings related to charter schools and achievement is consistent, negative effects of cyber charter schools on student achievement. Evidence of the negative effects of cyber charter schools can be found in the CREDO studies (South Carolina, 2019; Pennsylvania, 2019; Ohio, 2019; Idaho, 2019;) as well as in Bifulco & Ladd (2007). Mann, et. al, (2018) noted that through the CREDO studies, cyber charter students exhibited a -0.14-standard deviation in reading gains and -0.23 standard deviation learning gain in mathematics compared to "virtual twins" enrolled in brick-and-mortar schools, which equated to a roughly 90-day learning difference in reading and 180-day difference in mathematics. Additionally, the National Education Policy Center in that virtual schools have graduation rates over 30% lower than the national average (Molnar, 2019). These data are both significant and concerning, especially in the current pandemic where large numbers of parents are selecting remote learning and cyber options

(Bacher-Hicks et al., 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Oster et. al, 2021; Sass & Goldring, 2021).

Parents making selections about brick and mortar charter schools may have much more to try to decipher in making decisions based on school performance. Brick and mortar charters do not suffer from the same level of poor performance as cyber charter schools, however, there are plenty of studies that show that brick and mortar charter schools may have little effect on achievement or even negative effects on achievement. Clark et al., (2015) against. They found that there was little difference between students who were admitted to charter schools through lottery systems and students from the same applicant pool who were not selected by lottery. While low SES students who gained charter entry through lottery generally did better, high SES students from the same selection pool generally did more poorly, and the overall effects were slightly negative. Gleason et al. (2010) found that charter and public schools performed at about the same level. Bifulco & Ladd (2007) found significant negative effects on the achievement of Black students and test score gaps that had increased by nearly 40% more for Black students than for White students.

As a decrease in achievement and transiency or long-distance residential mobility are often connected (Cordes, Schwarts & Steifel, 2019), choice options may negatively impact students who change schools frequently. By increasing barrier-free school choice options, charter schools may increase transfers, transiency, and have an indirect negative effect on achievement. The link between school transfers and negative achievement outcomes may be stronger with charter schools and cyber charter schools. Mann et. al. (2018) indicated that only 54.8% of charter school students stayed enrolled in their cyber

charter through the four years of his study. This level of transiency may have a significant effect on learning outcomes for students as they move in and out of school choice options.

Large scale studies of voucher programs have generally shown only small positive or small negative effects (Hsieh & Urquiola, 2006). A recent study of the Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP) found that students participating in this voucher program suffered from decreases in scores on Louisiana state achievement tests (Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, & Walters, 2018). In this study, students participating in the LSP voucher program showed lower math scores by 0.41 standard deviations (σ), reading scores by 0.08σ, science by 0.26σ, and social studies by 0.33σ, with more significant effects in younger students.

Determining whether private school choice provides an advantage may hinge upon the effectiveness of private schools themselves. Sakellariou (2017) studied PISA mathematics data from 40 countries and found that accounting for peer effects eliminates any private school advantage on PISA Mathematics scoring for OECD, Middle Eastern ad Latin American countries and that accounting for selection is necessary in making comparisons between public and private or independent schools. Similarly, Elder and Jespen (2014) studied the effects of elementary Catholic schools on mathematics scores and found appreciable negative effects on student achievement.

Segregation

School choice critics often claim that school choice increases segregation and that the primary effects occur by race, class, and achievement (Mickelson, Bottia, &

Southworth, 2008). Söderström, & Roope (2010) found that charter schools increase segregation by ability and by family background. One of the primary mechanisms that produces segregation is schools competing for privileged students while finding ways to discourage the recruitment of disadvantaged and minority students due to their "unattractiveness" (Potterton, 2019; Sapparito, 2003). Given these circumstances, public schools have been left with little choice but to find ways to compete with private and charter schools (Haugen, 2019). In this light, determining the kinds of decision-making processes that parents use to make decisions about their children's schooling becomes an important piece of knowledge for traditional public, charter and private schools. Research may indicate that parents often are not making decisions based on academics or school merits, but are often running from public schools (Thompson Dorsey, & Roulhac 2019; Ellison & Aloe, 2019).

Further, some argue that school choice has furthered segregation and limited opportunities for students with fewer means or students of color and may support White supremacist ideologies (Thompson-Dorsey & Roulhac, 2019). Kotok et al. (2017) found that on average, charter school moves created greater segregation, with White students generally moving to more affluent schools, and Latino and Black students moving to schools with greater minority presence, although all groups tended to move to areas of less poverty on the whole.

Funding

The consideration as to whether education should be a public good, providing economies of scale that confer equitable benefits, equality of opportunity and economics,

and provide for a cohesive society, or a product for private consumption like bread or cars (Pendola et al., 2021) places educational funding directly at the fulcrum of the school choice debate. As education is not free, funding of school choice places parents in a position to consume a product rather than to participate in the use of a public good, and produces a zero-sum effect on the collective benefits of public education. In most instances, voucher programs are not thought of as negatively affecting public education. It stands to reason though, that in most states, there is a limited supply of revenue for education budgets, and monies devoted to vouchers and charters are funds that are pulled away from traditional public schools. Multiple states have appropriated additional funds for vouchers since the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic, including Florida, West Virginia, New Hampshire, Missouri, South Dakota, and Arkansas (Blad, 2021).

Many state education systems typically pit traditional public schools and charter schools in competition with one another for students. As funding is tied to the student, and often will travel with the student from public schools to charter schools, states that use this method can see negative financial effects on their traditional public schools as students move into the charter system. Depending on the enrollment change and circumstances, this exodus of students and educational dollars can place significant financial stress on traditional public school districts, inclusive of mid-sized urban and rural districts in North Carolina (Ladd & Singleton, 2020; Bruno, 2019), and larger urban districts in Buffalo, New York and New York City (Bifulco & Reback, 2014). Studies have also shown that flat funding for charter schools may lead to underserving of disadvantaged populations (Singleton, 2019). The mechanism for these financial strains is likely related directly to the competition model, as schools with fewer resources must

still compete with schools with greater resources on multiple dimensions (including academics, athletics, extra-curricular programming, the arts, etc.) and may be forced to divert funds away from the classroom to non-academic purposes to attract families (Harris & Larson, 2015).

Parental Decision Factors for School Choice- Parental Characteristics

The closest and most connected group to students, their parents, are at the heart of the school choice movement. The factors that drive their decisions have been widely studied and those factors may be evolving alongside school choice options. access to new programs and technologies in both urban and rural areas expand. As school choice has become a fixture in the education landscape and will not be disappearing anytime soon, developing a better understanding of the decision-making processes parents use to select schools for their children is beneficial to all public, private, charter and magnet schools. In this section, literature on the drivers of parent decision-making will be further explored.

Affluence, Influence, and the Connection to Choice

Parental affluence plays a role in school selection processes. From the beginnings of schooling, the most affluent parents have always had options for schooling, ranging from private tutors, to independent schools, to boarding schools. As time progressed, parents who were affluent, but less so, had the options of private schooling through Catholic and Lutheran schools (Parker, Cook & Pettijohn, 2007). Affluent parents are more likely to be highly involved in the school selection process and may be guiding

their children to school and career choices that reflect their affluent backgrounds. In the United States, higher levels of parental education, especially of the mother are connected to a more "passionate" search for resources for their children, including an education that is suited directly to the individual skills and competencies of their children (Poikolainen, 2012). In a comparison study between Germany and the United States, the education level and socioeconomic status of parents has been shown to be strongly correlated with high school program tracking and career choice (Schnabel et. al, 2002). These studies, as well as the Coleman (1987, 1988) studies on socioeconomic status and social capital suggest that more affluent parents spend more time and resources to research and make decisions for their children's school and that socioeconomic status remains a strong indicator of achievement and high school program selection.

A St. Louis study of parental choice for magnet schools found that both more affluent and White parents were much more likely to choose magnet schools than other types of schools and that minority parents are nearly as likely to be non-choosers as they are to choose magnet schools (Goldring & Hausman, 1999). In this study, lower income parents were far less likely to take advantage of magnet school choice options, creating a creaming effect in the magnet schools.

Affluence and the Connection to Gentrification

The composition of neighborhoods and affluence change the dynamics of parent selection in school choice matters. As Botterman (2019) notes, urban environments tend to show a very strong connection between affluence and high performing, well-funded schools. This fact leads to geographic separation of residence between affluent and less

affluent populations and creates segregation and gentrification as a function of affluence and geography. In a Boston study that reviewed the shift from a fixed busing program to school choice programs, proximity to home was a consistent theme in gentrified communities of affluence. These communities sought the transformation of neighborhood schools to serve as an amenity that helped to bolster community cohesion and contributed to the atmosphere that they were trying to cultivate. This shift toward neighborhood-based schools from a bussing program would lead to a significant increase of White population in gentrified neighborhoods where busing programs existed (Billingham, 2015). In Whiter neighborhoods with higher socioeconomic levels, parents tend to choose schools in ways to create better conditions within the schools for their children. They select neighborhood schools and ensure high quality options exist for their children. This often leads to greater segregation.

School Characteristics & Satisfaction

Dissatisfaction with public schools is commonly sighted as a primary reason that parents participate in school choice (Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Hamlin & Cheng, 2020). Some predictors of satisfaction are common to public, private, and charter schools and include school communication, parental involvement, academic achievement, curriculum, school environment, school safety, staff quality and transportation (Bond and King, 2003; Gibbons & Sylva, 2011; Forman, 2005; Friedman, Bobrowski & Geraci, 2005; Oberfield; 2020). Friedman, Bobrowski & Markow (2006) found that parent satisfaction with schools could be predicted by the degree of involvement provided by teachers, the adequacy of school resources, effective budget management, and accurate

delivery of information about students. Some of the more well- researched factors that determine parent choice are outlined in the following sections.

Proximity and Geography

The influence of geography on parent choice is related to distance from home to school and the geographical features of the school-related land mass, including the composition and affluence of neighborhoods (Botterman, 2019). Geography is a significant factor in school choice in that neighborhood schools can be a draw or a deterrent for parents and travel to and from school and transportation are a significant driver of decisions for many parents. The influence of geography is affected by the local market and the beliefs parents hold about their neighborhood and schools, but the distance to a high quality school may create barriers that outweigh the preference for charter or magnet schools in low SES families (Bell, 2009). Local choice markets may determine much about whether parents select their neighborhood public schools or local charters. If the local market holds several options in close proximity, geography may not be a factor. Low SES families in urban settings often have more choices (Burgess et al., 2011), but may not have as many high quality choices (Meyer & Kučerova, 2016; Burges et al., 2019; Butler & Hamnettô, 2010; Botterman, 2019). If there are fewer options, geography may be a larger factor in the decision-making process. This is especially prevalent in low SES families, and although they might still actively make school selections for their students, these options are often limited to their geographic location and may offer lower quality choice sets such as failing charter schools or cyber schooling (Burges et al., 2011). Conversely, those further from the city centers, which tend to be

more affluent and have higher quality schools, usually have fewer choice options. Related to these ideas is the research on minority satisfaction with school choice that shows minority parents are often less satisfied with their children's schools than non-minority parents (Friedman et. al., 2006). Parents in upper income brackets often have the ability to nullify transportation as a barrier because of working hours that are flexible, better access to cars and transportation options, and the ability of one or more parents to transport students to school, thus making distance to travel a larger factor for low SES families (Bell, 2019).

Market choices for schools are generally better for parents of more affluent students than for lower SES parents of students. In areas where there is a high potential for competition between schools, affluent parents generally have choices of schools with greater advantages than students from low SES backgrounds. In urban and highly rural areas, where schools tend to have fewer resources and more issues related to poverty, affluence and opportunity are often inversely related.

Safety

Parents have long used choice as a means of finding schools in which they feel their student will feel or be more safe. There is some research indicating that parents often are not making decisions based on academics or school merits, but are often running from public schools based on safety concerns or lack of resources (Thompson, Dorsey, & Roulhac, 2019; Ellison & Aloe, 2019). Parents who believe their neighborhoods are unsafe may choose to use local choice options and bussing to send their students to schools outside of their local neighborhood (Ellison & Aloe, 2019). The growth of

charter schools has been attributed largely to safety concerns in traditional public schools (Hamlin & Li, 2020).

Recent research holds safety as a top priority in parent school selection (Catt & Rhineshmith, 2016; Kelly & Scafidi, 2013; Schneider et al., 2000). Even in situations where more extracurricular activities are offered and public schools provide more opportunities for involvement, parents chose safety in private schools over extracurricular opportunities in public schools 51% to 1% (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013). Aspects of social class, ethnicity, and geography are intertwined with ideas of both school and neighborhood safety. Neighborhoods and schools can become "demonized" or "idealized" by members of a community (Gabay-Egozi, 2016). As safety becomes an issue for these demonized localities, moral panic may drive families with means and opportunities out of city schools for other options that appear to be safer (Yoon, 2014). Lastly, because of neighborhood differences, safety considerations may differ between lower and higher SES parents (Schneider, et. al. 2000; Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016).

Racial Composition of Schools

Racial composition's influence on school selection is difficult to ascertain. Simple surveys often will not produce reliable results related to race with all but the most cavalier respondents. For these studies, hypothetical situations are often used. In Billingham & Hunt (2016) participants were given hypothetical choices to determine the school of choice for their children. Responses were analyzed to determine the degree to which composition of the student body determined parental decisions. White parents

tended to select schools with lower proportions of African American students, and they tended to avoid schools with Black majorities in the student body. The likelihood that White parents will choose a hypothetical school for their children dropped significantly as the proportion of Black students in the student body increased (Billingham & Hunt, 2016), marking racial composition as a significant factor in the selection process for parents.

In a historical study of the desegregation efforts in Portland, Serbulo (2019) found that desegregation policies in the district from the 1970s increased the integration of Black and White students significantly. Over the next forty years, the districts policies evolved into controlled choice, allowing parents to select schools for their children, but giving district control over finalizing the balance of race and ability groupings, and further became a neoliberal model of school choice, allowing markets to drive decisions. Over this same period of time, Portland schools became much more segregated. Serbulo found that using a dissimilarity index, when integration became voluntary, the population of schools became more segregated, and remained consistently segregated through the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s despite the fact the that the dissimilarity index for the City of Portland as a whole was falling dramatically, indicating lower segregation. By allowing in-mover parents to use school choice as a means to bypass neighborhood schooling, Serbulo argues that parents could make a racially exclusionary choice, reinforcing segregation, and it would simply feel like "good parenting."

Adding to the deeper understanding of the segregation phenomenon, Ellison and Aloe (2019) conducted a qualitative synthesis of five research studies of working class parents of color and their lived experiences in making school choice decisions. Finding

that for a number of reasons, working class parents of color may not have the options of school choice offered to their higher SES peers, these families are often left in neighborhoods vacated by more affluent, and often white, peers. This "White flight" process increases segregation and concentrates both poverty and race in these school environments. They summarize the findings as:

> Participants in the studies reviewed for this synthesis are being pushed from schools they perceive to be failing institutions plagued by issues of disorder and unsafety, poor material conditions and low academic achievement, and pathologizing racial discourses. Parents describe their assigned public schools as overcrowded, "rowdy" places in which students are "running in the halls" and in which violence and the presence of police are the norm….However, parents also expressed their belief that it was not just that teachers could not help their children but that "they wouldn't help." The predominantly White teachers working in urban public schools are perceived to be either new teachers getting their "feet wet" before they pursue opportunities at wealthier suburban schools or older, burned-out teachers who are "just there to get a paycheck (p.1148)."

These perspectives influence parental outlook on their school options and further the plight of those who wish to provide better schooling options for their children. Not feeling a sense of trust in the staff providing learning opportunities to their children is detrimental to the system, and as such, racial composition becomes an issue of focus for parents.

Racial sorting is not always driven by White flight. As explored in the section regarding segregation, there is a common sorting of race by Black parents choosing charter schools with higher populations of Black students. Stein (2015), Kotok et al., (2017), and Bifulco & Ladd (2007) all found that Black families making charter school selection showed some preferences for schools with higher populations of Black students.

In the case of Kotok et al. (2017), this observation also held for Latino families. Racial preferences are not the only sorting mechanism.

This suggests that parental choices are to some degree dependent on race and ethnicity in ways that are further reaching than simply Black and White populations and the segregative element of choice may be a characteristic of choice. Sorting mechanisms based on race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status have been seen in the U.S., England (Burgess et al., 2011; 2019; Gibbons & O'Silva, 2011), South Africa (Blake & Mestry, 2019), Norway (Haugen, 2019), China (Wu, 2011), Malaysia (Lee, Ting, & Lo, 2017), South Korea (Kim & Hwang, 2014), Sweden (Hennderdal, et al., 2018), The Netherlands (Boterman, 2019), Canada (Yoon, 2016), Argentina (Sakellariou, 2017) among others. The fact that racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic separations take place in various context across the U.S. and throughout the world significantly contributes to the idea of the "other" as a primary sorting mechanism.

Other Factors

Research indicates that there are a number of other factors that parents use while making school choice selections. Among these are financial impacts, enrollment religion, sports, values, "good schools," facilities, and specialized programs. After Hurricane Katrina, the City of New Orleans schools implemented a program that removed school boundaries and allowed parents to choose any public school in the city for their child. An app was used to rank-choice parent's preferred schools for their children, along with options available at those schools, providing an opportunity to study revealed preferences rather than stated preferences. Only 14% of families chose their neighborhood school,

and the lowest income families showed weaker preferences for academic outcomes while indirect costs associated with schooling and extracurricular activities were at least as important as academic quality (Harris & Larsen, 2015). Some researchers also found that parents choose schools because of dissatisfaction with other options (Goldring & Hausman, 1999) and dissatisfaction itself has long been recognized as a motivating factor in making change (Cady et al., 2014).

In a Missouri study, money and quality of education are also important factors (Ajuwon & Bradshaw, 2009). 18.1% of surveyed families in Missouri listed money (cost), quality of education as the primary reason for their school choice outpacing religion (12.9%). 11.2% cited parent control, and 6.9% selected better life experiences and socialization. Similarly, a 2012 study in Ohio sought to understand parent religiosity as a factor in determining school choice. The study compared parents who chose to pay private religious school tuition and those who used vouchers and found that although parent religiosity may be a small factor in school choice, there was no statistically significant difference between the groups (Reichard, 2012).

The Influence of Social Networks

Social networks play a role at both ends of the economic spectrum. Affluent parents in suburban areas relied on social networks to find out about and apply to private, magnet, and charter schools, while independently researching school quality, curriculum, instruction and other factors. (Wu, 2011; Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016). In some instances, social networks and status are a factor in admissions for schooling (Wu, 2011). Goldring & Phillips (2008) found that parents who were more affluent tended to have

more interpersonal social networks that they relied upon in choosing a private school and were more likely to invest time at home investigating and talking to their children about school choice decisions. Middle class families will often use their social networks to find out about schools, but may be less able to spend the time thoroughly researching schools for their children (Potterton, 2019). They may also rely more heavily on "grapevine information" or "hot knowledge" from their social groups, while often making decisions based on a composite of their social investigations and relying less on "researching" school options (Kosunen & Rivière, 2018; Reinoso, 2012). Although they also used social networks, low SES parents were often limited to knowledge about their neighborhood schools and, when combined with local geography and transportation concerns, often defaulted to proximity as a primary selection criterion. Social networks may play a unique role in elementary schools, as elementary schools are often tools used to build social networks for both parents and students and may also provide parents with social capital (Kosunen & Rivière, 2018).

COVID-19 as a Parent Choice Factor

From the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic in January of 2020, schools have been placed in the center of a storm of difficult decisions, affecting students, parents, teachers, and staff. Decisions about closing schools, mask mandates, virtualized instruction, adjusted schedules, and the availability or cancellation of extracurricular activities have plagued school districts and, for many students, altered the concept of schooling and the opportunities that schooling provided. The confluence of these decisions may affect the outlook on school for both student and parents, potentially producing a sizeable impact

on the way that parents will make school choice selections for their children (Musaddiq et al., 2021; Dee & Murphy, 2021)

Research on the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on K-12 schooling to date have shown three key trends. First, students who spent more time in virtualized instruction show learning loss and have fallen behind their peers academically, which may be a motivating factor for some parents to select a new school that did not rely on virtualized instruction, such as private schools (Dee & Murphy, 2021). Second, students who are experiencing learning loss, lack of access to full-time in-person instruction, and lower achievement tend to be urban, from a low SES background, and from minority populations (Huck & Zang, 2021; Sass & Goldring 2021), all which largely describe the population of this study. Third, as it has been shown that parents make private school choice selections largely based upon academics and graduation (Morris & Perry, 2019) it would be expected that the number of parents taking part in school choice would increase, and there is some evidence to support that perspective. There are early data that suggest that parents are exercising school choice at a higher rate in the COVID-19 Era, and there is speculation and early research that shows parents have made active school selections at increased rates during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Answers to questions about changing enrollment due to the COVID-19 Pandemic will continue to be researched for several more years. Differences in public, charter, and private schooling trends related to COVID-19 are still playing out. Current data suggest an overall increasing exit of 3% on average from traditional public schools to private and charter schools (Butcher & Burke, 2021; Dee & Murphy, 2021; NCES, 2021). The rate of declining enrollment for the 2020-21 school year ranges from 5% in Mississippi and

Vermont to less than 1% in Utah, South Dakota, and the District of Columbia with more than half of states posting a 3% decrease (NCES, 2021). Dee & Murphy (2021) studied enrollments patterns in Massachusetts and found that during the pandemic, enrollments in traditional districts declined, while enrollments in charter, vocational, and virtual districts or options all increased. The declines in enrollment were found to be significantly larger in districts with greater numbers of White and disadvantaged students. Overall public school enrollment dropped by 4.5%, while charter school enrollment increased by 2.7% and virtual learning enrollments increased by 21.5% when comparing SY 2019-2020 to SY 2020-2021. They note that these data may be important, as Massachusetts mirrors much of the nation on average from demographic standpoint. No data were available on private enrollment at the time.

A second study on enrollment trends in Michigan, completed by Musaddiq et al. (2021) utilized longitudinal student-level administrative data and compared it to nationally representative data from the Census Household Pulse Survey to determine ways in which K-12 school enrollments had shifted during the pandemic. Significantly, they found that kindergarten enrollment fell by 10 percent and overall K-12 enrollment fell by 3 percent. The data varied widely by both socioeconomic status and race with low SES (-11.3%) and Black (-19.0%) families enrolling in Kindergarten at far lower rates than their non-poor (-7.8%) or White (-10.1%) peers. They note that similar trends were found in a Virginia study (Bassok & Shapiro, 2021). They also found that homeschooling rates increased the most in areas where in-person schooling was mandated on both a state and national level and that homeschooling accounted for the majority of enrollment shifts in Michigan, followed by movement to private schools.

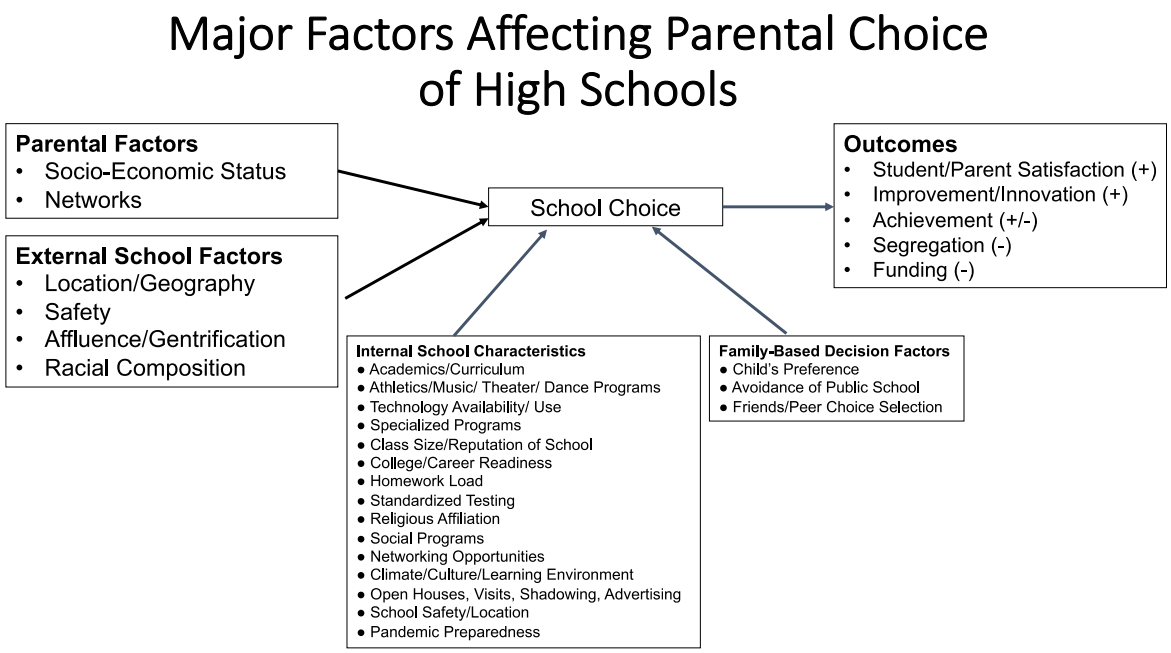
Traditional public school enrollment may be declining, but the rest of the education picture has yet to come into focus. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools reports a 7% increase in charter school enrollment in the fall of 2020, representing about 240,000 students (Veney & Jacobs, 2021). Private and independent school data are not available at the time of this report, and estimates from news outlets and non-profit organizations can be found to show both increases and decreases in non-public school enrollment. In Pennsylvania, there has been a noted increase in virtual school enrollments (Fuller, 2021). Increasing virtual school enrollments could be out of concern for safety in the COVID-19 Pandemic, but may also be reflective of high school students exercising freedom for their educational choices as they start working, or a wish to avoid in-person schooling for safety, bullying, peer effects, or other reasons.

Although many studies have been cited concerning the mental health effects of lack of schooling, online schooling, and virtual at-home education form the pandemic, I focus on one that describes the effect on parents, as it relates specifically to the question of parent choice related to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Davis et al. (2021) studied parents who were providing assistance to their children while they learned at-home during the pandemic. They found that parents whose children struggled with virtualized learning showed elevated symptoms of mental health distress, with struggling parents showing symptoms of anxiety to be .45 standard deviations higher than those whose students were not struggling, with an equal increase for symptoms of depression (.45 standard deviations). Elevated symptoms of anxiety and depression, coupled with the draw of local in-person instruction offerings could very well be factors that would contribute to the perceived need to exit traditional public schools for other school choice options and

may be responsible for some portion of the studied shifts in enrollments. As Posey-Maddox (2016) noted, the personal and private interests of parents supersede their willingness to commit to public interests or the collective good. Understanding this trend, at least six states appear to be taking advantage of the opportunity to magnify school choice by expanding tax credit scholarships, educational savings account plans, voucher programs, or charter availability (Blad, 2021).

Parental Navigation of the School Choice Markets

The growing complexity of schooling increases the number of selection factors that parents must navigate to make decisions about the school of choice for their child. Figure 1 summarizes the major influential factors collected from the literature review and including some time and place-bound factors (COVID-19, local internal school characteristics) that parents face when making a decision about high schools for their children. The influential factors that parents must sift through in order to make their high school selection include external factors such as location, neighborhood safety, and racial composition; internal school characteristics, such as program availability, academics/curriculum, or religious affiliation; family-based factors such as the child's preference and peer selections; potential outcomes like satisfaction and achievement; and their personal context including socioeconomic status and parent networks. These choice categories may influence decisions in a variety of ways and Figure 1 briefly approximates most of the major factors that may affect parental choice.



(Figure 1)

The neoliberalist approaches of market-based school choice reforms require parents to be sophisticated consumers of schools for their children. This influence on school choice programs requires parents to strategically engage in a complex system of procedures in which information and assistance is not forthcoming, and their ability to successfully navigate the policy field is a reflection of the social and cultural capital they possess (Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016). Those with larger social networks and more cultural capital are better positioned to effectively advocate for their children than those who lack these assets. Those with smaller networks do not seek more choice or complexity, but equity and convenience.

In light of the arguments for and against school choice outlined above, I argue that understanding the decision-making processes of parents in school choice situations is

necessary from a policy-making standpoint, a school marketing standpoint, and for the purposes of school improvement, for both public and private schools. As school-choice gains in popularity, it is necessary to have thorough, sound, and comprehensive research to either back up or dispute school choice claims for the betterment of education. I further argue that as parents are the primary school choice targets, better understanding their needs and motivations in making school choice decisions is of paramount importance in laying out the groundwork to help policy makers and school leaders navigate the issues of policy making, school improvement, and school marketing.

Conclusions

School choice is a complex topic with a body of research showing mixed effects on academic progress and achievement, social outcomes with regard to stratification and socialization, and outcomes based on socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Throughout the literature, studies have found both positive effects and negative effects in each of these areas, and in general, these effects are small. One consistent finding is the large achievement gap between the achievement of cyber charter schools and brick and mortar schools. Recent evidence suggests the negative impact that charter schools have on traditional public school district finances, and that these effects are common in both rural and urban districts.

A review of the literature shows that school choice has positive effects on parent and student satisfaction, graduation rates, and that markets may drive further innovation and improvement for local school systems. Voucher programs have positive effects on

graduation rates, and to a lesser degree, achievement, although they too may exacerbate inequities and segregation.

Parents use a variety of factors to make school choice decisions, including the financial and racial make-up of the local public schools. Charter schools and voucher programs may not offer a draw as much as an opportunity to escape the public-school setting. Many parents choose schools for their proximity or travel considerations. Parents with large social networks and connections have more options for their children and are often more affluent. Strong programs in sports, the arts, and other specialized elements have been shown to affect parental choice, particularly in affluent communities.

This study aims to contribute to the literature in two primary ways. First, school choice in large cities has been widely studied, but the dynamics of school choice in a mid-sized city with relatively few options for school choice is an area that leaves much to be explored. Erie, Pennsylvania also presents a sample population that may, in many ways, serve as a better representative sample of the country as a whole than large cities. Erie county was one of the counties that flipped in the last two elections, suggesting that on a whole, it may closely mirror the political thought processes of the United States. It also is a city that has been largely, and relatively recently impacted by school choice initiatives and charter schools (Badams, 2012) and, unlike most large cities, provides parents with a limited number of choice-sets of each representative type, private, charter, traditional public, and magnet, providing for more tightly controlled variables.

Second, all prior research in the area of parental decisions and school choice is from a pre-COVID-19 perspective. This pandemic has had several short-term, and likely long-term impacts on schools. Parents in many communities have been influenced by

school decisions about the pandemic and will likely continue to do so as the pandemic unfolds, and schools and districts respond. This study provides an opportunity to research any potential changes in parents' thinking on school choice due to COVID-19, and its potential implications.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Context

The current study took advantage of the natural pocket of variety in high school choice sets that exists in Erie, Pennsylvania as a means to gain insights into high school selection decisions from the perspective of parents with representative, but limited options for high school. In its current form, Erie offers one large, urban, public, comprehensive high school, one urban, public college preparatory magnet school, two private catholic high schools, one charter school system consisting of three separate, small charter schools (one middle school and two high schools) under one management organization, and one large suburban high school in a neighboring district that draws many city residents to relocate outside of EPS prior to their children entering high school. Erie is a mid-sized city with a shrinking population and changing demographics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021) It has seen a number of large businesses leave in the past decade, most notably, the local General Electric plant, which relocated to Texas in 2016.

In the 2020-21 school year, there were 14,987 K-12 students in the city boundaries, with 10,242 students receiving their education within Erie's Public Schools (EPS) and 4,745 private, charter, cyber charter and alternative education students. At the start of the 2021-22 school year there were 1975 Erie resident students attend brick and mortar charter schools. 2,023 students attended the 17 different local private and parochial schools in the Erie area. The remaining 747 students attended cyber charter schools or were home-schooled. The district housed 2,338 special education students (22.8%) and 956 English Learners (9.3%). Demographically, the district is 5.5% Asian,

31.4% Black, 11.6% Hispanic, 38.2% White, and 10.7% Multi-Racial/Ethnic, and 2.6% other. 82% of Erie's Public Schools' students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Erie's Public Schools has a recent history of financial troubles stemming from several decades of increasing costs, declining funding, a reduced tax base, and a number of mismanagement steps that occurred through two generations of superintendents (Badams, 2012). The last decade marked a continuous effort to overcome these challenges and set the district back on solid financial footing. Central to these efforts were a multi-school consolidation plan that reduced the number of high schools from 4 to 1 and eliminated all K-8 schools in favor of 10 K-5 schools and 3 middle schools. The effects of this consolidation are still rippling through the community after nearly five years and are a topic of frequent discussion in high school selection.

Erie's inner city school district has three middle schools, Strong Vincent Middle School, Wilson Middle School, and East Middle School, that serve as the source for this study (Table 1). Erie is also home to a number of K-8 parochial schools, which were not included the study design as the focus is on selection from the public school population. Strong Vincent is a former high school and holds the largest population overall and the lowest population of students in special education programs from among the three schools. It is the least diverse, most affluent, has the lowest population of English Learners, and is a community school. East Middle School is also a former high school building with the smallest, least affluent, and most diverse population, and the greatest number of English Learners, along with the highest percent of students in special education. It is also a community school. Wilson middle school ranks in the middle in

each of the previously mentioned categories, was constructed as a middle school, and is not currently a community school.

Table 1

Middle School Comparison, Erie's Public Schools

Strong Vincent Middle School	Wilson Middle School	East Middle School
Erected 1928 as Strong Vincent High School; Became SV Middle School in 2018	Built in 1927 as a Middle School	Built in 1999 to replace the former East High School; Became East Middle School in 2018
Community School	Not a Community School	Community School
855 Students	787 Students	685 Students
1% Asian 31% Black 13% Hispanic 51% White 4% Multi-Racial/Ethnic 5% EL 27% Special Education	7% Asian 42% Black 14% Hispanic 34% White 3% Multi-Racial/ Ethnic 15% EL 26% Special Education	7% Asian 47% Black 18% Hispanic 25% White 4% Multi-Racial/Ethnic 29% EL 30% Special Education

The city high schools (Table 2) consist of a two high schools, a large, comprehensive high school (Erie High School), which houses traditional high school programming, career and technical education programming along with several magnet programs and a mid-sized, public college preparatory magnet high school (Collegiate Academy) with an arts program (Performing Arts Magnet). The large, comprehensive high school was consolidated from three former high schools in EPS during the 2017-2018 school year as a result of a district consolidation due to budget constraints. The former East High School, Strong Vincent High School, and Central Technical School. Each of these former high schools each housed 600-1,000 students and were combined

into the Central Technical School Building (the largest of the three) and renamed Erie High School. This new school initially housed 2,400 students. East High School and Strong Vincent High Schools became middle schools during this transition. The performing arts magnet school was also added to Collegiate Academy during this transition.

Two private Catholic schools (Cathedral Preparatory School and Mercyhurst Preparatory School) have become the final major parochial high school options remaining in the city (Table 2). Cathedral Preparatory recently merged with its sister school, Villa Maria Academy and maintains the Cathedral Prep/Villa naming system. The new school offers strong sports programming (they are known primarily for sports), and a variety of academics ranging from remedial to honors. Mercyhurst Preparatory school is known for academics, the arts, and has a reputation for being a well-rounded school where athletes, scholars, struggling students, and those interested in the arts can all receive schooling.

Erie also houses a single charter network (Charter School of Excellence) consisting of two small high schools, one focused on struggling youth (Perseus House Charter) and the other focused on career development and leadership (Perseus House Skills Center), along with a middle school (Perseus House Leadership Academy). This small choice set provides a relatively unique opportunity to survey most of the typical school choice options for parents framed within a limited geographical area. Additionally, a second, medium-sized, neighboring school district with a large high school (McDowell High School) acts as a final local option that many parents take advantage of by moving to the neighboring district as their students complete middle

school. McDowell offers strong sports teams, honors programs, an off-site career and technical education option, and a number of levels of academic programming. Lastly, there are a growing number of cyber charter school options selected by high schoolers, and a few other very small private schools, of which very few EPS students attend. At the time of this study, there were not a significant number of students attending these schools after attending EPS middle schools. For this reason, these high school options are not included in this study.

A summary table of these schools along with information on student population, acceptance criteria, and application information are provided in Table 2. With this arrangement, the medium-sized city of Erie holds a representative sample of the variety of options provided to many parents as they navigate school choice options across the country. This research seeks to build upon existing research and further develop an understanding of how parents of middle school-aged children make decisions about high school selection for their children.

Table 2

Most Commonly Chosen High School Options for EPS 8th Graders

	Erie High	*Collegiate Academy*	*Cathedral Prep*	*Mercyhurst Prep*	*Charter School of Excellence*	*McDowell High School*
# Students	2200	850	750	510	585	2400
Type of School	Public Comprehensive High School	Public College Prep Magnet	Private Catholic Preparatory	Private Catholic Preparatory	Charter School	Public High School
Application (Y/N)	No, except for CTE programs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No, except for honors programs
Tuition	None	None, in district, $8,600 out of district	$9,825 + Fees	$10,725 + Fees	None	None
Acceptance Criteria	(CTE) Behavior	Grades, test scores, rec.	Grades, test scores, rec.	Grades, test scores, rec.,placement exam	Application only	N/A
Acceptance Rate	(CTE) ~80% (Regular ed. Programs) ~100%	~55%	~50%	~65%	~95%	~100%

As seen in Table 2 (above), applications play a large role in high school selection in Erie. Applications are required for the career and technical education programs at Erie High School, Collegiate Academy (the college preparatory magnet school) and both parochial high schools (Cathedral Preparatory School and Mercyhurst

Preparatory School), as well as the Charter School of Excellence programs. Selection based on applications varies widely by school. Acceptance criteria form a continuum ranging from application submission (Charter School of Excellence), to behavior and grades (Career and Technical School at Erie High), to grades, tests, and recommendations (Collegiate Academy, Mercyhurst Preparatory School, and Cathedral Preparatory School, McDowell honors programs). Acceptance rates range from nearly 100% at Erie High School to about 50% at Cathedral Preparatory School. Acceptance rate data were not available for the McDowell honors programs.

Tuition also plays a role in high school selection in Erie. The private Catholic schools have tuition that approximates $10,000 per academic year plus fees for activities and sports. Both schools offer tuition assistance through scholarships and volunteerism, as well as opportunities for fundraising for tuition/sports fees. Additionally, a subset of approximately 50 parents from outlying districts choose to pay tuition to attend the Collegiate Academy public magnet school each year. Tuition for Collegiate Academy is paid only for those parents who choose to have their child attend, but live in a district outside of the City of Erie. Tuition to attend from another district is $8,600 for the 2021-22 school year.

Research Design

The current study utilized a case-study approach as defined by Mertens (2020), focusing on the particular example of a group of parents of 8th grade students in the three middle schools at Erie's Public Schools as they work through the process of selecting a high school for their child during the 2020-21 school year and through the continual

changes of the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study was conducted through the use of a survey, interviews, and artifact collection.

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of eighty five parents of local middle school students who were in the process of making their high school selection decisions. The sample was derived from a general survey sent to all parents of 8th grade students at Erie's Public Schools Middle Schools (Strong Vincent- 253, Wilson- 247, East- 213, total= 713) who provided the school district with their email address (N= 584). The survey was sent to all email addresses provided by the parents in the Erie's Public Schools student information system. Emails were sent using a mail-merge application in Office 365. Of the emails sent, 89% were delivered. Of the delivered emails, 51% were opened and 85 parents (14.5%) responded to the initial survey.

From the 85 respondents, 31 indicated their interest in participating in the interview portion of the study. The 10 parents that took part in the interview portion were chosen based upon their self-selection, and interest in or probable selection of the different school choice options, representing parents from each of the five school choice options available to parents in Erie, Pennsylvania. From this pool, candidates were further screened and contacted to determine their interest in participating, while working to find representatives from varying ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds who are selecting each of the options. After completing several rounds of contacts, 10 parents took part in the interview portion of the study.

The smaller relative sample size, along with the unique timing of this study, as it is taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic, limited the reproducibility and representativeness of this study.

Participants

The participants in this study were parents of 8th grade children in the City of Erie who were making high school choice decisions for one of the local high school options. Because the school populations, demographics, relative socioeconomic status, and community school status of each middle school varies (Table 1), the participants from each building were purposefully selected to attempt to ensure a representative sample.

Participants were selected using a combination of self-selection and purposeful sampling for the survey, with the intent that snowball and stratified purposeful sampling would be used to include parent groups who had specifically chosen each of the different school options and samples from varying socioeconomic, religious, and racial/ethnic backgrounds for the interviews. Some of this work was accomplished through a district survey to parents of 8th grade students who were in the process of choosing a high school option for their child. The survey asked parents to provide the school they are choosing for their child's high school option along with other information about their high school selection process.

The list of participants was then screened using the initial survey results to determine relative socioeconomic status and demographic information. Once the potential participants were identified, an email was sent with a consent to participate form to determine the potential participant's interest in joining the interview and outlining the

process for transparency. The sample size was most affected by self-selection on the part of the parents, all of whom indicated their interest in participating in the interview portion of the study. Of the group of parents who indicated an interest in the interview portion of the study (n=42), fifteen responded to emails and, or text messages to set up the interviews. Of this group, eleven parents showed up for their Zoom interview or rescheduled and arrived. The remainder failed to respond to later attempts to reschedule. In some cases, in order to increase representativeness, secondary attempts with individuals representing specific schools, races, or socio-economic groups were called or sent text messages to verify interest in participation. To the extent possible, efforts were made to find diverse candidates representing each high school choice option. The participants in this study were chosen because they 1) had varying demographic backgrounds 2) had each made different choices about schooling for their children, representing all of the five local options 3) each had a unique lens from which they were making their decisions. Survey and interview sampling goals can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Sampling Goals by Middle School

School	Survey Email Goals/ ~Response Estimates	Interviews
East Middle School (N=213)	100 emails / ~25 responses	2
Wilson Middle School (N=247)	215 emails/ ~45 responses	4
Strong Vincent Middle School (N=253)	200 emails/ ~45 responses	5
Totals (713)	515 emails/ ~115 responses	11

As previously stated, East Middle School is the school with the largest overall group of low socioeconomic status families. It has the smallest population of the three schools and was the school with the smallest percentage of parent email availability and had the lowest response rate. Strong Vincent and Wilson were expected to provide about the same number of responses, and Strong Vincent was predicted to have slightly higher response rate based on feedback from the principals at the schools.

Table 4 shows the available pool of students and the number of collected emails per school. At Strong Vincent and Wilson, the ratios of emails to students were 1.25:1 and 1.5:1, which differed from East with a ratio of 0.74:1. All three schools had populations of students without parent emails. At Strong Vincent and Wilson, it was

common for a parent to have 2 or more emails in the student information system. Table 4 also shows the number of survey respondents who provided their names, allowing for a calculation of the known response rate for each school. Actual survey response rates were higher, but without the respondent providing any identifying information, true response rates for each school could not be calculated.

Table 4

Available Email Pool and Known Responses by School (n=85)

School	Strong Vincent Middle School	Wilson Middle School	East Middle School
8th Grade Students	253	247	215
Available Parent/Guarding Emails (Includes multiple emails for individual parents)	312	381	159
Respondents providing names	14	19	6
Known Response Rate	5.5%	7.7%	2.8%

Demographics of Survey Respondents and Interview Participants

Respondents to the survey spanned all three middle schools and were less demographically representative than the population as a whole, with 67% identifying as White or Caucasian, 20% identifying as Black or African American, 8% Hispanic or Latino, 3% Asian, and 2% as another race (Table 5). Comparatively, the district demographics are 38.2% White or Caucasian, 31.4% Black or African American, 11.6%

Hispanic or Latino, 5.5% Asian, 10.7% Multi-Racial/Ethnic, and 2.6% Other. On the whole, survey respondents tended to be more white and of higher affluence than the demographics of the district, and more closely matched the demographics of Strong Vincent Middle School (51% White or Caucasian, 31% Black or African American, 13% Hispanic or Latino, 1% Asian, 4% Multi-Racial/Ethnic) than Wilson (34% White or Caucasian, 42% Black or African American, 14% Hispanic, 7% Asian, 3% Multi-Racial/Ethnic), East (25% White or Caucasian, 47% Black or African American, 18% Hispanic or Latino, 7% Asian, 4% Multi-Racial/Ethnic) or the district overall (see Table 1).

As previously stated, over 80% of Erie's Public Schools students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Survey respondents were less representative in this regard than the population of families as a whole (Table 5), with more respondents reporting household incomes over $49,999 which is greater than the qualifying annual household income of $49,025 for a family of 4 to qualify for reduced price lunches under the Federal Income Eligibility Guidelines for 2021-2022 (Food and Nutrition Service, 2021). In all, over 45% of respondents reported incomes higher than the maximum amount for a family of 4 to qualify for free or reduced lunches. About 53% of respondents reported incomes less than $49,999 which would indicate that they would have qualified for free or reduced priced lunches with a family of 4 or more.

The 10 interview respondents were selected based in part upon ethnicity in an attempt to mirror race and ethnicity demographics of the population of parents in the school district. Interview participants did not match the survey participant or district demographics, as the greatest number of participants were White, making the interview

sample less representative of the district as a whole. However, three of the White interview participants were parents in multi-racial/ ethnic households, expanding the demographic field and representativeness to some degree (Figure 2). Table 5 illustrates the breakdown of parents who participated in the interviews. Attempts were made to identify respondents that best matched the pool of survey participants, adding to the authenticity of the study (see Table 5 and Table 6), but the final set of parents who chose to participate in, scheduled, and completed the interviews varied from the demographics of both the survey pool and the district demographics. It should be noted that the survey group most largely consisted of white, middle-aged women. Only four respondents to the survey identified as male, and only one interview participant was male. These figures are not fully representative of the district as a whole or the middle school parent population and must be considered in later analysis.

Attempts were made to ensure the group of parent interviews mimicked the survey and district demographics from a household income standpoint, but the final pool of interview participants did not strictly align with either set (Table 5). This was the result of fewer respondents agreeing to participate in the survey from the unrepresented income brackets and the targeted parents in those brackets either not responding to the interview emails or text messages, or missing interview appointments and not rescheduling. Most participants were grouped in the middle income categories of the distribution, with absent representative income ranges between $15,000 and $29,999 and $100,000-$150,000. A single interviewee from the highest ($150,000) and lowest (under $15,000) household income ranges were able to be identified and recruited for participation, increasing the range offered in the interview sample.

The age range of the survey respondents (Table 5) and interview participants closely matched one another. Most middle school parents were in the 30-39 or 40-49 age range. Fewer participants from both portions of the study were in the 50-59 age range and no participants were in the 25-29 age range or above the age of 60. The data do represent some grandparents who were raising their grandchildren, and representatives of these groups were captured in both the survey and interview portions of the study. In all reported cases, their age ranges were 50-59. No grandparents raising children in middle school were captured in the data whose reported ages were above the age of 59. Although it is known that there are a certain percent of grandparents raising middle school children in Erie's Public Schools, that percent is difficult to ascertain from reported data in the school district's student information system, as household situations reportedly change frequently in many instances, and identification of parents or guardians as a grandparent is not consistently captured by school district enrollment data. For this reason, all survey respondents were treated as parents/guardians and noted in the interviews only if provided by the participants.

In addition to the demographics collected in the survey, interviewees were asked about their level of education. The results for this question are listed in Table 5 All parents interviewed were high school graduates or had received their GED, although in one household, the spouse was reported as having an 8th grade education. The most common level of education for parents was a response resembling "some college" which could represent a two or four year track, followed by "Master's Degree or Higher." Interestingly, none of the interviewees reported having finished their education with a

bachelor's degree. They either had a high school diploma, GED, some college credits, an associate's degree, or had completed work at the master's level or beyond.

Table 5

Demographics of Interview Participants and Survey Respondents

Demographic Characteristics	Interview Participants (n=10)	Survey Respondents (n=85)
White or Caucasian	5	67%
Black or African American	2	20%
Hispanic or Latino	1	8%
Asian	1	3%
Another Race	1	2%
Under $15,000	1	5%
$15,000- $29,999	0	23%
$30,000-$49,999	3	25%
$50,000-$74,999	2	13%
$75,000-$99,999	3	13%
$100,000-$149,999	0	17%
Over $150,000	1	3%
30-39 years	5	45%
40-49 years	4	44%
50-59 years	1	11%
Hispanic or Latino	1	8%
Asian	1	3%
Another Race	1	2%
Under $15,000	1	5%
$15,000- $29,999	0	23%
$30,000-$49,999	3	25%
$50,000-$74,999	2	13%
$75,000-$99,999	3	13%
$100,000-$149,999	0	17%
Did not Graduate High School	0	
High School Graduation/ GED	1	
Some College	4	
Associate's Degree	2	
Bachelor's Degree	0	
Master's Degree or Higher	2	

Instruments

The primary method of inquiry for this research was a case study approach involving a parent survey (Appendix A) to determine the most important factors parents used to make decisions about high school selection, followed by in-depth interviews with a sample of 11 parents. The survey was created using Survey Monkey and asked parents to provide the school they are choosing for their child and complete a rank-choice question to rank the top 5 of 23factors that were used to make their determination from most to least important. These 23 characteristics were compiled from the work of Erickson (2017), who conducted a literature review of private school choice programs in the United States and identified 17 top preferences in parental selection for high schools, Harris & Larson (2015) who identified a number of parental choice selection factors in pre and post Katrina New Orleans, and from elements emphasized in programs at the local level using promotional materials from open houses conducted in the 2020-2021 school year. A fifth category was be added to determine the potential shifts in thinking of the parents related to the COVID-19 outbreak, its effect on schools, and their responses to the outbreak. Additionally, the survey asked which local high school was selected for the child, so correlations could be drawn between the selected school and the school characteristics the parent indicated were most important. Optional demographic questions were also included, covering parent gender, race and ethnicity, approximate age, and approximate household income. Additionally, parents were provided with the opportunity to volunteer to take part in the interview portion of the study. Surveys were emailed to parents on weekends with the hope that the potential for parents to be off from work would increase the chances of participation in the survey (see Appendix A).

The second portion of the study employed in-depth, standardized-open-ended interviews using a traditional social science interview approach (Patton, Ch.7, 2015) to gather information from the parents taking part in this study. The interviews took place between August and December of 2021 via the Zoom application due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The interviews consisted of four main categories of questions related to demographics, school choice topics, impressions of local school options, and the importance of the twenty three factors used in the survey as a way of expanding on the participants' views regarding their role in high school selection. Interviews were concluded with opportunities to capture general impressions on the process and to add further detail from the experiences of each individual parent. Questions were scripted, with follow up and probing questions included as needed. Limited member checking was used during interviews by paraphrasing and summarizing for understanding. Due to time constraints, formalized member checking was not completed during the timeframe of this study. The interview process was loosely based on a protocol developed by Moustakas (1994). The interviews were scheduled to last 45-60 minutes, but interview timings were largely dependent upon the length and depth of answers provided by the parents and their willingness to expound upon the questions and follow up questions.

The case study artifact collection focused on promotional items created for open houses, pamphlets, hand-outs, and other communication provided by the schools to advertise and inform parents and students about the opportunities at each school. These items were collected from open houses, websites, letters, and other promotional materials that are sent out by the schools. These items were specifically used to help parents recall

and determine the ways in which the schools were able to adequately provide the necessary information to navigate the selection and application processes at each school.

Data Analysis

Marketing material artifacts were collected and compared for points of emphasis and were used as references if needed during interviews. Two copies were made of each set of materials, one to be annotated for comparison, and one to share with interview participants as needed for reference.

The survey data were collected and analyzed using Survey Monkey analysis tools. Demographic data were analyzed through Survey Monkey and exported to Excel. The ranked choice question asked parents to select their top 5 of the 23 high school selection and rank them from 1st to 5th priority. Use of this measure provided some challenges for analysis, as parents were forced to select only 5 of the 23 possible selection factors. The remaining 18 selection factors were unranked and had not numerical value associated with them. Basic statistical analyses such as mean were inaccurately skewed toward some items that were nearly never selected as a result of unranked selection factors. In order to better analyze the data, the scales were reversed and items not selected were given a value of zero, while 1st choice was provided a value of 5, 2nd choice valued at 4, 3rd at 3, 4th at 2, and 5th at 1. By reversing the scale, higher priority factors were given larger numbers and "more importance" and factors that were not selected were given a value of zero, which provided more clarity in calculations measures of central tendency and graphing. Providing a zero for unranked data provided better representation of selection and helped to control the skewed data. This process also allowed the ranked

choice selection factor data to be analyzed by percent of total rankings by adding up the total number of selected options for any one factor and dividing by the total rankings. All data were uploaded into Excel, which was used to produce the final charts and graphs.

Interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom software and saved to a local computer. The files were then uploaded to Otter.ai. for transcription and initial interpretation. The interviews were replayed and annotated to note linguistic pauses, voice inflections, emphases, and tonal changes using the schemes outlined in Ochs (1979). The transcripts were then uploaded into the Dedoose® application for coding.

The coding process began with a third read-through of the interview transcript while listening to the accompanying audio files for accuracy. Codes were added to the Dedoose® software for each individual transcript. Following this step, a process to develop further codes by looking at the interviews from the lenses of the participants, employing the different angles and filters that the participants used in their discussions to get a more robust representation of their experiences (Saldana, Ch. 1, 2016). Next, a fourth read-through to develop sub-codes (known as child-codes in the Dedoose ® software) in several code categories, while trying to capture the essence of their discussion from points of emphasis, frequency, and the uniqueness of their responses. All interviews were saved as new trials and re-coded to seek out primary marketable factors as themes using the initial coding schemes. This process was completed again to analyze the interview data for school choice perspectives and any additional themes.

The individual trials and codes were then analyzed using the Dedoose ® code application, code co-occurrence, descriptor multi-chart, and qualitative analysis tools to develop textual and structural descriptions of the parents' experiences for clusters of

meaning and were eventually developed into themes (Creswell, 2016). The themes provided the essence of the parental experiences and determine findings related to the research questions. Special attention was paid to both patterns and unique or seemingly unique perspectives, especially those that, upon further analysis, could be tied to responses from other participants, thus further developing sub-codes and themes.

Reliability & Validity

This study was completed by a single researcher rather multiple researchers, limiting reliability checks between multiple coders. In order to increase reliability, digital recorded audio files were transcribed using Otter.ai software and coding using Dedoose coding software and a structured code book for dependability and objectivity (Appendix B). Attempts were made to increase validity through credibility, authenticity, and integrity (Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle, 2001). Representativeness in the pool of interview participants was used to construct authenticity through the careful selection of interview participants to produce the most diverse candidate pool available. Integrity was built through multiple coding checks over several weeks of analysis. To the extent possible, triangulation was completed through comparisons of interviewee data and coding, survey data, and artifacts. Limited member checking was included in the interview process through summarization of important points, and paraphrasing for clarification with participants to improve credibility. Formalized member checking could not be completed due to the time constraints for this study. Efforts were made to build a rapport with interviewees and allow them ample time to clarify points, process their thinking and correct interpretations as opportunities arose.

Before presenting the findings, I, the researcher, acknowledge my position as a White male, 20 year educator with 10 years of administrative experience. My educational experiences include teacher, counselor, and assistant principal in one former and two current EPS high schools (one magnet, and one large, urban comprehensive high school) as well as principal in one EPS middle school. I acknowledge my positionality must have influenced this project to some extent and add that my experience in public education has both informed and aided the process of completing this research.

Ethics

In preparation for this study, great care was taken to ensure the anonymity of participants and their data. All participants were notified of their right to answer all or only a portion of the survey and interview questions, or to end the interviews at any time or to refuse to answer any and all questions. Some participants chose not to answer particular survey questions. The candidates who elected to participate in the interviews all fully participated, answering all questions to the best of their ability. Participants were also made fully aware of their rights to their data for the study and provided with opportunities to participate or decline. Participants were informed of the potential benefits of the research and offered access to the findings.

Coding schemes and pseudonyms were used in both data analysis and reporting to protect identities. The specific data to be collected were general demographic information of the participants that will included race, ethnicity, occupation of parents, general income, ages and genders of family members, religious preference, and other general data as offered or appropriate. Care was taken to ensure that participants or data

collected did not present a conflict of interest with the researcher's roles as a professional in Erie's Public Schools and that data collection and processing do not present ethical concerns.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses completed on the data as described in Chapter 3 are presented in this section. The chapter begins by describing the assumptions and decisions used to generate and analyze the statistics employed in this investigation, as well as the qualitative analysis tools and techniques used to generate the related results. This chapter also presents descriptive statistics of the program participants, and includes sections that address each research question and sub-questions.

Description of the Dataset

The data analyzed for the current study included both quantitative survey data, demographic information in both quantitative and qualitative formats, qualitative interview data, and some document collection from local high school options from open houses and promotional materials. The survey data were collected using Survey Monkey and these data were analyzed using Excel. Qualitative interview data were recorded using Zoom conferencing software, transcribed using Otter Ai transcription software and analyzed, coded, and prepped for analysis using Dedoose qualitative analysis software.

The survey respondent total (n=85) was comprised of all survey respondents who agreed to the terms of the survey and completed the ranked choice question portion of the survey. Twelve additional respondents were eliminated from the pool because they did not answer the ranked choice questions in the survey and, or selected that they did not wish to participate. At least one household had survey responses from two parents. The

number of instances with multiple respondents from the same household cannot be determined due to the anonymous nature of the Survey Monkey reporting. Only responses where parents identified themselves by providing names or emails could be traced back to specific households. Not all participants provided demographic data, with 22 respondents leaving the race/ethnicity question blank, 28 leaving household income blank, and 11 leaving the high school choice question blank.

In the survey results, 31 participants provided their name and contact information, which was used as an indication that they may be willing to participate in the interview portion of the study. Participants for the interviews were prioritized for district representativeness. From the list, 24 respondents initially agreed to participate, but only 10 finalized the interview process by scheduling and participating in an interview. The resulting 10 interviewees span all three middle schools, all high school options except the charter school option, all income categories, and all race/ethnicity categories except for Native American/ Pacific Islander, which comprises less than 2% of the population of students in Erie's Public Schools. All demographic information was self-reported and based upon categories used for reporting in Erie's Public Schools for state reporting.

Study Population

Sample

The sample for the survey portion of this study consisted of 85 parents of local middle school students who were in the process of making their high school selection decisions. The sample was derived from a general survey sent to all parents of 8th grade students at Erie's Public Schools Middle Schools (Strong Vincent- 253, Wilson- 247,

East- 213, total= 713) who provided the school district with their email address (N= 584). The survey was sent to all email addresses provided by the parents in the Erie's Public Schools student information system.

From the 85 respondents, a final count of 10 parents took part in the interview portion of the study. Selection of interviewees occurred to create the most representative sample available from the candidate pool (Table 6). Codes were assigned to interviewees for data analysis and to protect confidentiality. This table also provides the level of education of the interviewees, household income ranges, chosen high school, race or ethnicity, age and middle school of the child. The interview volunteers provided a reasonable range of demographics and school selections to build this sample in comparison to general district demographics. In an attempt to ensure representation from each middle school and chosen high school was provided, respondents were selected based on the best available match between middle school attended, high school selected, race/ethnicity, and household income. It should be noted that no respondents were available for interviews whose household income was in the $100,000- $149,999 range, but this group does not represent a large portion of the population of Erie's demographics. All respondents were high school graduates or had obtained a GED, four had completed "some college," two had associate's degrees, and three had master's degrees or higher levels of education. No respondents had education levels below high school diploma or had obtained a bachelor's degree and not a master's degree. Additionally, in the interview process, four of the interviewees reported households that were multiracial/ethnic even though they identified as Caucasian (2), Black (1), and Another race/ethnicity(1). This additional information provided greater context and

increased the diversity of perspectives in the interviewee pool beyond initial targets. It is understood and noted that the smaller relative sample size, along with the unique timing of this study, as it is taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic, limited the reproducibility and representativeness of this study.

Table 6

Interview Participant Data

Interviewee Code	Level of Interviewee Education	Approx. Annual Household Income	Chosen High School Option	Race/ Ethnicity	Indicated Multi-Racial/ Ethnic Household	Age Range	Middle School
LolaC	High School Graduation/ GED	Under $15,000	CP	Black	Y	50-59	EMS
KellyA	Master's Degree or Higher	$75,000-$99,999	CA	Caucasian	N	40-49	SVMS
KorraE	Some College	$30,000-$49,999	EHS	Caucasian	N	30-39	EMS
SallyA	Associate's Degree	$30,000-$49,999	CA	Hispanic or Latino	N	30-39	WMS
JaneM	Master's Degree or Higher	$75,000-$99,999	MHS	Caucasian	Y	40-49	SVMS
MonicaM	Some College	$75,000-$99,999	MP	Caucasian	N	40-49	WMS
KimE	Some College	$50,000-$74,999	EHS	Asian	N	30-39	SVMS
DarbyC	Master's Degree or Higher	Over $150,000	CA	Caucasian	N	40-49	WMS
TonyaM	Associate's Degree	$30,000-$49,999	MP	Black	N	30-39	WMS
RoryD	Some College	$50,000-$74,999	MHS	Another Race/Ethnicity	Y	30-39	SVMS

Note: EHS- Erie High School; CA- Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy; CP-Cathedral Preparatory School; MP- Mercyhurst Preparatory School; CSE- Perseus House Charter School of Excellence; MHS- McDowell High School

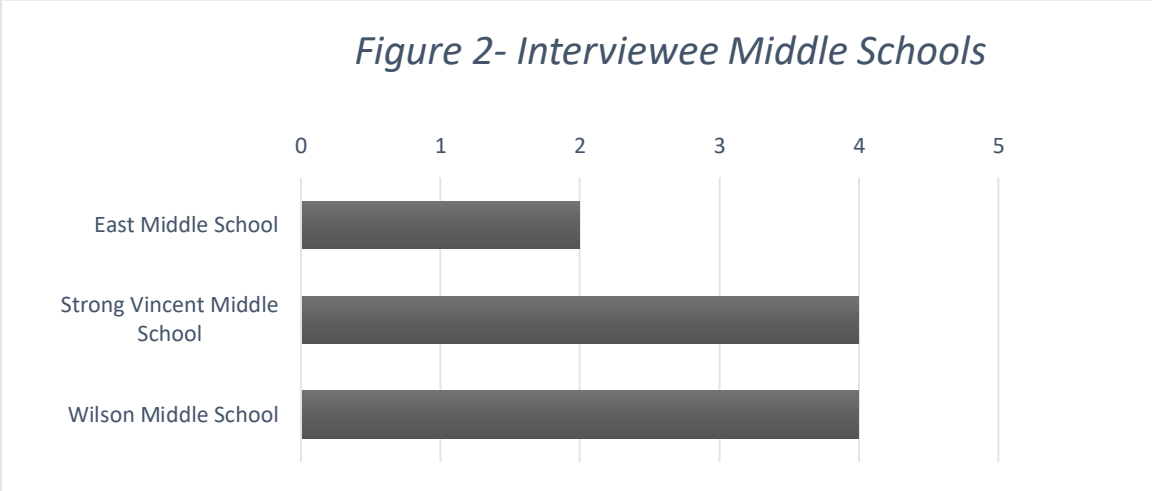
Study Participation and Middle School Representation

The survey construction allowed for respondents to answer some or all questions. In regard to identification of current middle school, 51% of survey respondents provided their student's school. From this, calculations were made to determine the known response rate by current middle school. The results can be found in Table 4. As previously stated, Strong Vincent Middle School is the school with the highest overall socio-economic status and East Middle School is the school with the largest overall group of low socioeconomic status families. East Middle School has the smallest population of the three schools and was the school with the smallest percentage of parent email availability and had the lowest response rate. The response rate at Wilson was slightly higher and is the school that represents a sort of median between Strong Vincent and East Middle School in terms of demographics, special education population, socioeconomic status, and location within the city boundaries (see Table 1).

Two respondents to the survey had been enrolled in EPS schools but enrolled in parochial school options prior to the survey. Their emails were captured in the mass mailings, and because they chose to respond, their data are included in the results. As enrollment in EPS schools is continually shifting, it is not possible to recapture the email data related to the total from a specific point in time. Therefore, the resulting total number of 8th grade students and parents who may have received the emails but had recently chosen a private school option cannot be tracked. The survey response rate results from each school are listed in Table 4.

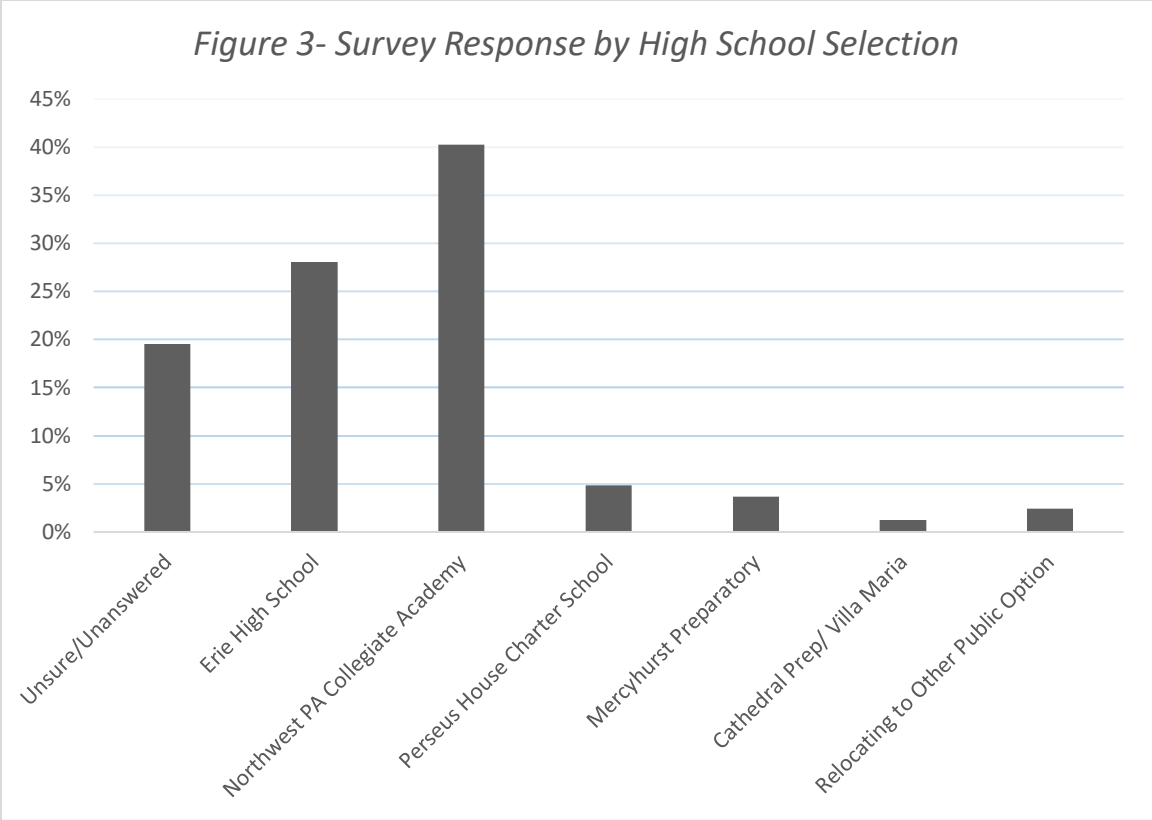
The interview sample closely matched the expected sampling by school (Table 3), with 2 parents opting into the interviews from East Middle School, 4 from Wilson, and 4

from Strong Vincent (Figure 2). Additional interviews were scheduled with Strong Vincent Parents, but were not attended by the parents and could not be rescheduled in the timeframe of this report.

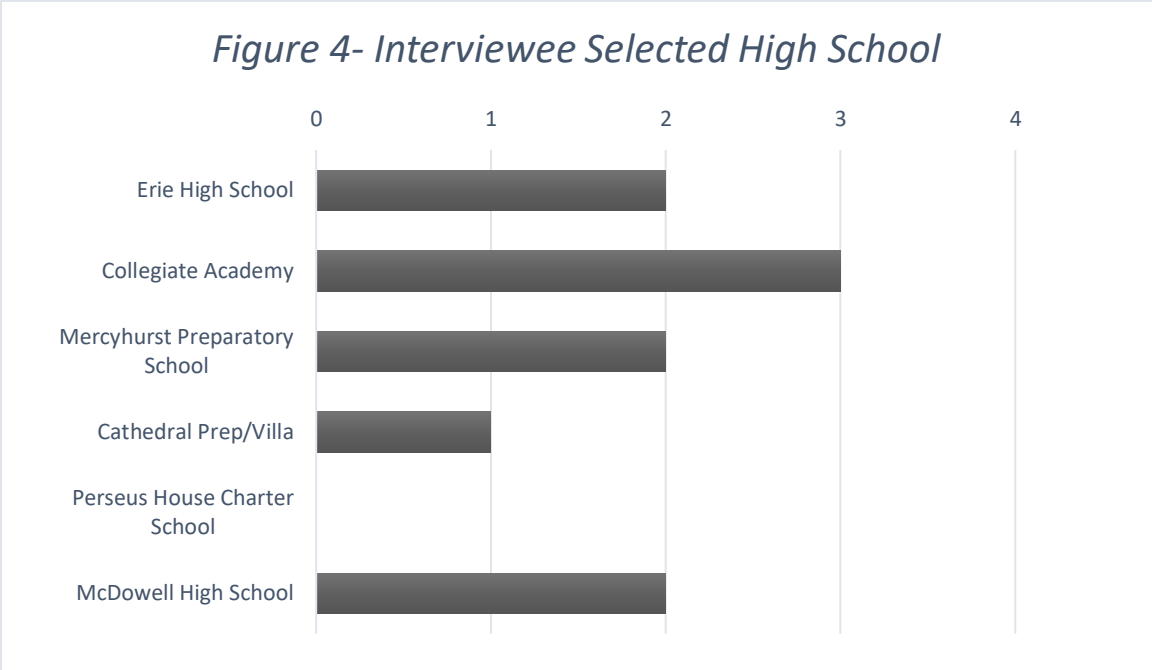


Survey Respondent and Interview Participant High School Selections

The survey asked all parents to identify their high school of choice (Figure 3), however, a number of parents left this question blank, potentially due to the timing of the survey. About 19% of parents chose not to answer this question. Nearly 28% chose Erie High School, while 40% of respondents indicated that Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy was their school of choice. Just fewer than 5% selected the Perseus House Charter Schools, and 3% selected Mercyhurst Preparatory School. Only one respondent selected Cathedral Preparatory School, while two respondents indicated that they were planning to relocate to another public school outside of the Erie's Public Schools district.



The interview sample (Figure 4) included representatives who selected each high school option except for the Perseus House Charter School of Excellence. Although one parent who selected this option volunteered for the interview, they could not be contacted at the appointed interview time and failed to reschedule, leaving the lone potential representative charter voice out of the interviews. The single survey respondent who selected the Cathedral Preparatory School chose to participate in the interview process, as did two parents who selected Mercyhurst Preparatory School. Interview volunteers for both Erie High School and Collegiate Academy were more widely available and were selected based on race/ethnicity, household income, and level of education to attempt to increase the representativeness of the sample.



Research Question Analysis

RQ1: What are the primary marketable factors that parents use to make high school selections for their children?

Ranked Choice Survey Data

In order to gather information on the first research question, a ranked choice question was developed to gather data on the most important factors that parents use in school selection. The ranked choice option was selected to force parents to prioritize from the 23 factors (Table 7), rather than simply choosing most or all factors as "most important" or "very important" in a Likert-esque scale. This decision was validated through the interview process, in which parents were again asked to provide their own

scale and briefly describe the importance of each of the 23 factors. Overwhelmingly, the interviewees stated that most all factors were the "most important" or "very important." Very few choices overall were ranked as "less important" or "not important," although these choices generally coincided with the survey data. Most parents took this opportunity to elaborate on their descriptions of the importance of these factors, providing both additional context and details that proved to be useful in answering other research questions as well.

Table 7

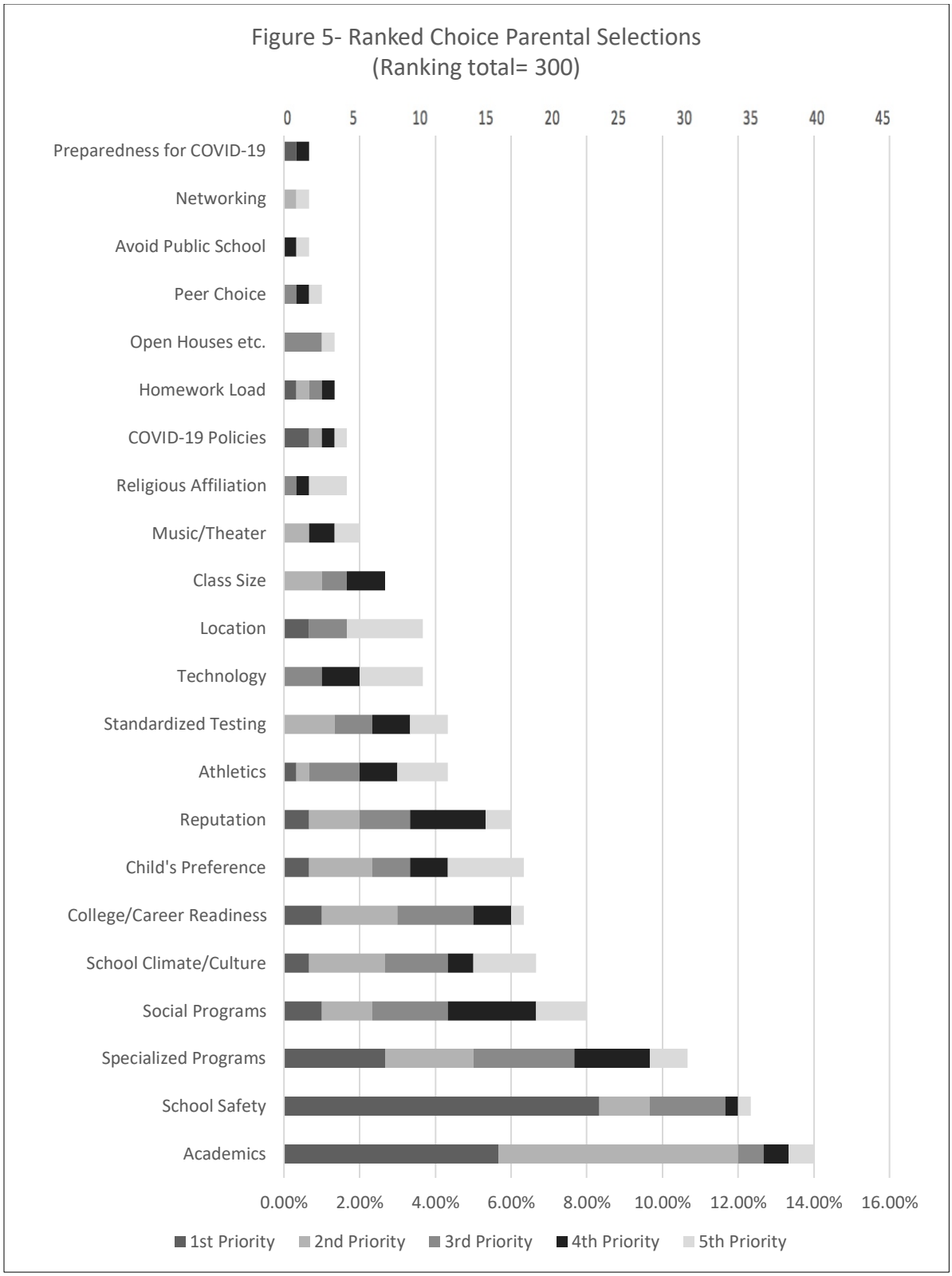
Ranked Choice High School Selection Factors- Survey Data

Selection Factors	1st Priority	2nd Priority	3rd Priority	4th Priority	5th Priority	Total % of Ranks (n=300)
Academics	5.7%	6.3%	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%	14.0%
School safety	8.3%	1.3%	2.0%	0.3%	0.3%	12.3%
Specialized programs	2.7%	2.3%	2.7%	2.0%	1.0%	10.7%
Social programs	1.0%	1.3%	2.0%	2.3%	1.3%	8.0%
School climate/culture	0.7%	2.0%	1.7%	0.7%	1.7%	6.7%
College/career readiness	1.0%	2.0%	2.0%	1.0%	0.3%	6.3%
Student's preference	0.7%	1.7%	1.0%	1.0%	2.0%	6.3%
Reputation	0.7%	1.3%	1.3%	2.0%	0.7%	6.0%
Athletics	0.3%	0.3%	1.3%	1.0%	1.3%	4.3%
Standardized test scores	0.0%	1.3%	1.0%	1.0%	1.0%	4.3%
Technology	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	1.0%	1.7%	3.7%
Location	0.7%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	2.0%	3.7%
Class size	0.0%	1.0%	0.7%	1.0%	0.0%	2.7%
Music/theater	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	0.7%	0.7%	2.0%
Religious affiliation	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	1.0%	1.7%
COVID-19 policies	0.7%	0.3%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	1.7%
Homework load	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	1.3%
Open houses, etc.	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%	0.3%	1.3%
Peer choice	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	1.0%
Avoid public school	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.7%
Networking opportunities	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.7%
COVID-19 Preparedness	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.7%

Note: Figures indicate the percent of total ranked choice selections made by parents in survey.

As Table 7 illustrates a representation of the percent of total rankings which each factor was ranked as a 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th or 5th priority, Figure 5 displays the data in a stacked bar-chart form for ease of comparison over the entirety of the 23 school selection factors. It should be noted that 11 parent chose not to answer this question and that others did not rank all 5 selections. The total number of ranked selections was 300. The chart and figure can be used comparatively to analyze and generally compare the frequencies of parent rankings. The stacked bar chart (Figure 5) shows the relationships between the ranked choice voting selections and the priority given to each selection factor. It provides a general sense of the overall weight and importance of the selection factors as compared to one another. The ranked choice selection data show that academics, school safety, and specialized programs were top priorities for parents. These categories were selected as a top five priority 14%, 12.3%, and 10.7% of the time, respectively. School safety was selected as the top priority 8.3% of the time, while academics was the top priority 5.7% of the time. Interestingly, these top two selection factors were rarely selected as a 4th or 5th priority. Also important were social programs, school climate/culture, college/career readiness, student preference. Selection of specialized programs was selected in the most even distribution across all 5 priorities.

The least prioritized factors in school choice selection were avoidance of public school, preparedness for COVID-19, and networking. Music/theater, technology, avoidance of public school, standardized test scores, open houses, shadowing etc., peer choice, and class size were never selected as the top priority, although athletics, preparedness for COVID-19, student preference, location, and peer choice were all ranked lower, they each had some selection as a top priority.



Note: Upper scale denotes number of parent ranked choice selections.

After an initial analysis of the ranked choice data and completing the coding and analysis of the interviews, patterns began to form in the responses from each data set. In the interviews, parents often wove together ideas such as academics and college and career readiness; social programs (such as after school programs, clubs, intramural sports, and other extracurricular activities) and specialized programs such as honors and AP programming, some special education programs, arts, music, and theater programs, ROTC and other programming typically tied to coursework and curriculum. Additionally, school climate, culture, and reputation were often used interchangeably. School safety was often discussed, most often as a stand-alone issue, despite the fact that it is related to a number of other factors on the selection list. Of all 23 factors, no single factor showed up as a stand-alone reason parents decided on a school in either survey or interview data. Together, these groups of factors might better explain the sorts of larger contextual schema parents rely upon to make their school choice decisions than considering each of the 23 factors individually. Based upon both sets of data, I propose the local themes that parents of middle school students in Erie's Public Schools use to analyze school choice can be categorized into four overarching "marketable factors":

1. Academics & College & Career Readiness
2. Social & Specialized Programs and Athletics
3. School Climate, Culture, and Reputation
4. School Safety

These larger themes or marketable factors provide a more robust explanation of selection than the 23 selection factors. The marketable factors better encompassed

reasons that particular parents provided that steered them toward specific school choices or away from others. Although no marketable factor can be thought of as a single reason that will ultimately convince the majority of parents to select a particular school, most all parents in the interview portion of the study either generally came back to these broader topics in their discussions or selected them as the most important or highly important in making their decisions. In addition, the 4 marketable factor categories can be linked to nearly all of the 23 selection factors, with the lone exception of location. Taken together, they envelop each of the 23 selection factors in a way that is useful in describing overall decisions for many of the parents. The revised groupings are displayed in Table 8. Each primary marketable factor has now been recategorized with each of the remaining 21 school selection factors that are most closely related to the primary marketable factor.

Table 8

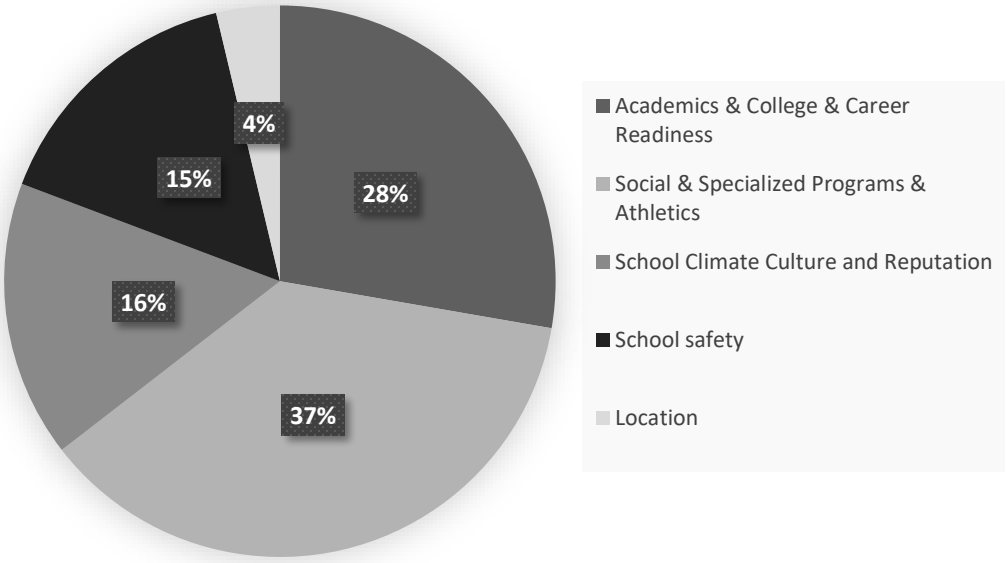
Codes Traced to Primary Marketable Factors

Academics & College & Career Readiness	Social & Specialized Programs & Athletics	School Climate, Culture, and Reputation	School Safety
Academics College/Career Readiness Homework Load Standardized Test Scores Class Size	Athletics Music/Theater/Dance Technology Specialized Programs Social Programs Open Houses, etc. Student Preferences	Reputation Religious Affiliation Networking School Climate Peer Choice	School Safety COVID-19 Policies & Procedures Preparedness for COVID-19 Avoidance of Public School

In this study, location is left as its own category for two reasons. First, in the review of the prior research, location's primary importance is related to safety on the way to or from school, but this is linked primarily to elementary education and neighborhood schooling (Botterman, 2019; Bell, 2009; Burgess, et. al, 2011), and second, in Erie, while location may be a determinant for some families, it is more likely to be out of convenience than on safety in travel to and from school, as both public high schools are located only a few blocks from one another and most all students will use either personal, public, or school district transportation to get to and from school. It should be noted that bussing is not generally provided to Collegiate Academy, the public magnet school.

As a means of making some sense of the reorganized data, the totals for each new sub category were gathered and displayed in Figure 6. The primary marketable factor of school safety and its sub-factors (high school selection factors) made up 15% of the total selection from the parents. school climate, culture, and reputation accounted for 16% of the prioritized factors, while academics and college and career readiness made up 28% of the total prioritized factors. Social and specialized programs and athletics made up 36.3% of the prioritized factors and location accounted for 4%.

Figure 6- Survey Data-Reorganized Primary Marketable Factors and Location



Note: Total ranked choices=300.

In the remainder of this section, the primary selection factors will be further analyzed using the data available from both the quantitative analysis of the survey and the qualitative analysis of the interviews. Each primary selection factor is treated separately in the analysis in order to best lay out the supporting data that binds it together.

Primary Marketable Factor 1: Academics and College and Career Readiness

Academics and college and career readiness was compiled from code data that included academics, college & career readiness, homework load, standardized test scores, and class size. These categories were placed together based on the array of commentary from parents linking these ideas together. Homework load was most often associated with increasing rigor and honors or AP classes and was resultingly included in this

category. Although one parent mentioned class size with school safety, it was generally discussed in terms of receiving the required amount of attention from teachers, and allowing for student participation in class. Discussion related to test scores and school data and readiness for college and careers naturally fit this larger category.

Academics was the most highly selected factor in the survey, garnering 14% of the ranked choice selections (Table 7). Many of those selections were either the first or second priority for parents. The only other closely ranked factors were School Safety and Specialized Programs. When taken as a marketable factor (Figure 6), Academics and college and career readiness accounted for 28% of the ranked choice selections by parents.

Perhaps the simplest, most overused, and under-dissected factor in school selection is academics. The term itself became noticeably problematic quickly when discerning the interview data. Parents regularly seemed to both highly prize and set aside academics relatively readily. Most sought it as the most highly prized focus in seeking a school, while some unenthusiastically noted academics as important, but needed to take a back seat to social wellness and general career preparation. A closer review of the transcripts and audio files provides cues that many parents may use different working definitions of the term academics. Three of the interview participants spoke about academics in terms of higher level learning and rigor through honors, AP, and dual enrollment courses. For these parents, academics provided the types of challenges to their child that they were looking for and allowed them to be in an environment that would best suit their student, and as DarbyC, an upper middle class White mother of three with a master's degree who is a self-described firm supporter of public education

described it, to best prepare her student for college: “Honestly, that's it in a nutshell, it has nothing to do … with athletics, it has nothing to do with, like- culture or reputation. It all has to do with what high school is going to prepare him best for college.” Descriptions of academics in this light characteristically described rigor, challenge, college preparedness, and high-level academic programming. They were most associated with the public college prep magnet school, Collegiate Academy, and then the two private parochial high schools, Mercyhurst Prep and Cathedral Prep/Villa.

Academics was also used as a measure against what parents perceived were poor or low-level academics. The best example of this is that two parents specifically mentioned not wanting a school where taking low level math as a senior was an option. For them, the ability to still be working on basic algebra as a senior was a measure of low quality academic programming, and to some extent, peer selection. As KellyA tried to describe, “I didn't want the option of taking pre-algebra as a senior- like the thought of like, you know what I mean? Like, we wanted, so I know, academically, the bar isn’t very high and that doesn't… I'm like, this is just my perception.” KellyA used the availability of students to continue to take lower level mathematics as upperclassmen as a sign of the academic prowess of the school or student population, using it as a bar to gauge the fit for her son.

Others used academics to refer to an overall collection of coursework offered to students. In these cases, academics included electives, shop classes, and less emphasis on overall higher level academic coursework and rigor. Parents using this lens for academics specifically discussed their own children and thoughtfully drew their vision for academics around their child’s needs and interests. Examples of these thinking are

linked through the following chain of excerpts which start from a broader perspective and work inward toward more individualized meanings:

From KorraE, a White, middle class mother and parent educator with some college experience who separates academics as high level coursework or rigor from academics as a tool that meets the needs of her child-

> Um, so that was kind of a huge thing that everybody, you know, everybody wants the best education. And sometimes I think parents kind of get caught up in what they think would be best for them (the parents) and not necessarily best for the kids. You know, I mean, academics is great, don't get me wrong, but I think definitely those life skills of doing a trade even if you're not going to pursue that as a career. Like it's great to have that kind of in your back pocket for everyday life.

Parents sometimes would stress the importance of grades, but not higher level academics. These parents were not necessarily seeking honors courses or accolades, but stressing the importance of a student doing well in their general coursework, and balancing grades with other needs. LolaC, a Black, single grandmother on a fixed income with a GED education and a passionate supporter of her grandson, a young man who she recently was able to take in after leaving a group home, who she is now raising, focuses on these ideas. Her grandson is in an emotional support classroom and receives help with ADHD, PTSD, and is sensitive to stress and overstimulation. When asked about academics LolaC notes that she has enlisted the whole family to help ensure his success-

> everybody talking to him and encouraging him to these grades is what's gonna get you there, you know, you want you want to do this, but your grades and your attitude is going to play a lot on what you want to do with your life- colleges, and you know, things like that. And everybody knows

> not to overstate-- Don't, don't put too much on him. But always try to encourage him. So about, you know, basically about grades and stuff.

The concept of not putting too much on the child became incredibly important to LolaC in regard to academics, and for reasons that often were hyper-focused on the needs of the child, recruiting family to make sure that her grandson was encouraged to work hard, but not to overstress him with academics and grades. Her preference was for a school that would help him academically, but not push him too hard, but would also provide opportunities for sports and have a good special education support system. JaneM, a White mother of three in a mixed ethnicity household, and educator with 25 years of experience in multiple countries and settings and a master's equivalency described her transition from the higher level-academic focus for her children as they aged. She noted how she had worked in several honors and magnet schools and was proud of the work she had done and always held education in a high regard and wanted all students to seek out higher education. She then talked about the struggles she encountered as her middle child was growing up and how her understanding broadened as she tried to navigate the challenges of diagnosing her son's learning disability and eventually reshaping her notion around academics based on that child's needs-

> Well, … I feel like I'm digressing a little bit, but for years, I kept saying to people, there's something wrong. We need to figure out what's going on with this kid. And everywhere I took them, they'd go, "No, there's nothing wrong. There's nothing wrong." You know, I've had him at- I've had him assessed three different times. And even then, …, I went to the school psychologist said, there's something wrong. This kid has a math disability. And everyone kept saying No, he doesn't. … Everybody kept coming and they weren't doing anything but screeners. This is what they were doing- your teachers opinion of him. You know, some kind of screener. And even the school psychologist from Erie who came and said, I said, I said, This kid's got a learning, -ya know a math disability. (Psychologist) Oh, in my

> opinion, in my experience, he couldn't have gotten this far without serious intervention if he had a math disability. I said, **I'm a serious intervention.** I haven't been working since he was in third grade. I sit with him and do homework for hours, every night hours, and no, nothing wrong. And so finally, I sought some different help. And he's this guy said to me, he goes, No, you need to walk into a school district and say you want cognitive testing done on your child, and they date stamp it in front of you, not screeners. And once they did that, she came back and said, Oh, you are right! … I've been trying to get help since sixth grade. And sorry. And, um, you're right, he has a math disability. So I've had to think about things differently. His ability to do math is not going to determine his success in life. And I'm not going to keep making him take academic math classes to get through high school. So when it came time for scheduling this year, and they brought me home the form and said he had to take algebra two, I cross it off, and I put consumer math. And this year when they made all the kids take PSATs, I opted out. There's no reason for this kid to be tortured like that. Sorry.

JaneM's struggles with her middle child's math learning disability shifted her thinking about academics. As an educator, she was adamant about ensuring her child's success. As a parent, she had to find a way to allow her son to find success without enduring what she and several other parents described as the agony or torture of trying to engage in academics that were of absolutely no interest or were well beyond the level she felt their child was able to accomplish. In JaneM's case, she chose not to send her son to a school with rigorous academics, and instead chose a school that she felt was well-rounded, and had special education options and a level of academic rigor that fit what she saw as the needs of this son in particular. In most cases, they described a struggle to arrive at that point, and academics became a serious consideration in school selection as a way of making sure their child's learning needs were met, as well as their needs for general well-being. JaneM's description of high level math as torture for her son and her selection of a school that was not considered to be as rigorous as the magnet and private schools was a decision made for the well-being of her son.

Choosing a school that does not have a strong academic reputation does not mean, however, that parents have lowered the standards for their child to an extent that academics do not factor into school selection. Continuing with JaneM's case, academics end up being tied to school population as a whole rather than by the quality of the school or its educators. Again, JaneM-

> I had two kids in my biology class at [county school] who had come from Erie. And they came up to me together one day and said, this is just so hard. If we just behave at Erie, we get good grades. This is so hard. And I had a kid when I worked when I worked at Gannon (University), who came into my office one day, I knew her from [former school], who said, "I had a four-oh, it's [former school], and I'm failing out of school here." She said, "How did they tell me I was a rock star. … I am working my ass off here and I cannot be successful." So I just have reasons to believe that the standards are not as high as they are in other places. And that is not a criticism of the teachers. at all, what are you going to do? You can't fail every kid in your class. So that's what, that's what I kind of feel. I feel that it's a rough crowd with kind of low standards because it has to be that way.

Again, this quote encompasses both parent concerns about academics and peer selection, tying them together. About half of the remaining parents connected peer selection and academics. These concerns were present for both parents who looked at academics in the sense of higher level learning and programming, as well as those who used a broader conception and wanted to balance challenges with student needs in describing the importance of academics for school selection. In both groups, parents discussed their desire for their children to have opportunities to work with other hard working students who would help to provide the kind of learning environment that would stimulate them and keep them engaged. From KellyA-"I wanted him to be surrounded by students that cared and students that were driven and to the front you know, for the most

part not everybody's perfect, but I didn't want him to be surrounded by people who did not (care)." They also looked for the school to provide structural elements that would increase their opportunities for success. One of the structural elements that stood out for several parents was the master schedule employed by the school.

The type of schedule utilized by the school was considered important for groups for academically different purposes. Choosers of Collegiate Academy pointed out it's A/B block schedule as sought after to afford students better opportunities in AP and dual enrollment work, while both McDowell parents described the 4x4 block schedule as something they believed would help their student to be able to concentrate on fewer courses at once and allow them to enjoy more of the other aspects of high school. One Mercyhurst Prep parent did mention scheduling, but in the context of overall fit with academics, rather than providing specifics.

Primary Marketable Factor 2: Social & Specialized Programs and Athletics

Social and specialized programs and athletics includes elements of schooling that are intertwined with coursework and curriculum, but also serve to supplement education outside of the classroom. In effect, these programs provide students with opportunities to specialize their education and meet their needs. Social and specialized programs and athletics is comprised elements of academics, volunteerism, athletics, social engagement, activism, and community. In the realm of academics, they are composed of honors, AP, and special education programming, career and technical programs, music, theater, and dance. Social and after school programs like, Model UN, Mock Trial, Academic Decathlon, Key Club, 4-H Club, Robotics, STEM programming,

Future Teachers of America, and National Honors Society all are grouped into this category. Opportunities for athletics, both formal, state sanctioned athletics, and club sports and intramural sports are included here as well. In interviews, parents often used these academic programs and afterschool and club programs interchangeably, rightfully understanding that they can complement one another in enhancing student experiences and engagement. They also understood that these programs offered opportunities for social engagement, and chances to further explore their interests as a way of working toward a more focused vision of the future for their child.

As a group, social and specialized programs and athletics were highly sought by the interviewed parents. In questions about parent networks and larger discussion around high school selection, interviewees cited that these programs were also sought after highly by their peers. On the whole, these factors accounted for the largest group of primary marketable factors, carrying 36.3% of the selections (Figure 9). In the survey data, specialized programs such as honors, AP, career & technical programming, and special education programs made up 10.7% of prioritized choices, social programs made up 8% of prioritized choices, and athletics, music, theater, and dance programs, and technology programming made up 10% combined, and student preference made up 6.3% (Table 7) . Open houses, shadowing, etc. was also included in this grouping because a number of parents specifically noted that they attended these programs specifically to see these elements of the school and they were also what was primarily showcased at these events.

These specialized programs offer students opportunities for individualization and enrichment. The importance of social and specialized programs and athletics cannot

be understated in the school selection decisions of parents. These programs appeal to parents primarily because they are an essential element of school choice and enhance the number of choices available to tailor schooling to the student. Parent attitudes about these options can be summed up by a response from TonyaM, a Black, middle class nurse with an associate's degree who attended high school in Erie and was looking for a place that would best suit her son, who is studious, somewhat introverted, likes sports, and has a lot of varied interests. When asked about these programs, her response included-

> You know what I mean, when you want to join this club and that club, and he has this, he has all these different interests that you know, that in his head, they're supposed to have at school, not knowing the reality of budget cuts and... you know, not having the time or people just a time or anyone available to do the type of programs that he thinks would be available. But at Mercyhurst he had, **oh my goodness**, his eyes **lit up** when they started talking about coding clubs and the cooking classes and you know, it was just like, it was the place for him.

For TonyaM, meeting her son's needs included ensuring he would be surrounded with students who had similar interests, but also that he have opportunities for participating in social and specialized programs that would captivate him and meet his desire to continue to try new things and explore as many opportunities as possible. For her, and many of the parents, the preferences of the child are highly important data to be used in the decision-making process. When asked who was the final decision-maker in the high school selection process, only one parent stated that they were the sole decision-maker, and did not in some way include the student in their response. TonyaM's son also was interested in athletics, but was not interested in playing in college. For her, the addition of athletics at Mercyhurst Prep that would allow her son to participate no matter his level of skill, was an additional bonus.

Athletics dotted much of the conversation for many parents, although few of the interviewees in the qualitative portion of this study cited it as the primary influence. They did, however, attribute athletics as a decision factor to many of the conversations in their social groups as their peers made selections for their children. RoryD, a middle class male account technician who identified as "another race or ethnicity" who was raising two boys in a mixed race/ethnicity household and had reported many conversations with other parents in the high school selection process expressed that athletics dominated much of the conversation in his social circle-

> So I would, I would say that was the biggest component was athletic programs, you know, football programs, basketball programs, baseball programs. Most, most of the kids that [are around] my kids are athletes, so they're always looking for what's going to set them up- What High School is going to give them the best opportunity at the next level. So I know a lot of people went to Prep even Mercyhurst even McDowell, just because they felt like those schools would give their kid the best chance to play college, baseball, basketball, football. Get them prepared for the next the next level.

Similarly, DarbyC noted that many parents in her social circle were focused on athletics-

> So I mean, I do feel that I have friends for whom athletics are the number one. Like, that's the goal, that's their most important thing. And I think for those people, if athletics is the number one thing for their kid, I think that Cathedral Prep is the place that they want to go. And, and Alex is not an athlete. That wasn't part of his kind of whole background. It's not a part of his interest. If it had been, maybe our decision making would have been different, but because athletics was not, you know, I feel like some people were making that choice for Cathedral prep because of athletics.

LolaC's interview concurred with the view above, as she was the lone interviewee who chose Cathedral Prep/Villa and was highly focused on athletics and football for her grandson. She viewed athletics as a way for her grandson, whom she

describes as a “big kid” with lots of strength to continue to grow and thrive. It also is seen as a way for him to avoid potential bullies and make friends.

The second primary marketing factor does not just focus on social programs and athletics. Specialized programs were viewed as particularly important to meet student needs by several parents. KimE and KorraE both targeted the Career and Technical programs at Erie High School as a key to their decision making process but for somewhat varied reasons. KimE is an Asian female customer service rep and mother of four who is also currently taking college courses. She carefully weighed out safety concerns with the benefits of the career and tech programming her child was seeking- “I had people that tried to talk me out of sending my son to that school. Okay because of the safety and concerns but it's again it was the auto mechanics class that sold him [her son] that's the class that he wanted to take so…” KimE’s concerns about her son were also related directly to his strengths and needs in the classroom and his desire to get something other than a traditional academic education, thus making the selection of specialized programming in the form of career and technical education (auto mechanics) a highly important selection factor-

> … my son cuz he's not, he doesn't plan on going to like four year college. He wants to be able to- he's working now. He's 14 years old. He's not… he doesn't want to sit in a classroom. He likes to work and that's how he learns is working as he goes, you know, he can't, he's not, well-- he doesn't like to learn from a textbook. He's hands-on. So the tech program made his decision to go and we were making sure he was committed to the class he picked.

KimE understands that her son just does not want to be in a regular classroom setting very often. He wants to use his hands, be active, and stay engaged in something

that will capture his interest. For them, the career and technical education programing are exactly the right fit for him. For others, these programs are a solid fit and a better opportunity for students than what some private schools may offer. KorraE offers this when asked about her final decision factors-

> Um, well, I think when it came down to it, him not getting accepted to Collegiate kind of sold Erie High for us. You know, because we had never really considered private school, just because he, he really wanted that opportunity for the tech. In the privates, they just don't have that.

Capturing the complexities of the decision-making factors surrounding social and specialized program and athletics could comprise an entire dissertation of its own. Here, the analysis focuses on understanding the generalized perspectives with which parents seek out these sorts of opportunities for their children. In essence, they offer students opportunities to become more well-rounded, capable citizens, and hand-tailor their education to their needs and desires. Perhaps better than any other primary marketable factors, social and specialized programs and athletics capture the true essence of school choice and at a minimum in the current study, encapsulate the largest portion of factors that parents used to select schools for their children.

Primary Marketable Factor 3: School Climate, Culture, and Reputation

The code data related to school climate, culture and reputation was synthesized from associations of reputation, religious affiliation, networking (as future opportunity for students), school climate, and peer choice. School climate, culture, and reputation were woven into parent responses regularly with one another. (Student) peer choice and student preference were also sometimes discussed interchangeably, but parents most

often associated peer choice with school culture, attributing it to social networks, or religious affiliation. Although peer choice was associated with both academics and college and career readiness and social and specialized programs and athletics in the context of parents discussing what was on the minds of their children, the parental decision lens, seemed to focus on their ability to control the peer selection for their students by choosing schools with a particular school climate or culture. School climate, culture, and reputation made up 16% of the selection factors chosen by parents in survey data (Figure 6). Of the individual selection factors, school climate and culture made up 6.7% of the total, reputation accounted for 6.0%, while religious affiliation made up 1.7%, networking opportunities made up 0.7%, and peer choice made up 1.5 of the total (Table 7). Only 1 interviewee cited religious affiliation as important, possibly because the sample was primarily coming from the public middle schools. Networking was not seen as important either, aside from on parent who pointed out that coaching networks can play a role in sports recruiting. Peer choice provided for some conversation, but interestingly, most parents discussed making a more individualized decision for their child, and relying much less on the decisions of either parent or student peers. The remaining factors, Climate & Culture and Reputation played more prominent roles in the discussions.

Parents looked for school climate and culture to help support their own parenting views and supported their ideas about what they wanted their children to get from their school experience. For these parents, students learn much more than academics. As KellyA, a White, middle class teacher at her son's chosen school and mother of two describes it-

> They're [teachers at the Magnet School] very accepting of different kinds of learners, different kinds of students. I also like the diversity, when it comes to the types of learners types of experiences. I also like that my kids, some have been raised with, people of all races, all religions, all know, all walks of life. I think that makes them better citizens, where they accept it …doesn't… you know, people are people.

KellyA goes on to further explain how she believes the culture and climate of her chosen school will help not only develop her child as a citizen, but also as a person with a greater sense of self, having value, self-worth, and provide continual opportunities to learn and grow in these areas-

> So the fact that that it's, it's kind of like, there's a lot of life lessons to learn there beyond just academics, that tolerance, and about pride in your tribe, pride for yourself and your, you know, respecting others, and most of them have this constant pride, honor, respect [the student motto], and we do it every day, you know, and I wanted him to be a part of that. So the environment more than, I mean, all schools have academic programs, right, but not all schools have ,have the environment that we have, everybody tries to imitate it, but it's something that has taken 20 years.

When asked about the most important factor in the selection process KellyA goes on to say-

> Hmm. School environment? I think the environment- that, did the kids feel safe? Do the kids feel wanted? Do the kids feel… Well do the kids feel like we have lots of kids that are transgender or gender fluid that, that whole thing that was not an issue 10 years ago? Right? … Well are they safe? Are they in a place where they're going to feel like they can go to school? Do we fear do we fear students that are different you know, the Asian students getting bullied or the Muslim students getting bullied or, or the way that just safety I think that safety and acceptance and school culture are of upmost importance, and if you if you don't have a strong schools, if you don't have a strong idea of belonging and safety, and acceptance, it's really, really, really hard to get kids to increase their academics and increase their, their workload and all of that if they don't feel wanted, and like they belong. When kids feel wanted, and they feel like they belong, and they feel like, like they're part of something, they're just like, just like employees, when, when employees feel like they're wanted and they belong and that they're safe, they're going to work harder.

KellyA also spoke about the importance of surrounding her son with students that would be like him, where he could find encouragement and safety to be who he is, enjoy playing the trumpet with friends and not worry about being bullied or picked on for his choices. These sentiments were echoed in several of the parent interviews for families who chose both Collegiate Academy and Mercyhurst Preparatory School. Environment and culture, climate and reputation are closely linked. In some instances, they could be used rather interchangeably, although some parents add physical safety to the group of elements placed in the term environment. Climate, culture, and reputation may not be a primary factor for all parents, but it is an essential choice component for some parents in the high school selection process.

RoryD and MonicaM both cited that they had considered school culture heavily in similar regard, although they both made different school selections than KellyA. DarbyC initially stated that these factors were not important and that academics were the only decision-making factors, but later recognized that she contradicted herself and acknowledged that there were major benefits to the culture of the school she selected. However, she was careful to note that she was wary of some of the reputation Collegiate Academy may have gained from its success, worrying that students there may feel as though they were "better than other kids," something she very much wanted to avoid. This sentiment burrowed its way into conversations about reputation, especially in regard to one of the private schools, known as a former all boys' school and having a long record of athletic success. KorraE was the first to note her concern when asked about what she knew about the school- "Um, very sports driven. I mean, I went to [Private

School] but I think it was very sports driven. Um, very snobby richie, kind of if you're, if you don't come from that you're looked upon differently." KellyA was less subtle in her approach, remembering a recent event at a football game-

> I did I just roll my eyes out loud? I think when I think of [Private School] all I can think about is entitled and the only thing that really matters is sports. And the way that like all I can think about is the way that [Private School] treats the way that the [Private School]athletes- athletes treat, treated our kids at the game and as the kids are coming onto the field (like, you suck, you suck!)

MonicaM's experience at this school's open house both confirmed her feelings about the school's reputation and turned her away from it as a personal consideration, although she reluctantly admitted that if her son had wanted to attend, she would have let him go there-

> So, we went to the [Private School] open house and actually felt extremely uncomfortable, um trying to talk to some of the coaches, they didn't want to talk to me they only wanted to talk to my husband. I didn't, you know, and I tried to explain to them that as much as I love my husband, if I told him this is where I wanted him to go, and he said no, but I said, YES,, this is where he would go. So I am the one you should be talking to, you know, to try and let them know that I had to let you know that I'm the one you want to talk to, and they just dismissed me. It felt very. I, I, I wanted to turn away but [son] is still kind of had a thought about [Private School] in his mind. So I tried not to when he committed to [a different Private School]. That I let my feelings go. [laughs]

These insights show that reputation can be both a major pull factor and a push factor, depending on the circumstance. In many instances, a school's reputation could enhance its appeal, which was certainly the case with at least three of the schools. It could also be a detriment, which was the case for one private school and the large, urban public school, wherein the schools reputation regarding fights, safety, and violence, were definitive push factors for several parents, and concerns that were overcome by the career

and tech programs available at the school for others. Although few parents discussed it, reputation is both a surface idea, and a subconscious one. This concept, brought up by RoryD may more fully describe the sorts of underlying effects that reputation has in the decision-making process-

> So I would say probably conscious, you know, consciously, I don't… I wouldn't say it made, it was a deciding factor, but I know subconsciously like those things you know you make a decision kind of by how much you actually dig in and look into see if those reputations are verified or if there's anything real about those reputations. So that's usually your first impression is the reputation that you're you know, that you're getting from someone. Sure it played a big factor, but to be honest, I can't tell you how much I've looked in after the fact to know, if those reputations were correct or not, though I'm damn sure they played a factor.

RoryD's insight is that reputation is both conscious and subconscious, and as he would later state, the validity of a school's reputation is very difficult to ascertain until *after* a student is enrolled and begins to attend classes and events. This problem is a difficult barrier for parents who are truly trying to weigh options for their children to overcome. As other parents noted, open houses only provide window dressing and cannot give students a real feel for the climate and culture of a school. KimE and LolaC, JaneM, and KorraE noted that their own experiences in these same public, private and parochial schools may color their own views of the schools or that their former knowledge of these schools (reputation) may be different from the actual current state of these schools. In most all of the cases, they felt that they would not let their view of the schools affect their student's choices. To RoryD's point, that may be more difficult than expected.

Primary Marketable Factor 4: School Safety

School Safety was definitively on the mind of nearly every parent interviewed, although it did not necessarily surface as the primary determinant for final school selection. School safety comprised 15% of the total Primary Selection Factors once the data were re-organized (Figure 6). 12.3% percent of survey responses prioritized school safety as a top 5 choice (Figure 5). It was the number one ranked selection factor amongst all other selection factors, with 8.3% of 1st priority responses. Included in the School Safety Marketable Factor are the sub-factors of school safety, COVID-19 Policies, Preparedness for COVID-19, and Avoidance of Public School. COVID-19 Policies and Preparedness factors were included in this category because of the strong reactions regarding safety that were elicited by some parents. These parents looked at COVID measures as a top priority from early experiences in the pandemic. Avoidance of Public School was also included in this section because the topic was either dismissed wholly by parents (i.e. they rejected the notion of avoiding public school), or was explicitly tied back to school safety in the ensuing discussion.

Safety proved to be a defining reason that at a number of parents chose not to send their student to the large, urban, comprehensive school. The recent merger of several schools into one, the feeling of overcrowding, and history of different segments of the city not getting along with one another shook many of the parents, some of whom described the potential of their child attending with words like “scary”, “terrifying”, “absolutely not,” and “100% NO!,” among others. They were willing to make great sacrifices by paying large sums of tuition, taking extra jobs, or moving to a different district to alleviate their safety concerns. Perhaps the voice that best illustrates all of the

thoughts and emotions that swirled though the conversations about this level of fear over safety was TonyaM, who chose to send her son to a Private School-

> So I think it scared me when I put all those kids in one school, I didn't even give public school a chance to, you know what I mean? Where, where, I may have considered sending him on to a public school because you pay $7,000 for a freshman school year, like right now for him to go to school. Like that's more than tuition for when I went to college, like you know what I mean? It's, it's ridiculous, honestly, it really is. And I can't even believe it. We're paying it. But we're, we're kind of terrified for him to go to [Comprehensive Public School] , because my son is not that kind of kid. Like, I don't know what to say. Not that I don't know what that means to everyone. But like, my son is very timid, very reserved, not confrontational, and they put a bunch of inner city kids in a school that there's no way that I can see him, like, getting the attention that he needs or thriving, in an environment as such… So I think he may have went to, maybe I don't know if it would have been Central or East (former high schools), but I don't think I would have had a problem with him going to either of those it was when they put all the kids in one school and you don't understand, **it's terrifying**! And I didn't go to school with police on guard you know what I mean? And fights breaking out every day I didn't go to school with that environment and I don't want that for my son, especially being he's not that type of kid, so yeah everyone kind of like supported the decision to that public school kind of like [Comprehensive Public School] was not wasn't a fit for him….it was kind of like [Comprehensive Public School], No!, automatically, No! No matter what we got to do, I don't care if I have to pick up an extra job, I don't care, whatever I have to do. He's not going there.

Although safety was generally targeted to physical safety or psychological safety (from bullying, fighting, harassment, etc.), some parents also tied the idea of safety to a student feeling safe to be who they are. KellyA captures both sentiments in her recall of a recent event at a football game-

> I was at the football game with a big fight started, I was there. And my first thought is where's my kid? You know, I don't want to my kids to go to a school where I have to say, where's my kid? Is he safe? Do you know what I mean? I hate it because it I feel that Collegiate is very safe. I feel

> that kids are safe, not only physically safe, but they're safe to be themselves there. It's a safe, environment to be who you are, you know?

Psychological safety and the freedom to "be who you are" were important and might be best thought of through the lens of Maslow (1987), which places psychological safety and physical safety first and a sense of belonging and self-actualization further up the organizational pyramid. As the basal (deficiency) needs of physical and psychological safety are secured, parents are likely turning their attention to the desire to ensure their child's being/growth needs are supported in their school environment. In other portions of her interview, KellyA focused highly on her chosen school's ability to help her child meet his growth needs. Similar to KellyA, three other parents,TonyaM, JaneM, and SallyA, all sought out situations that would help their child(ren) further develop their cognitive needs or sense of self through specialized programs of interest (such as computer/AV clubs and social activities, special education programming, and hands-on learning, and auto mechanics) offered at the schools they selected for their children. Choosing their specific school or program may aid the parents in feeling as though their child's psychological and safety needs are being met and that the focus of schooling will be on the growth needs such as cognition and self-actualization.

As the discussions around safety varied from parent to parent and school to school, it might be noted that, in general, most schools were considered safe, but the push away from the large, urban, comprehensive school for safety concerns was a very real phenomenon based on parent interview data. This theme appears again as a large portion of Research Question 3, and the exploration of school safety continues in that section.

RQ2: What sources of information do parents rely on to make school choice decisions as their children enter high school?

The second research question in this study centered on trying to determine the types of information that parents utilized to make school choice decisions for their children. In parsing out the qualitative and quantitative elements of the collected data, three major sources of information came to light. The first information source is their child, especially when considering the needs and preferences of their child. Second are parental networks, and third, are the school-created information sources, such as open houses, shadowing days, and school websites, materials and pamphlets. Overwhelmingly, parents relied chiefly on their understanding of student's needs and preferences, followed by parental networks, and to a much smaller degree, school-created information sources. In this section, each of these sources of information are reviewed by order of importance to parents.

The Child as a Source of Information

The child proved to be the most often discussed and cited source of information that parents used to make high school selections for their students, especially in regard to the child's needs and preferences. Every parent interviewed spoke about their child's specific needs in a variety of forms. Examples from their conversations included academic needs, both for higher level rigor and opportunities to engage in elective and hands-on work, and for learning support structures. They also talked about

their child's need to participate in their preferred activities, whether they be sports, music, or clubs and activities. They explained how the tried to tune into the preferences for their child, trying to determining what type of environment might best suit them, where they might be best able to find friends, or at least peers with similar interests. Several discussed in detail the search for a place for their student to belong that might best suit the child. Parents worked hard to navigate the varying opportunities that each school in the selection process might present, often citing long discussions as a family, or in some cases, putting together checklists to compile about each school as a way of making decisions. Almost all of the parents with more than one child discussed how they made different decisions for an older sibling or may need to make different decisions for a younger one. Of the 10 interviewees, 8 had more than one child and 4 discussed having students at different schools.

Although they use differing methods, both LolaC and MonicaM went to great lengths to try to discern the needs of their student and found ways to try to ensure their success. LolaC built a coalition of family, friends, and school supports for her grandson-

> Because when he came to me, he didn't really-- He's a very smart kid, he really didn't have that much, you know, good grades, because right now, he is like in emotional support. And working his way to regular classes. He, you know, we've been, he has a team of people, you know, Office of Children and Youth Family Services, we have a whole team of people that work with me, and been going to the school and having meetings. They want it to, you know, put him in all regular classes. I said, No, I want him to do it. I don't want to overstimulate him, you know, and have him crash and burn. I want to do it. You know, maybe two classes every, let's say, the periods. Good. How do they do that? Yeah, I didn't want them to do all at once. So like right now. He's an 85% emotional support. And he's in language arts, his regular class, which he's doing great. The quarters, that's what it's called per quarter. I want them to, you know, gradually, you know, do that with him. And he's actually doing good. And then you

> know, another thing with the school I need to know that the schools can help him.

LolaC continually discussed the coalition of support she had garnered to help her grandson out. She specifically targeted extra supports for him to help with his emotional supports, and noted regular weekly meetings with the team to ensure his success, as well as enlisting friends, family and coaches to continually provide positive support, through academics, special education, football, and to make sure he was well dressed and would not encounter bullying from his peers. She noted weighing all of these factors in the decision-process. By contrast, MonicaM worked with her children to set goals for themselves, made checklists, and weighed out their options using a variety of information at their disposal-

> You know, we didn't look into look at we, we kept, we had our lists with both the kids we made lists what we were looking for in a school, what they wanted to see. And then when we did the tours, we looked at what we saw that we liked, what we saw that we didn't like. Um with [older child] it was just making sure she felt comfortable. That was the big thing is she needed to feel comfortable where she went where she thought she could thrive. With our youngest, it was different it was, um, he push, he pushes himself more academically and athletically. So we needed to find a fit where it would go with both of those for him. And with our options, the private school had more of the athletic fit for him. And it also has a more of an opportunity to push him academically. And I know he could have done this in any of the schools, but in eighth grade, he took classes in the high school level. And, he felt very comfortable with our choice at Mercyhurst. And he really enjoyed his eighth grade year classes there. So he knew that's where he wanted to go to high school.

In this excerpt, MonicaM explains one small portion of the variety of tools she used to make her decisions, lists, open houses, tours, early coursework at the schools, information about athletics, and about the school environment, but she also employed

separate techniques for each of her two children, a common theme among parents with more than one child. Additionally, she later explained that the family used an explicit strategy to not get caught up in the "bells and whistles" of the open houses, but to use them to target their lists and weigh their options according to what they felt their needs were, not what the school put on display. MonicaM had many conversations with other parents about high school selection, but did not let those affect her decision, and noted that in the case of both of her children, who selected different schools, they made decisions that were unlike those of both the parents' and children's peers.

Parental Networks

Throughout the interview process, parental networks were discussed frequently, and were a regular topic of discussion for the acquisition of information, although they much less frequently factored into the final decision-making. No parent stated that they made a decision strictly using the information provided by other parents, however all but two stated that they used their networks to gather information. KimE stated that she passed off advice from friends as "nice, but not really helpful."

TonyaM noted that most of her friends sent their students to a school she felt was unsafe, telling her that they didn't feel the need to "shelter their child." She noted using the advice of a friend who had an older child at the private school she eventually selected to learn how to navigate the complexities of the financial aid process and figure out how to get involved in parent groups at the school. RoryD was probably the most vocal about gathering information from his peers.

> I had a lot of parents that I knew and friends that through coaching kids that had kids in Mill Creek did have the older kids that went through McDowell already had kids that are Currently in Prep, I mean, we've been talking about Fairview. So I was talking to some friends who have lived in Fairview. And I'm just gathering kinda getting information on, you know, how good how good the school is, like, you know, what are the incident rates at the school, like if there's a lot of fights, if there's, you know…

He noted long discussions for up to three years prior to high school on a number of topics ranging from, safety to academics, sports (mainly), and specialized programs like ROTC and robotics. He mentioned speaking to parents from 4 or 5 nearby districts, and really looking into all of the schooling options within the city. Ultimately, he explained that the real discussions were between he and his wife, along with his children, and the decision to move to a nearby district was driven primarily by a desire to let his children grow up in a better neighborhood and a better school. About half of the parents noted using their networks to gather information about schools, the rest explained that although they had many conversations, they did not use the information provided by others to make their choices. In all, parental networks proved to be a useful source of information, relied on more heavily than school provided information, but less so than the children themselves.

School Provided Information (Data, Open Houses, shadowing, etc.)

Of all three groups of information sources, school-provided information was relied upon the least. In part, due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, many said they did not attend open houses. Shadowing programs were not offered at the public schools, but continued at the private schools. Few parents reported relying on website information, two mentioned using the school Facebook pages. The overall sentiment around school

provided data was that it was useful, but not as highly as other sources of data. The exception came in the form of open houses, which were seen as somewhat more useful than other materials. One example comes from TonyaM, whose son's experience at the open house for the school he eventually selected was very important, "I don't know what kind of what kind of image in his head he had a high school, but for him, it was just TV perfect." Another parent, DarbyC, noted that she felt open houses were important sources of information, but stopped going for her third child, "I think that's very important. Although this is my third kid there. So I made it with him. It was less important. I will say with my first one, those things were very, very important." At least during the COVID-19 Pandemic, needs and preferences of the student and parental social networks were reportedly much more heavily used than school provided information. It is also possible that open houses, shadowing, and school provided information are more important in making a decision for the first children entering high school than for the younger siblings, and that school provided information, especially in-person events would be more of a factor outside of a pandemic.

RQ3: How do parents' perceptions of public schools affect their high school selection?

General Perceptions

The parents in the qualitative portion of this study generally had a positive view of public schools, indicating that their perceptions of public schools on the whole did not influence their high school selections. None of the interviewees were against

public schools, although it should be noted that they all sent their children to public middle schools. They generally looked at public schools as a positive community resource and felt that their own children were well-served. The majority of interviewees chose a public school option for their student, although some moved to different districts to take part in other offerings. Their support ranged from staunch public school defender to strong fear of one public school, but general good feelings toward most others. Avoidance of public schools was not a major factor in either quantitative data from the survey (1.2% of selections, all 4th or 5th priority) or qualitative data, where no parent stated avoiding public schools was a priority, however, there was a tendency to avoid one public school that was considered to be less safe than the other options. Some research would suggest that parent concerns over school safety are related to race (Shumow & Lomax (2001) at least some of which may be related to school size, or neighborhood concerns (Henry et al., 2019). While the large percentage survey responses from white, middle-aged women may warrant greater scrutiny in further research, these concerns cannot be interpreted from the data in this study as there is little evidence from this particular study in support of racial concerns as a surrogate for school safety concerns.

School Safety

Based on the interview data, it is nearly impossible to separate perceptions of the public schools from school safety. This is particularly the case for the large, urban, comprehensive school. For the large, urban public school, safety was seen as not just something that affected students physically or mentally, but also could have a negative impact on teacher effectiveness. In these discussions, parents thought out what they

understood to be the logical extensions of unsafe schools. Their dialogue around these issues shows their extended thinking and the ways that they perceive schools and students to be affected by the safety issues that present themselves.

Both SallyA and RoryD mentioned that school safety was both a student well-being and a teacher quality issue, noting that they believed that good teachers would have options and choose not to stay in an unsafe environment, leaving schools that they felt were unsafe in the position of having lower quality teachers and a more dangerous environment. There is some research to support the parents view (Steele et al., 2010). RoryD recalled growing up in a very poor neighborhood and going to a school with a lot of fights and bullying. He and his wife both grew up in the same troubled neighborhood and wanted to provide a different environment for their children. Showing an understanding of the dynamics of school choice, not only for parents, but for teachers he states-

> - for us, it was, we don't want to go to a school that we had, like worry our kid had to worry about safety, personal safety, where, you know, fights would be broke out, not enough teachers, high classroom ahh student to teacher ratio, that way, you know, they're not getting enough attention that they need, when it comes if they're having a problem, you know, having a teacher that's overwhelmed.

Perceptions of public school were also used by parents with regard to peer selection, both in positive and negative ways. Parents were often actively seeking positive peer affiliations for their children and actively working to avoid negative peer affiliations. These sorts of push and pull factors play out in the dynamic ways that parents attempted to influence the environment their children would encounter through the peers they would be most likely to regularly be in contact with. They look at these

dynamics both as aids in helping to ensure their children are raised well, and as potential pitfalls to be avoided, or worked around as they are able.

Positive Affiliations and Peer Selection

Seeking positive connections with other students and adults was common among parents in the interviews. This behavior is closely tied with the social capital perspective, where parents are seeking social connections that will benefit their children and avoiding those that may lead to negative results. Seeking positive affiliations with other students came in several forms. Some parents wanted positive influences, while others were looking for acceptance, camaraderie, and like-mindedness through coursework, classroom environment, and extra-curriculars. Much of this is captured in KellyA's desire to help her son find an environment in which she feels he can thrive-

> -That that kind of, because he likes to see himself as an intellectual. And so he likes the fact that the students engaged with the material and engaged with the teachers and all of that. So I love that. That environment, I also love the fact that like Collegiate no matter what, I mean, [son] plays the trumpet. And playing an instrument is cool, right? Being in, you know, what I mean, and being involved in art is accepted and cool. And you're not considered a weirdo or whatever. And people that play instruments and people that go on stage and act and people that you're, you're kidding, it's cool. It's, it's, it's, it's part of who you are, it doesn't mean that you're a geek or whatever. That's what I want. And I wanted him to have that kind of experience.

KellyA focused on two positive peer selection elements, peer academic engagement, and fitting in with like peers. She actively sought an environment where her son would feel welcomed and pushed by peers who performed at a high academic level and would feel welcomed and accepted for his own preferences for music, academics,

and other personal characteristics. KellyA saw Collegiate Academy as the place where her son would experience the sort of environment that would provide him with positive peer supports, and selected her son's school for that reason.

Negative Affiliations and Peer Selection

Contrastingly, negative affiliations were obstacles that parents worked strenuously to avoid for their children. The parents who discussed these ideas shared common believes about the pitfalls of negative influences on early high school adolescents. These concerns ranged from mild to severe. Some parents thought they could handle guiding their students through difficulties with negative peer influences, while others saw it as maybe the most difficult challenge for them to navigate. Because of her experience in multiple schools, JaneM has chosen to actively avoid situations she feels may have a negative influence on her son-

> And I still feel I have a responsibility to provide you with the best education I can. And don't get me wrong. I know, you know how many teachers I know in that building who are rockstars Don't get me wrong. I just, I'm trying to avoid clientele more than I am the teachers. So yeah, sorry.

JaneM's aversion to the large urban comprehensive school was placed directly on her wish to avoid negative experiences with peers. She attributes the need to avoid the school as a way to help ensure her son would stay out of trouble and not get caught up with "the wrong crowd." Her experience as an educator led her to believe that there were many good teachers in the school, even "rockstars," but it wasn't enough to overcome her

desire to help her son avoid negative peer influences. She selected another public school option for her son that she felt would provide a set of peers that better suited her desires.

JaneM's feelings are mirrored to a degree by RoryD, who's experiences growing up in some of the toughest neighborhoods in the city color his desire to ensure his children have different opportunities-

> Yeah, um, I went to East High, I grew up, I grew up with lower class, I guess you'd say, um single parent, and I just, you know, some of the stuff that I've seen growing up and going to, you know, you're going to Erie , I mean going East High and, and just some of the friends I even had back then. That kind of people I surrounded myself with, I made a big decision on like, how I wanted people, to grow up around my kid, you know? I didn't want him to be seeing some, some of the stuff that I've seen growing up that, you know, probably grew up a little bit too fast, you know, growing up on the lower east side. So, you know, the friend, our friend group we hung out with…um, we kind of, we grew up real fast, we're exposed to stuff at a pretty early age and I wasn't really something I wanted to happen for him. So I want him to kind of grow up on his own, you know, kinda hold on that innocence for a little longer. You know, that's not promised, even in Millcreek, but I knew where we currently lived in Erie that, you know, wasn't the greatest neighborhood if he was going to go out and, you know, just be gone for the day, I wouldn't feel as comfortable.

RoryD was concerned about the types of situations that may present themselves in the large, urban comprehensive school, and did not want his son to be exposed to those situations. His family's choice to move to the nearby district and go to their public high school was a way of providing both a better set of neighborhood peer influences and school peer influences.

Of perhaps the greatest significance is the lamentation of LolaC When asked about what she may be trying to avoid in the decision-making process for her grandson:

> ...trouble...., period, um, the… Jesus, these kids these days....It is sad. And we constantly have talks with him because now this generation and just these past couple months, a lot of these shootings and homicides and stuff are being done by a 20 year old you know, do you understand what I'm saying, yes, it's so easy. It's so easy for these streets to suck... I'm gonna be honest, a young Black man- it is so easy to suck them up. Yeah, and he is good prey so it's like because he don't really know the street you understand? I'm saying so it's like we're on him constantly and sometimes he always asking you know, like…please grandma can I go here? Can I just like... "No not right now", you know, not unless somebody was with you and I hate being like that because I know that's how it was at when he was in the group home and stuff but also to tell him that we're doing this so you don't end up you know, like this stuff going on. And like I said, it is getting younger and younger.

LolaC's very real concerns for her grandson place a great deal of stress on her. She has wrapped support around her grandson, but greatly fears the potential influences from her neighborhood and from school. For these reasons, she is highly active with his school and plans to continue her activism for him at his next school. One of her top priorities has become ensuring his safety and well-being, and she sees a large part of that as related to their ability to navigate negative peer influence together. In total, all but one parent interviewed mentioned peer influence in one context or another. These parents' desire for some amount of control over the influences that could impact their children drove many of the decisions that parents made and found themselves in the conversation of parents at every socioeconomic level except for the one parent from the highest socioeconomic background. For these parents, especially the ones whose voices were provided in this section, the potential pitfalls of peer influence were real, and something to be taken seriously in their calculations for high school selection.

RQ4: Which school choice perspectives are parents employing when selecting a local high school option for their student?

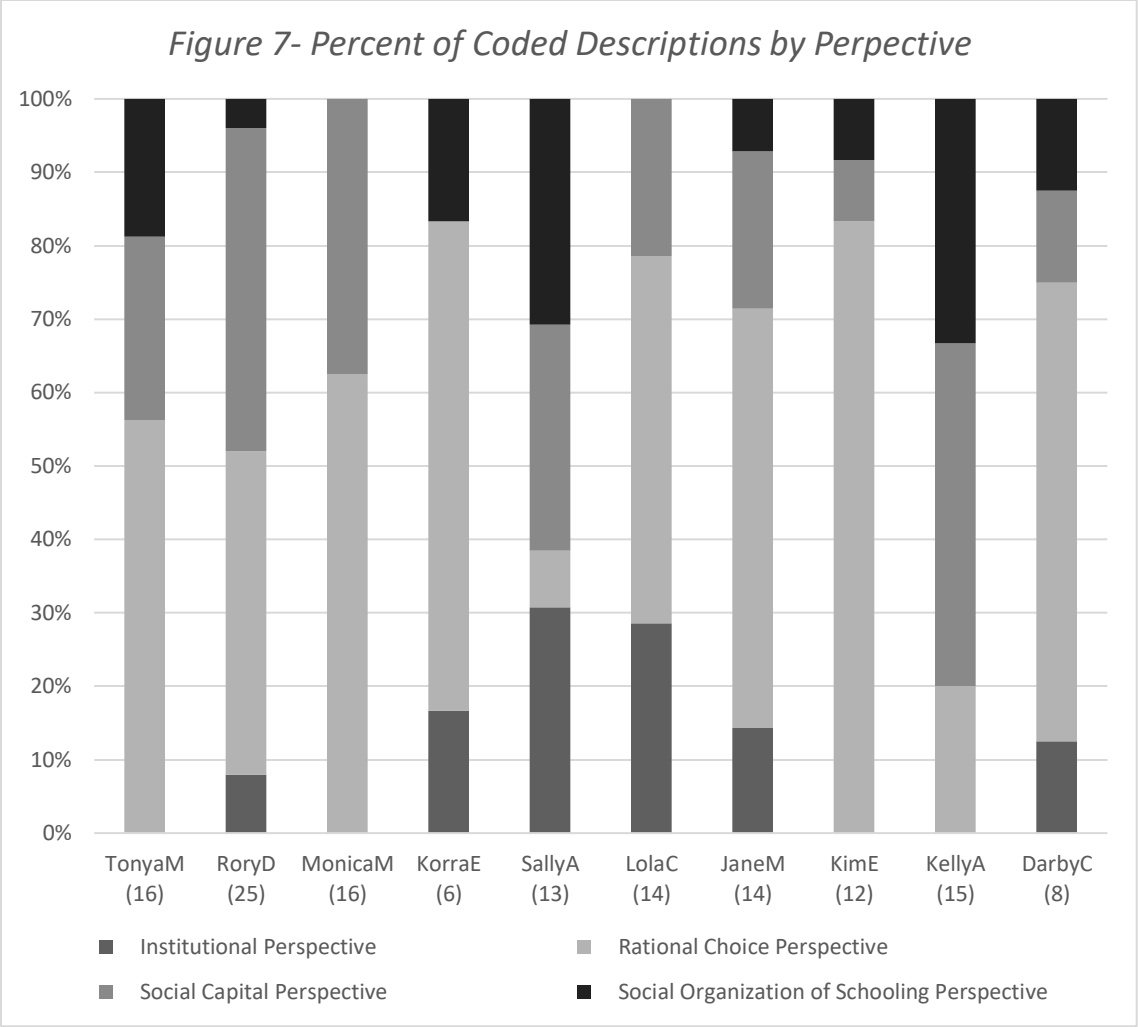
The perspective lenses that parents employ in making school choice decisions could well shape much of the school choice debate. Though rational choice is the most commonly cited methodology for parent school selection, Berends (2019) provides three other alternative perspectives that parents may use; social organization of schooling, institutional perspectives, and social capital perspectives (Figure 1). It is important to note that parents may use one or multiple perspectives in making their decisions regarding school choice. In most instances, parent decisions cannot be simply locked into one category, but are made up of some combination of decision-making perspectives multiple categories.

In an attempt to build some small understanding of this complex landscape for decision-processing, the interviews used for this study were re-coded, looking for key words and phrases that might signify the use of one perspective or another. The code book (Appendix B) provides descriptions of words and phrases that signified the use of rational choice, social organization of schooling, social capital, or institutional perspectives. As these codes were applied to the interview transcripts, they were also tracked for their prevalence and analyzed using the Dedoose analysis tools. The results of the re-coding and analysis by school choice perspectives can be found in the pie chart, Figure 8.

Figure 7 is a stacked 100% bar chart and presents the total percentage of each of the social perspective codes that can be attributed to each interviewee. If a perspective was not used by the interviewee, it is not included in the total percentage. The data here

provide some insight into how much each interviewee may have utilized each of the possible school choice perspectives in their decision processes. This figure shows again, most commonly, rational choice is employed by the parents in this study. From Figure 7 we can more easily determine that 6 of the 10 interviewees used words and phrases associated with only 3 of the 4 social perspectives. Social organization of schooling was not used by two of the participants, while the institutional perspective was not used by four participants.

Based on the interview data (Figure 8), it was found that rational choice was the most common perspective, however it was not employed evenly across all participants (Figure 7). RoryD relied equally on rational choice and social capital, and used both to a much higher degree than Institutional or social organization of schooling. TonyaM, MonicaM, LolaC, JaneM, KorraE, and DarbyC all used rational choice more than the other perspectives. DarbyC's decision making was almost entirely rational choice, as was KorraE's. If weights were given to these perspectives based on language use, DarbyC, who recorded the highest annual household income and is in the highest education bracket, would have made almost exclusively rational choice decisions.

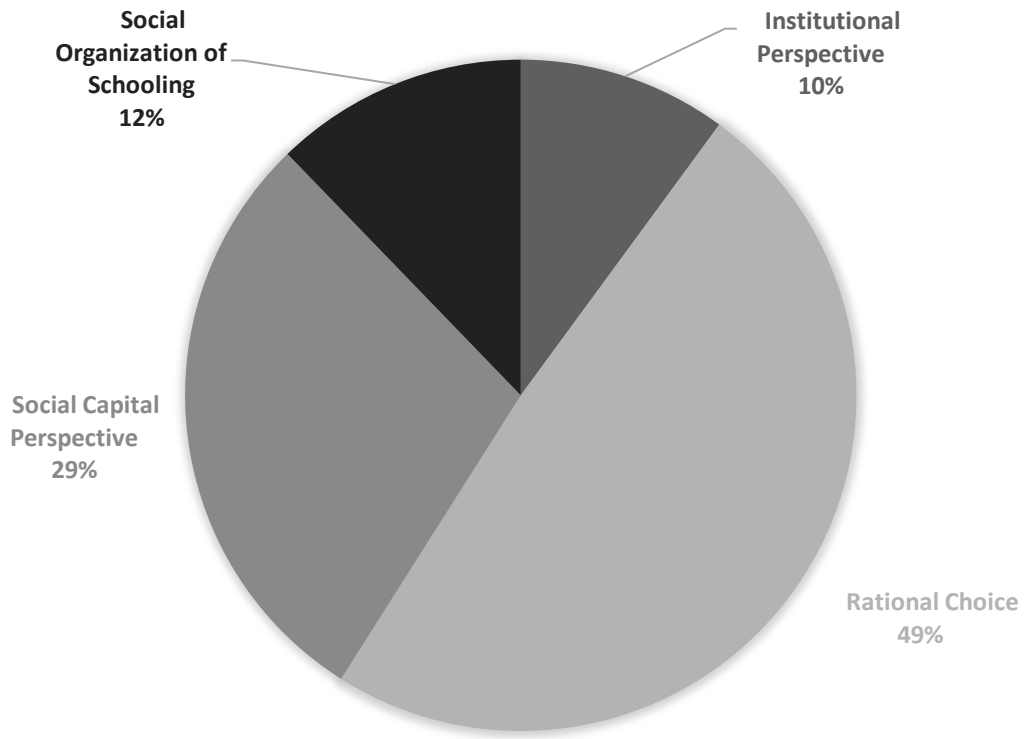


Note: Y-axis displays percent of each participant's coded perspective use.
Note: Total perspective codes listed under each interview participant.

Taken as a whole, the four perspectives can be categorized as a percent of overall decision-making by dividing the total number of codes from each perspective by the sum of the codes. This provides an overall picture of the number of phrases that could be coded back to any specific perspective from all interviewees. These data are found in Figure 8 and show a clear delineation between each perspective, with rational choice

being used to the greatest extent, followed by social capital, then social organization of schooling, and lastly, the institutional perspective.

Figure 8- Interviewee Participant Perspective Use



Note: Total perspective codes=139

Rational Choice Perspective

As Friedman (1964) described, markets are influenced by consumer choice and the idea that consumers make "rational decisions" about their selections. It is again, important to note the context with which this occurs. Markets drive innovation for consumer desires, not necessarily for the desired outcomes. Product success does not

mean that innovation drives improvement in product quality (although it may); it could just as likely drive poor construction and mass, cheaply made products if the market is driven by lower price points. Just as successful products are not necessarily driven to improve in quality (although they may), rational choice does not imply that the decision-making process is goal oriented in ways that drive traditional school success. Therefore, a more useful proxy for rational choice may be asset and liability indicators. Reasonably, rational choice makers will make asset/liability-based decisions in their selection processes. For these reasons, all interviews were re-coded for asset/and liability language to find further examples of rational choice and compare with additional data from other perspectives. These modifications are further discussed at the end of this section.

As stated, parents making rational choice decisions are often weighing assets and liabilities in their decision making. One example of this is the weighing out of options, using methods such as pros and cons lists. Another example follows as parents weigh out the very real financial decisions they often make while selecting schools. The qualitative data below show some of the rational choices that parents considered in their decisions. MonicaM, when asked about how her final decisions were made states-

> Um, I know a big factor was cost. Both of our children were already in private grade schools. Um. When we started looking with our oldest, it wasn't necessarily just the cost, it was more where we thought she might fit in with it. So a big part of the conversation was, was it worth sending her to a private school where she might not enjoy it as much as she went to public school? Does that make sense? Ogay, so with with her, the conversations were much different. It was- what do you see yourself doing? Where do you want to-- ahhh you know, you know, she is confident almost anywhere, she can make friends wherever she would go? So it wasn't where, you know, we didn't talk about where her friends were going. We talked about where did she feel most comfortable when we toured the schools. You know, we didn't look into look at we, we kept, we

> had our lists with both the kids we made lists what we were looking for in a school what they wanted to see. And then when we did the tours, we looked at what we saw that we liked, what we saw that we didn't like.

Similarly, when asked about what he thought about when making a decision for his children, RoryD paints a picture of gathering lots of data from multiple sources and weighing out his options, using available resources along the way:

> And I'm just gathering kinda getting information on, you know, how good how good the school is, like, you know, what are the incident rates at the school, like if there's a lot of fights, if there's, you know, there's good teaching going online and looking, seeing how schools are graded compared to you know, they have like, if you go on like Zillow, you can check and see where schools fall in a grading system. I don't know how the grading system is formed, but they'll give you a breakdown of you know, of pretty much everything the social classes, the race, that just kind of a breakdown of each school. So we did that. It's kind of pick and choose what, what situation would be best for our kids.

Rational choice was used simply by process of elimination in what one parent felt was a limited set of high school options for her son. KimE explains their decision:

> Me and my son sat down and talked about all the options that we had available, which aren't many in my area. He was having a hard time because of the pandemic. But he honestly he really chose the school we chose was for the tech programs that they had he chose to go into auto mechanics but we really didn't have a choice. It was either he could test to get into Collegiate or he could go to the auto mechanics class.

KimE later explains that her son really wanted to be in the auto mechanics program and sees himself as a budding mechanic. Their decision was made in part from limited options and in part from her child's interests, matching the interests to the available programming in the area.

Half of the interviewees discussed finances and how they factored into the decision-making processes for high school selection. In all cases, parents noted they

would make sacrifices, pick up extra jobs or cut bills in order to send their child to a private school if they felt it was necessary and didn't have a satisfactory alternative. Two confided that without major assistance, even with those sacrifices, private schooling would not be a possibility. Four interviewees discussed finding a satisfactory or preferred alternative in public schooling.

Social Capital Perspective

The second most common perspective utilized by parents was the social capital perspective. Indicators for this perspective were conversations with friends, family, peers, coworkers, or other students as information sources and discussions about peer selection and connection. RoryD was the biggest user of social capital, having reported numerous conversations with multiple peer groups across various schools and networks. He carefully balanced these data against rational choice factors as well, to near-even degrees as captured in the data. TonyaM and MonicaM also used social capital to a greater degree than their remaining peers. The use of social capital was highly common, perhaps unsurprisingly noting the potential connection to the heavy use of parental networks to obtain information. Although social capital perspectives were discussed heavily, social capital and networkin were not usually identified as an important tool for decision making by the parents.

As was found in the coded data, parents used the social capital perspective heavily in decision-making, but most often attributed its use to others. In discussing selections made by her peer group, MonicaM provides hints that they were using both rational

choice (cost of attendance, academics in her inner circle) and social capital (“hype” over schools, social aspects, etc.)

> MonicaM-In my close circle, I know a lot of them were choosing based on athletics and academics. A few probably went on cost coming from a private school. But, you know, if they couldn't afford it, then obviously their choice was based on cost..hhh Parents outside of my circle. A lot of them was more based on the social aspect of what was the hype for, Erie, you know, Prep/ Villa was always the hype for for St. George. So, but in my inner circle, I would say it was more based on The academics and the athletics.

SallyA, who chose the public magnet school for her children,, describes her concerns with the potential selection of the large, urban comprehensive school and her desire for her children to not be in situations where he may be tempted to follow other students who would be making poor decisions-

> So it's kind of like, I really don't want them to go there. Because God knows what they're going to see what they're going to do who they're going to follow. So it's kind of scary, but peer settings, this comes out that I kept looking at it as well.

SallyA also weighed out her option to send her children to private school, noting the experiences of her nieces with bullying in the private school and how she wanted her son to be in a more diverse environment that was accepting of differences, like a family-

> But I did also maybe realize there wasn't a lot of cultural in there. So it kind of was like a family. You know, I mentioned not funny, but funny how my niece was getting bullied, you know, and my sister was paying for it, and “oh, my God, at my son's game, you would not believe, but, you know, I have to pay for it.” It's racial, stuff like that.

Social capital was found in multiple contexts throughout the interview process. No parent outwardly discussed the use of social capital as a means to increase social standing, but many discussed it as a way of increasing opportunities for learning, and as a

way of decreasing the likelihood of their child running into situations they sought to avoid, linking much of their thinking to peer selection.

Institutional Perspective

Indicators of the use of the institutional perspective included deference to authorities in decision-making, focusing on following the lead provided by the school, or reporting the use of school personnel (guidance counselors, principals, teachers, coaches) to help make decisions about school choice. SallyA and LolaC were the greatest users of the institutional perspective, indicating through their discussions that they deferred to the schools (institutions) in decision-making much more often than their peers. Interestingly, both of these parents fell into the lowest recorded household income brackets, although SallyA has a higher degree attainment than several peers, she reported working in local schools and holding the staff in high regard, while LolaC's GED attainment was the only interviewee on the list not to report having had some form of higher education. 5 of the remaining interviewees did not use this perspective in their discussions.

The institutional perspective was the least utilized among all participants. There was little deference to the schools as institutions overall, but the perspective is perhaps best captured by LolaC, who discusses not just the needs of her grandson, but her needs from the school as his lone parent/guardian as a place that can help to provide her with the resources and support she needs for him to be successful-

> And then you know, another thing with the school I need to know that the schools can help him. You know, I'm saying I'm not just saying we're pinpoint just him but them having different counselors and stuff like that in the school. Yeah. So that's another thing we looking forward, you know, we're looking at so yeah, and I'm working with the Erie school

> district with the special education department and stuff the IEP, so we have to take a lot of consideration when trying to pick a school for him.

Social Organization of Schooling Perspective

The use of the social organization of schooling perspective was also not very common. Indicators for this perspective included discussion around looking for rigorous schooling, discipline, curriculum, or community aspects in making school decisions. This perspective is more likely to be common in parochial school systems, which are often tied to religious organizations that center schooling around the classroom as its nucleus, or potentially the church. KellyA, SallyA, and TonyaM were the largest users of this perspective, while LolaC and MonicaM did not employ this perspective at all.

Although not as rarely used as the institutional perspective, the social organization of schooling perspective was used less often than both the rational choice and social capital perspectives (Figure 8), but still factored in with about 12% of all associated codes. In this perspective, parents are using the organization of schooling to provide their children with tools to meet their needs or desires. This is often manifested by their selection of schooling that will allow them to use the built-in constructs found in the school organization to their benefit. This can be in the form of rigorous instruction, discipline, or religious instruction. It may also come in the form of using structures found in schooling to attain organizational status. Contrasted with social capital, where a parent may seek out social status, the attainment of organizational status comes through merit-based or loosely-based merit-oriented systems.

This is captured in commentary by DarbyC-

> So I'll just be really Frank, you know, we are a, we're a middle class, upper middle class, White family. And our boys, we have felt if they went to suburban schools, or to Catholic schools would be a dime a dozen doesn't. They're kind of, you know, upper middle class White boys. But I think that, putting them in our city schools and giving them that opportunity to both benefit from the diversity, but also on paper, show that they kind of were able to go to school with a lot of different kinds of kids, we've always felt that it would give them a leg up when they apply to college. So for us, again, the number one college where they're going to go, how they're going to go. And so we've tried to be thoughtful about the high school that was going to position them the best whether that was from diversity from academic preparedness from offerings that were made, whatever was going to position them best for college. That was the number one decision.

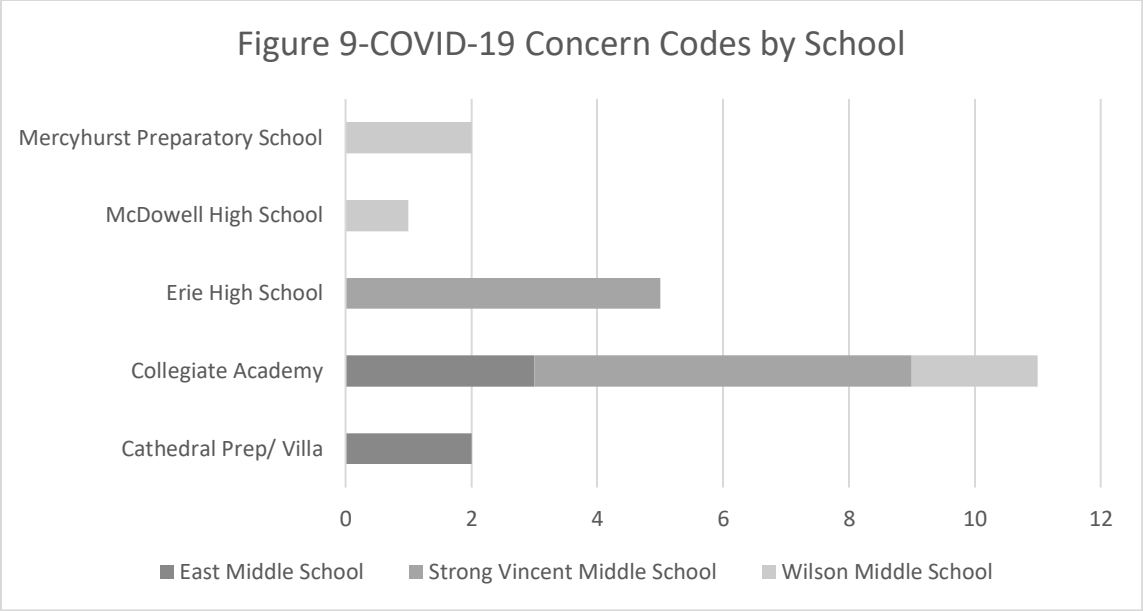
RQ5: How have parents factored COVID-19 and local schools responses into their decision making?

The study design for this research was initially centered on parent concerns over the COVID-19 Pandemic with the early understanding that parents would be able to provide a perspective from their individual lens during the interview process. Over the life of the study, the conditions surrounding the pandemic changed far more rapidly than the study was designed to capture. Schools, closed, reopened and closed again. Mask mandates, came, went and were brought back. The socio-political spectrum surrounding the pandemic was in constant flux, as were parent and student opinions about the pandemic and schooling. The data gathered represent just a single data point at the point of the interviews, which took place over the fall of 2021, between September and December. In this timespan, multiple elements around schooling shifted, as likely did the opinions and viewpoints of all of the parents interviewed. Therefore, the data are limited

to the snapshot from which they were gathered, and further representation of parent sentiment around the Pandemic and school choice cannot be ascertained from this study, even on its small scale.

COVID-19 Concerns

Although a question was asked about COVID-19 to all parents, only data related to elaborated commentary were tracked for this portion of the study. For example, when asked about how much COVID-19 factored into decision-making, many parents either said it was only a small factor or said it was important, but did not elaborate. Data were only tracked if parents elaborated on their concerns to avoid leading the interviewees. Results from these data can be found in Figure 9. These data were matched against both high school selection and current middle school enrollment. Responses indicate that interviewees looking to attend Collegiate Academy and also those coming from Strong Vincent had the highest rate of elaboration of their concerns about the pandemic. These data do not indicate that the parents were concerned about the conditions at Collegiate Academy or Strong Vincent as related to COVID-19 safety, rather, parents who shared COVID-19 concerns were worried about the Pandemic in general and noted feeling comfort in the conditions at these schools, but not necessarily all schools. These data are also not quantified by weight. For example, one parent who chose Mercyhurst Preparatory School elicited a very strong reaction with great concerns about the pandemic in general, but limited her commentary overall. Thus the strength of her reaction is not captured in tabulated data.



Note: Data depict the number of codes associated with COVID-19 concerns by chosen high school.

In general, the interviewees showed concern over the pandemic, but had overall confidence in the schools' ability to safeguard the students. The lone exception seems to be from Erie High School, where large populations and crowding were a greater concern for two of the parents. As for preparedness, there was overall confidence in schools to be prepared and parents in these interviews showed no dis-regard for the work schools were doing to keep students safe. As TonyaM stated-

> Number one, my kids do not go. They do not go to back to school. When COVID was going on. I did not, I don't think it's a good idea to take a bunch of inner city kids, put them all in one school, and no, like nonsense to anybody, but just taking a bunch of low income households, putting them into schools. I'm telling you, my kids with [Elementary School], it's always a great school. But let me tell you, those kids who come to school with gross things coming out their book bags, all different type of stuff, the kids will become school dirty, you know what I mean? Like, this is our new things are coming and taking all those kids and put them in high school, especially with COVID going on, that, to me is just really surreal. I don't care what A-Day, B-Day or how they stagger the system, or whatever they do. I don't think it was good. I mean, don't get me wrong.

> All the schools have had some kind of kid or something with COVID at one time, or more, I'm sure but I don't know. Mercyhurst is like they're very strict on it. And the kids look clean. I mean, you see what I mean? It's like a, there's a certain morale, level of standards that go with that type of environment that we put in.

As these statements show, concerns about COVID-19 were related to crowding, cleanliness, and ensuring that the students were clean and well taken care of. Although she projected some of what she saw happening at her younger child's elementary school on to the high schools, the sentiment was the same. Based on her experience with her youngest child, she did not trust the families and schools in the public schools to help ensure the safety of her child and her family as much as she did the private schools. For her, these ideas confirmed her choice to send her son to a private school, but may not have necessarily been a primary factor, as she still sent her younger son to the same public elementary school.

COVID-19 Preparedness as a decision-factor

Survey data indicated COVID-19 policies ranked 17th and preparedness ranked 23rd out of 23 high school selection factors. Both categories garnered some 1st or 2nd priority selections, although the political nature of COVID-19 policies may indicate it was a decision factor for safety concern, or because parents did not want their students to wear masks in school. These data cannot be interpreted from the survey, but represent a small portion of selection factors on the whole.

As previously stated, parents in the interviews did not imply that schools were unsafe, but that does not mean that parents did not have concerns. When asked about the most important factors in making a school choice decision, LolaC initially talked about

academics and sports, and also meeting the needs of her student. However, she stopped herself to walk back her statement and follow up with-

> You know, what even I know this about school, but I have to say, people writing with me the COVID. Preparation and stuff like that, okay. Okay, if it were, if we weren't, if we weren't in a pandemic, and never heard of COVID, I would have to stay the academics to school that, you know, things like that. I have to have, I'm gonna have to say COVID right now.

LolaC was the only parent who weighed COVID as the most important factor during the interview process, but she still qualified it as a short-term concern. The remaining parents generally noted concern, but left it to the schools to provide safety measures and placed their trust in their work. This, for many parents, also represented their touchpoint with the institutional perspective.

Finding the Right Fit

Perhaps the most salient idea that came through in the survey and interview data is that parents are actively seeking the best situation they can find for their student. Although one could argue whether rational choice is truly the best description of parent decision-making, this study indicates that, in every interview instance, parents were contemplating the needs and interests of their students, comparing them to their view of the schools that were available to them, either through application acceptance, or financially, and doing the best they could to match their child to the school they felt would be the best fit. They may have used different levels of logic and reasoning, considered academics, sports, peers, family history, social emotional need, program availability, or a litany of other factors in making their decisions, but they all wrestled

with the decision and considered how to best match a school with their student. Evidence could be found for this in the fact that more than half of the families either chose different schools for siblings or explained that they had or would consider different schools for different children in the family. RoryD and KorraE sum up these ideas-

> RoryD- you know, the hardest thing is trying to get I feel like one of the most important things is, is trying to figure out the overall climate of the school and like how the hell your kids going to, you know, how are they going to succeed in this environment, but that's also the hardest thing to gauge. Like you know, that's it, you get a lot of times you're getting other people's opinions and people base their opinion, people create their own opinions or their experiences. So it depends on their experience. Um, so I guess the biggest thing would just be like do your research and, and, make the best decision.
>
> *KorraE*- I think so I think, you know, you definitely want to look at what your kids are interested in as far as even sports, academics, extracurriculars, it makes sure that there's something that they're, you know, could be involved in, if they choose to be. You know, I think once they kind of get the high school, they kind of have to do it on their own, you can't really make them anymore do those things. But I think you definitely have to give them those opportunities. Because if they don't, it's going to be a miserable experience for them.

CHAPTER 5

Overview

School choice in various forms has been an option for families in the U.S. long before the founding of the country. The market-based, Neoliberal policies that have continually grown since Friedman first advocated for greater choice in schools ensures a continuous evolution of school choice options and produces a shifting landscape for parents to navigate while making their school choice decisions. Additionally, the advent of the COVID-19 Pandemic increased, and possibly accelerated the growing complex nature of school choice. Consequently, the decision-making models that parents are using school selection are valuable pieces of information for schools, communities, and political actors alike. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods in a case-study approach, the current study sought to uncover some of these factors and models in the context of public school parents of eighth graders in a mid-sized city, which offers limited choice sets, during the COVID -19 Pandemic.

Summary of Findings

Ranked choice survey data indicated that the parents in this study were most likely to focus on school academics, safety, specialized and social programs in their decision-making. Out of 23 possible selection factors, these four garnered the most selections, while several other factors, including avoidance of public school, COVID-19 preparedness, and peer choice were rarely prioritized. When the 23 factors were grouped together into their logical marketable factors, social & specialized programs and athletics

were the most highly sought elements of high school, followed closely by academics and college & career readiness. In making their selections, parents tried to balance student needs and preferences, using their best understanding of their child's abilities and dispositions to make their eventual decisions (Reinoso, 2008, Holmes-Erickson, 2017). Specialized programs and athletics were highly stressed and discussed as a way for students to continue to learn more about themselves, develop as individuals, and take part in social aspects of schooling. Athletics in particular were a large consideration for a select group of parents, but did not represent the group as a whole. School climate, culture, and reputation were more important to some parents than others. These trends played out in a school that was described as being known for its culture in contrast to a school that had developed a reputation for safety concerns. Similarly, safety was highly important to parents who opted for options outside of the large, urban, comprehensive school, but was not as highly prioritized by parents who selected this school for its career and technical programs, making tradeoffs while selecting their school of choice (Stewart et al., 2010; Cat & Rhinesmith, 2016).

In making decisions about high school selection, parents relied much more on their understanding of their children's needs and preferences than other factors. This is supported by both survey and interview data which both show parents made large portions of their decisions based on both student needs and preferences. This bears out in the number of interviewees who noted making separate decisions for siblings in the same household, where in many cases, they either went to different schools or parents indicated that they would send their children to different schools if they thought it would best suit them. Parents also heavily sought information from their networks, but relied on this

information to a much smaller degree than the child as a source of information. Information provided by schools, such as test data, website information, and open houses were used the least, but may have been a casualty of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Decisions were made through a constant "decoding process", creating a "composite" (Reinoso, 2008) to select the school that was the "best fit."

Parents' perceptions of public schools were generally positive, but school safety issues and concerns about fights and violence turned several parents away from one public school option. These parents chose private schooling or moved to other districts. Parents actively sought situations which would provide positive peer influences and camaraderie for their children through music, sports, clubs, and social activities provided by the schools. They also worked hard to avoid situations that may produce negative peer influences, not considering schools that they thought might place their child in a situation with highly negative influences, or choosing private schooling or relocation to neighboring districts. Having the option to attend a school in the district other than the large urban comprehensive likely kept some parents in the district system.

Of the four perspectives described by Berends (2019), rational choice was the option that was found to be used the most by parents in making their high school selections. Rational choice proved to be the dominant perspective, but all parents used some combination of perspectives in making selections. The social capital perspective was used the second most, and the institutional perspective was used the least. The data also show that parents selected different schools based upon their perspectives of choice, with those describing social interaction the most selecting one of the private schools or moving to a nearby district, while parents focusing on school environment tended to

select the public magnet school. Parents who selected the large, urban comprehensive school were the least descriptive about their choices.

The COVID-19 Pandemic's influence on parental decisions was small from the quantitative standpoint, with only 1.2% of parents citing the pandemic as an important factor in their choice, and ranking 17 and 23 out of 23 factors. However, the severity with which some parents described their need to ensure their student's safety suggests that it is possible that those who did consider it weighed it heavily in their choice.

Discussion of Findings

The current study is a small-scale case study of parental decision-making factors on high school selection during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The nature of a case study limits its reproducibility and its generalizability. The sample size was (n=85) from the population (N= 713). Of these 713 parents, only 584 emails were available, many of which may have been for multiple parents in the same household, and generated failed delivery rate of 11%. Of the 520 delivered emails, there was an overall response rate of 14.5 %, which was less than the 232 responses necessary to reach a 95% confidence interval with a 5% margin of error. Samples of both the survey respondents and interview participants approached the overall demographics of the school district, but did not match them, showing higher percentages of White participants tending to have higher household incomes than the average family from Erie's Public Schools. Some of the decrease in the number of expected responses may have been the result of transience within the school district, as email addresses were collected from the district's student information system and the district had reported significant increases in transient students

and students who had disappeared and were unable to be tracked down with phone calls, emails, and home-school visitors. Although efforts were made to ensure the representativeness of the interviewees, a larger sample would have been preferable to gain a greater degree of insight from the population as a whole.

Study Implications for Stakeholder Groups

The following section outlines the implications of the current study for four stakeholder groups most associated with school choice, parents and students, school leaders, the school marketing community, and policy makers. The study findings are matched with their probable ties to each group and some recommendations are made for further study. As this is a case study, care is taken not to generalize the findings beyond their explanatory capacity.

Implications for Parents

The current study found that parents selecting high schools for their children are generally users of rational choice who consider their understanding of their child's needs and desires and ultimately choose options that are the "best fit." In order for rational choice to be most effective, accurate information about both the student and the school is critical, but may have been difficult to ascertain as parents were often forced to make selections in the absence of a full cadre of open houses, and typical marketing efforts from schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Because of the Pandemic's influence on school modes of operation, students may not have been fully aware of all of their options in this time period, potentially making it more difficult for parents to

accurately gauge the interests of their child. This may be especially true when considering the impact of specialized and social programs on parent high school selection, as these programs are often showcased at open houses which were largely cancelled at the public schools during this time. Consequently, high school selection during this time period was likely to be somewhat atypical in these regards. To the extent possible, parents would need to advocate for more opportunities to learn about high school programming along-side their children. Outside of the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities to attend open houses and school events with their children provide parents with much-needed information to make high school selections, especially in the first instances of making high school selections. Attending events that may interest their child such as athletic events, club competitions, concerts, and other school-related activities that are aligned with potential student interests could be an important step in finding the best fit school for their child.

Parent concerns about school safety and peer choice also played larger roles conversations about high school selection. Parents were actively seeking schools that would limit their child's exposure to negative peer influence and situations that may risk physical safety or mental well-being. The parent implications are that they must continually advocate for student safety and well-being to ensure the full complement of options are available to their child and that a particular school is not eliminated for fears of safety or mental well-being. The large, urban, comprehensive school may provide a number of options for parents and students that could suit them well, but if parents do not consider the school for fear of safety, those options are not available to them, and school choice dictates that they seek out other opportunities so long as they are able.

As many parents may fear that they cannot influence local public school safety, their second option is to pursue school choice and advocate for greater choice options for their state or community via petitioning the local school board or their representatives to open up choice options for their children. Unfortunately, this option would likely take more time than would be feasible to have an impact on a student in 8th grade and preparing to enter high school.

Implications for Students

Although this study did not concentrate specifically on the student impact on school choice, the amount of consideration parents put toward meeting their child's needs and desires merits an account of the potential impacts of students on their parents in making high school selections. Of most significance is the idea that parents actively seek to understand their child's needs and desires. Students are empowered in high school selection decisions. If they have developed a strong sense of self and are active in communicating their needs and desires to their parents, they will likely have a great amount of influence in the high school selection process. Working on developing a sense of self and understanding how that matches their desires for their own futures are two things that students can do to better shape the outcome of their parents' high school selection. In addition, keeping an open dialogue and having regular conversations about their wishes is likely to have a positive impact on the fit of the school they ultimately select.

Implications for School Leaders

School leaders look to build high school options that suit the needs and desires of students and parents alike. Knowing how to create the sorts of programs and environments that parents and students seek out is an essential quality for a high school leader in a school choice environment. In creating these programs, school leaders should focus their efforts on two marketable factors: specialized and social programs and athletics and academics and college and career readiness. Options for specialized programs include career and technical education, STEM schools, performing or visual arts schools, college preparatory schools, or other magnet options. Leaders should select programs of focus for a school that mirror the student and parent sentiment about the sorts of programs that are of most interest in the community. Once the programs are in place, seeking out the best staff to facilitate these programs and marketing them vigorously directly to students should be emphasized. This study's findings that parents seek out specialized and social programs and athletics and academics and college and career readiness implies that school leaders may need to choose to either create well-rounded schools with many available options or specialize in areas that will likely attract students and parents. In urban and suburban settings, larger schools likely have economies of scale that allow them to create a broad range of programs that will attract students with varied interests. Smaller schools in urban and suburban areas may be better suited to specialize and create fewer high-quality programs that appeal to large subsets of the local population.

One key to the success of these programs is that school leaders must find ways to attract local students by helping parents to see the connections between their programs

and student needs and desires. It is reasonable that one portion of their efforts should be to directly seek out ways to ensure students at the middle school level are well-informed of their high school options and work with guidance counselors and teachers to assist them in learning about how the programs offered to them at the high school level may suit their needs and interests and facilitate their plans for their own future. In order to make good decisions, students will need to have spent time developing goals for their future and learning to understand more about themselves and their needs and desires as well as how they will put their education to use in an eventual career. School leaders should target their efforts on middle school students, helping them develop these understandings and work toward seeking out educational opportunities at the next level that will set them up to realize their plans.

One method of helping parents develop understandings of school options that may be suggested by the data in this study is the creation of materials that aid in rational choice decision-making. Some examples might be emphasizing program merits, outreach by current families to both students and parents, and succinctly summarizing the merits of their particular school in ways that promote easy comparison and highlight specialized and social programs and academics. This strategy may help school leaders capitalize on the tendency for parents to use the general principles of rational choice in making their selections. School leaders may see improved outcomes for enrollment by using these sorts of materials at school events and open houses.

As parents largely used their child as a source of information for making decisions, a second key to the success of these programs are strategically marketing them to parents and students and opening up opportunities to showcase the programs in ways

that allow parents and students to experience them together. This may be best accomplished by creating events specifically targeted to middle schoolers that showcase high school programs as well as activities that encourage student and parent participation. Free tickets to concerts, plays, sporting events, academic competitions, and the like that are specifically targeted to middle school students and children could help showcase programming and foster the necessary connections between parents and students to determine their fit for the needs and desires of the child. These may present opportune times to have promotional materials on-hand that describe important indicators of academics and college and career programming that may be of interest to parents, as these programs might be more difficult to showcase in-person. As the social capital perspective was the second most widely used, these events would provide an opportune time for parents to network with other parents and for students to begin to form connections with potential classmates. Attending events at the schools themselves may help to increase a feeling of safety and security as well, offering parents a chance to see the school from a new perspective.

As safety is a concern that will turn away some perspective parents, school leaders must formulate a plan of action to ensure the safety of their students and staff and work to build the reputation of the school as both a physically safe environment and one that will cultivate a sense of well-being. Smaller schools may be able to capitalize on specialized programming or themes to build an environment of like-mindedness. Larger schools may want to build smaller communities within schools or use the school within a school model as a way of providing more safe and secure environments in schools. Using the power of social networks and social capital may be a way to improve the sense

of community within a larger school setting and create conditions that will attract more parents and students into the smaller school community settings within those schools.

Implications for the School Marketing Community

There is an old marketing adage that states "don't sell the braces, sell the smile." In terms of school marketing, it may be that parents are seeking the smile and not the braces, per se. Since the primary marketable factors parents sought out the most ended up being specialized and social programming and athletics, followed by college and career readiness and academics, parents are likely using a very forward thinking mindset in making high school selections for their students. School marketers may do well to highlight what a student may accomplish at their school or after graduation as a means of showing a possible "future-self" that can be built through specialized programming, athletics, and academics. As parents may use open houses and other school events to make their selections, particularly for their oldest children, showcasing marketable factors using students who are participating in or have moved into fields related to their chosen specialized and social programs, athletics, or academic areas of interest may encourage parents to select the school for these options.

Additionally, focusing on the learning environment and safety while promoting academics may provide parents with the type of reassurance they need to focus on their child's needs and interests in making a selection. Ensuring that there are a large number of students participating in school events, clubs, activities, and athletics who participate in open houses is also a strategy that would make sense from both a marketable factor lens and a social capital perspective.

Implications for Policy-Makers

Policy-makers should pay particular attention to the drivers of high school selection for parents. If there is a mismatch between parent choice and policy, it is less likely that the intended policies will produce the desired effects. If policy-makers are concerned about the desires of parents, they should seek out ways to create policies that encourage the creation of robust specialized and social programming in schools and build strong college and career preparedness programming . As markets in a school choice environment will shape school programming, policies should be flexible and encourage continual innovation, which can drive the improvement of offerings for students and parents. Policy makers should also take notice of parent's focus on factors other than standardized testing as a measure of program success.

As most parents are looking to measure schools in ways that go well beyond simple performance measures on standardized tests, policy makers can look for other ways to increase the outputs of schools that more closely match student and parent demand. Parents are looking for safe, academically supportive schools with solid educational, extracurricular, and social programming. An increased focus on policy that helps to drive innovation in these areas will likely improve parent and student satisfaction with schooling and may even provide for better overall outcomes for students than a heavy focus on standardized assessment.

Limitations

As this study is a small-scale case study, with limited participants in both the survey and interview process, its generalizability is narrow, and cannot be applied to a

larger context. The survey sample was smaller than necessary to warrant generalizability, but can serve as a fair proxy for school district consideration. It should be noted that the demographics for which the sample differed from the population were socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity. Survey respondents fell into higher socioeconomic strata than the district population as a whole, and White parents, especially middle-aged females, participated at a higher rate than are represented in district demographics as a whole. While these may be limitations, it is also possible that they may be strengths of the study, as these may also be groups most likely to exercise choice in this region as the majority of choices are magnet schools (Goldring & Hausman, 1999) and private schools, rather than charter schools.

The qualitative portion of this study had the potential to be affected by self-selection bias, as interviewees both chose to respond to the survey and opted into the interview. As parents participated in the interview process, they also may have been prone to reactivity, wherein their participation in the study may have changed their behaviors from the norm during the interview. Their opinions, attitudes, or willingness to share information about the selection process may have been affected by this limitation.

Time constraints were also a factor in this study for two reasons. First, the ability to more thoroughly complete the member-checking process was limited by the time constraints for this study. Second, the ideal timing for the study would have been complete the survey and interviews in the winter and spring of 2022, during the height of school selection in the region and as scheduling events for high schools were taking place. This sort of timing would ensure that school selections were made, and that the decisions of parents were still on their minds. As a number of external factors extended

this study into the fall of 2022, it is less likely that parents were willing to engage in research activity since the process was likely 6-8 months prior and parents had moved on to focusing on the new school year. The fall of 2022 also brought a greater degree of transiency, as Erie's Public Schools officials reported much greater shifting in school populations and cited that many families were moving to other regions to follow employment opportunities elsewhere. As of the spring of 2022, it is too early to tell if the reported schools enrollments will match the actual enrollments in the fall of 2022-2023, but such a comparison would add to the strength of the data.

These limitations warrant the study as a small contribution to the larger landscape of research on parent school selection, providing useful clues that could inform future studies and branching avenues of inquiry. The study design does provide some avenues for easy expansion and modification to provide better descriptive power and potential for reproduction tests of the results. EPS could use a similar model to gather information for the current year as a means to inform decisions about the next school year. Expanding the survey through the district's communication channels and actively promoting a response during future open house events, scheduling, and other selection-related events could improve upon the limitations of the current study and inform policy and practice for the future.

Changing Dynamic of the Pandemic

Because of the ever-changing dynamics related to the COVID-19 Pandemic, this study is not equipped to capture the full range of parental opinions regarding the pandemic and high school choice, even for this small study in a single city at one time.

The swiftness with which information has shifted, social and political opinion and rhetoric have evolved, and levels of parent concern and activism have risen and fallen has made the tracking of these factors an impossibility for a study of this design. Again, it is likely that in the time since this study began, parental knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about the pandemic have shifted in a multitude of ways. It is not the intent of this study to gain a comprehensive view of these shifting attitudes, but to merely gauge the impact that they may have had at a single point in time in the fall of 2021. Thus this study serves as a blip on the radar of understanding the dynamics of COVID-19 opinions and parent decision-making.

Directions for Future Research

The study design does provide some avenues for easy expansion and modification to provide better descriptive power and potential for reproduction tests of the results. The study could also be used as a first in a series of studies on school choice for the region, providing the potential to further explore school choice in this particular context over a longer period of time, with recognition of the continually changing education landscape as a factor in selection. The overrepresentation of white females in the sample, which was problematic for this study, should be balanced with future studies that employ methods to recruit more male responses and a level of diversity that more closely matches the demographics of the district parents as a whole. One particular area of interest may be in cyber schooling and cyber charter enrollment. The current study was not designed to capture feedback about this particular avenue of choice, but Erie's Public Schools is reporting greater enrollment in cyber schooling and charter options for the 2022-23

school year. It may be possible that some parents feel their high school selections are inadequate and that there is a need for expanded school options.

Expanding the study to private schools in the area would provide a greater understanding of the overall choice landscape in the region. The current study only sought feedback from public middle school choosers. Adding the insights of private middle school parents could also be informative, as there are a number of families who choose to return to the public magnet school for their high school selection that come from this sector.

An expansion to regional choice would also be of value. Erie rests as a medium-sized city surrounded by rural districts to the south and east, extending to Pittsburgh to the south and as far east as Reading, Scranton or Allentown before a similar or larger city can be found. Gaining a better understanding of High School Selection in the greater Erie area could inform much about the landscape of choice and how policy decisions might be made for choice initiatives.

Several further questions stemming from this study may warrant investigation. The finding that parents are largely using their child as a source of information about high school selection seems to be largely absent from the literature. More studies to tease out the dynamics of high school selection and the child's influence on parent decision-making could help provide much insight into the high school selection process. Other options include exploring questions about socioeconomic status, school safety, and race/ethnicity as related to local school choice, especially given that several studies have linked these ideas (Mickelson, Bottia, & Southworth, 2008; Saporito, 2003; Thompson Dorsey & Roulhac, 2019). In particular, additional research may be needed to flesh out

whether parent discussion about school safety in particular are utilized to indirectly convey concerns about race. Further, the degree to which parents are selecting local schools based on influence of peer groups, and the degree to which social capital may influence decisions, especially while including parochial school parent data could be further explored. Also of interest are further studies involving uncovering a better model to understand parent concepts of "academics" which was found to be a problematic term in this study, and deciphering between parental use of rational choice or other elements of decision theory. As a generalized version of rational choice was used in the current study largely because of its historical presence in the field, other choice theories were not analyzed. It is possible that competing ideas from the field of behavioral economics such as bounded rationality (Herbert A. Simon) or more specific heuristics such as satisficing (Prichard & Swezey, 2016), elimination by aspects, herd behavior, or framing effects may more accurately describe high school parent selection. Since most parents in the current study cited using specific information about the needs and desires of their children to make their high school selection, determining the degree to which the child and parent correlate in this assessment could provide useful information about how best to guide families through the decision-making process.

Conclusion

As the school choice landscape continues to broaden, a continual study of the drivers of parent choice, the options available to them, the selections that they make, and the overall outcome of those selections are important data for multiple stakeholders. Schools need data to support their decision-making regarding programming and

marketability. Parents need to have options for the best possible schools they can find, and the information to make their decisions. Policy makers need to better understand the impacts of high school selection options, the kinds of selections that parents make, and the reasons for those selections, as well as their impact, in order to determine the best policy structures to build into the high school selection landscape.

The current study sought to determine the primary marketable factors that parents use to make high school selections, the sources of information they rely on to make their decisions, how their perceptions of public schools affect their selection, the types of choice perspectives they employ in selecting schools, and whether COVID-19 responses by the schools affected their decisions. In seeking information about these questions, the study employed a mixed-methods, case study approach to learn more about public school parent decision-making in a mid-sized city with limited choice options. It is thought to be the first study of this sort, and seeks to add to the overall understanding of school choice rather than to inform any generalizable constructs beyond Erie, Pennsylvania during the 2021-22 school year.

Findings included that parents' preferences were highest for the primary selection factors of Social & Specialized Programs & Athletics and Academics & College & Career Readiness, respectively. School safety was a major factor of its own, more so for choosers who did not select the large, urban comprehensive school, and may have been a highly significant factor for some parents based upon the intensity of their reactions to potential safety threats. Safety may have been a larger concern for low SES parents than high SES parents. Location was not found to be a significant factor, likely because the study was completed in regard to high schools, in a school district where the two high

schools are 8-10 blocks apart and most all students get some sort of transportation to school.

Rational choice as a generalized model was the perspective most often used by parents to make high school selections, followed by the social capital perspective. In making these selections, parents weighed assets and liabilities against prospects for school environment and social interaction. They relied on their child's needs and interests to a greater degree than the school's ability to communicate it's assets, and gathered intel from their own peers, but did not necessarily let it guide their decisions. In filtering though their decisions, they often weighed out the schools ability to influence the child's peer groups and environment, while trying to select a school that would fit the needs and interests of their child. Seeking positive peer interactions and influences and avoiding negative interactions and influences were significant factors, especially for parents who were not in the highest SES categories. The more factors of each type a parent used in making their decision, the more likely they were to choose a private or magnet school or move to a nearby district. Parents who incorporated fewer selection factors into their decisions most often chose the large, urban, comprehensive school.

These data have implicit effects on the way schools should view choice. As choosing parents, most accounted for assets and liabilities and weighed out both the school environment and social interaction opportunities in search of a school that was the "best fit" for their child. This "finding a school of best fit" exercise was carried out an may be a better description for parent high school selection than any version of rational choice, as it implies two important facts; 1) no school will be a perfect fit for most children and 2) even the most savvy parents cannot completely explain all of the intricate

needs and desires their child may have regarding high school. Therefore, the best fit model likely more accurately describes the decision-making process for parents, as it allows for imperfections in reasoning, information gathering, and school provision of selection factors.

Implications for this study include the importance for schools to develop and cultivate strong supplementary programs that provide positive peer interaction and allow for the pursuit of related academic interests. As supplementary programs were the most highly cited factors for parents in both the survey data and interview data, there is evidence that they serve as a strong selection factor for high schools. As parents used broad conceptions of academics, schools might best be able to attract students and parents by offering a broad range of opportunities for academic success, while ensuring the existence of traditional higher level academic programming for those who seek it.

Being "a school that offers everything" is a difficult task and requires economies of scale that most mid-sized to smaller schools cannot accommodate. Can small to mid-sized schools realistically offer a full range of supports for the most at-risk students in need of the most specialized instruction and supports while offering a range of regular, honors, AP, and dual enrollment courses while offering high quality sports, music, art, theater, dance, social programming, academic clubs, STEM activities, cyber programs, CTE, and non-traditional pathways, and the like? If so, at what cost? Additionally, meeting growing the diverse needs and desires of students requires talented and specialized educators and support staff that can provide the range of educational services that students may need. As school choice options grow, traditional public schools will be forced into situations that may require them to either specialize or consolidate into

schools with larger economies of scale in order to provide the full array of "school that offers everything" menu options.

The rapidly changing landscape of education will require fast adaptation and a keen eye on parent and student needs and desires. Schools will be hard-pressed to keep up as options change, and the schools as institutions model could fade quickly if school choice continues to proliferate, replacing a patchwork of similar small to mid-sized schools across the Commonwealth with fewer, much larger, comprehensive schools offering many programs and many smaller specialized schools for students with select interests and educational need.

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APPENDIX A.

PARENT SURVEY

Page 1- After Consent Form

* 1. Do you agree to the above terms? By clicking "Yes", you consent that you are willing to answer the questions in this survey.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Next

Survey Format

Page 2-

3. Below you will see a list of common factors that parents use in selecting a high school for their child. Please select the top five factors in making your decision and rank those choices in order of importance from most important to least important to your final decision.

	Top Priority	Second Priority	Third Priority	Fourth Priority	Fifth Priority
School Safety	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Academics/Curriculum	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Athletics	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Music/Theater/ Dance Progams	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Technology Availability/Use	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Specialized Programs (Honors, AP/IB Programs, Career and Technical, Magnet Programming, Academic Programs, Special Education Programs, Work-Study, ROTC)	○	○	○	○	○
Reputation of School	○	○	○	○	○
Avoidance of Public High School	○	○	○	○	○
Religious Affiliation	○	○	○	○	○
College/Career Readiness	○	○	○	○	○
Homework Load	○	○	○	○	○
Standardized Testing	○	○	○	○	○
Social Programs (After School Clubs and Activities such as Robotics, Model UN, Academic Sports League, Key Club, 4H, National Honors Society, Ski Club etc.)	○	○	○	○	○
Networking Opportunities	○	○	○	○	○
School Climate/ Culture/ Learning Environment	○	○	○	○	○
Open Houses, Visits, Shadowing Opportunities, Advertising	○	○	○	○	○
Friends/ Peer Choices	○	○	○	○	○

Preparedness for COVID-19	○	○	○	○	○
Class Size	○	○	○	○	○
Child's Preference	○	○	○	○	○
Location	○	○	○	○	○

Demographic Information

Providing the demographic information below is optional. It will provide the researcher with further insight into some factors that may influence high school choice. You may choose not to answer any of these questions, some of these questions, or all of these questions.

4. Gender

- ◯ Male
- ◯ Female
- ◯ Prefer to self describe as_____ (please specify)

5. Age Range

- ◯ 25-29
- ◯ 30-39
- ◯ 40-49
- ◯ 50-59
- ◯ 60 +

6. Race/Ethnicity

- ◯ White or Caucasian
- ◯ Black or African American
- ◯ Hispanic or Latino
- ◯ Asian or Asian American
- ◯ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ◯ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- ◯ Another race

7. Approximate Household Income

- ◯ Under $15,000
- ◯ Between $15,000 and $29,999
- ◯ Between $30,000 and $49,999
- ◯ Between $50,000 and $74,999
- ◯ Between $75,000 and $99,999
- ◯ Between $100,000 and $150,000
- ◯ Over $150,000

8. Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. We are looking for volunteers to take part in an interview process using Zoom to gain further insight into the ways in which parents make their high school decisions. If you are interested in taking part, please provide your name and contact information below.

Name

Email Address

Phone Number

Prev Done

APPENDIX B.

QUALITATIVE CODE BOOK

Qualitative Code Book		
Code/Subcode	Description	Notes
Parent Selection Factors	Parent states or alludes to a consideration, idea, factor, or impetus for making a school selection, directly or in passing phrase, or explicitly shares information indicating a factor was considered or dismissed in making a high school selection.	Secondary tag of +/- may be applied to show positive or negative affiliation.
Academics	Parent discusses general term academics, academic programming, grades, classwork, school projects, academic achievement or gives examples of academic honors or awards.	Does not include homework, or generalized standardized test scores unless specifically tied to academics or achievement.
Athletics	Parent discusses athletics in general or specific sport or competitive activity.	
Avoid public school	Parent states or alludes to consideration of avoiding public school, public school staff, or students.	
Class size	Parent states or alludes to considering class room size, number of students in a class, crowding, or space constraints in classrooms.	

Code/Subcode	Description	Notes
College/career readiness	Parent states or alludes to considering college preparedness, career preparedness, mentions specific college or career aspirations, or other post-secondary schooling or steps needed to be prepared for those activities such as credentialization, application processes, etc.	Separate from academics and specialized programs, unless specifically tied to college selection admittance, scholarship or career attainment.
COVID-19 policies	Parent states or alludes to considering COVID-19 policies or practices of schools.	Does not include general COVID-19 concerns or effects of the pandemic.
Homework load	Parent states or alludes to considering homework amounts, time, or difficulty.	
Location	Parent states or alludes to physical school location as being a positive or negative factor in school selection.	
Music/theater	Parent states or alludes to prioritizing music, theater or other performing arts as a factor in school selection.	
Networking opportunities	Parent states or alludes to seeking out opportunities for parent/student to network, form bonds related to interests, future business, or future career aspirations, including arts and athletics.	
Open houses, shadowing, etc.	Parent discusses open houses, shadowing, tours, attending school events as a part of high school selection.	

Code/Subcode	Description	Notes
Peer choice	Parent states or alludes to considering high school selection based on child's peer selections, friend groups, club or athletic team selections, or other peer groups as an influential factor.	Does not include child or parent selection of peers or peer selection.
Religious affiliation	Parent states or alludes to the consideration of religion, religious basis, theme, association, or affiliation with high school selection.	
Reputation	Parent mentions or alludes to reputation of the school as a decision factor.	
School climate/culture	Parent states or alludes to school climate or culture, student to student interactions, atmosphere, environment as factor in making high school selection.	
School safety	Parent states or alludes to physical or emotional safety, fighting, violence, confrontation, severe bullying, or other major forms of concern or fear for well-being of child.	Not to include COVID-19 concerns.
Social programs	Parent states or alludes to after school programs, clubs, school activities, events, or traditions that influence school selection.	

Code/Subcode	Description	Notes
Specialized programs	Parent states or alludes to specialized programs, honors, AP, dual enrollment, IB, CTE, magnet, special education, or other specialized academic programming that is considered in school selection.	
Standardized test scores	Parent states or alludes to the consideration of SAT, ACT, PSSA, Keystone, AP, IB, or other standardized testing.	
Student's preference	Parent states or alludes to considering the child's preference for school, inclusive of all selection factors student may use.	
Technology	Parent states or alludes to technology- computer, iPad, Chromebook, or other technology, hardware or software, used as a factor in making high school selection.	
Preparedness for COVID-19	Parent states or alludes to school preparations for COVID-19, social distancing, masking, policies, classroom spacing, sanitization etc.	
Sources of Information	Parent states or alludes to seeking, retrieving, or accepting information about a school.	
The child	Parent states or alludes to seeking, retrieving, or using the child or knowledge or feelings about the child as a source of information about high school, or the child's needs or preferences for high	May also include what is known about the child's educational needs, inclusive of IEP/504 plans.

	school in the selection process.	
Code/Subcode	Description	Notes
Parent networks	Parent states or alludes to seeking, retrieving, or accepting information from friends, colleagues, peer groups, or other network connections to find information that may be used in high school selection.	Networks may be formal or informal in nature.
School provided information	Parent states or alludes to seeking, retrieving, accepting, or using information provided by the school through events, pamphlets, websites, cell phone applications, or other communication to gather information about a school.	
Perceptions of Public Schools	Parent states or alludes to understandings, feelings, or other perceptions of public schooling.	
School safety	Parent states or alludes to indirect knowledge of physical or emotional safety, fighting, violence, confrontation, severe bullying, or other major forms of concern or fear for well-being of child.	
Positive affiliations & peer selection	Parent states or alludes to the preference for peer groups as a means of adding positive value to child's education.	May include both formal and informal peer groups.
Negative affiliations & peer selection	Parent states or alludes to the preference to avoid or mitigate potential negative peer influences on the child.	
School Choice Perspectives	Parent states or alludes to the use of particular means or viewpoints in making high	

	school selection that may be categorized as per Berends, 2019.	
Code/Subcode	Description	Notes
Institutional perspective	Parent states or alludes to the advice or information provided by school officials, school systems, deference of decision-making to the school or school officials, or sorting mechanisms used by schools.	
Rational choice perspective	Parent states or alludes to using rational or semi-rational thinking in making school choice decision, weighing out factors, making lists, seeking out specific outcomes, or tangible benefits provided by the school for their child.	
Social capital perspective	Parent states or alludes to seeking beneficial peers, mentors, networks, status, or adults or students who can provide social capital benefits.	Should not include discussion of general atmosphere, environment, or community.
Social organization of schooling perspective	Parent states or alludes to community atmosphere, teacher/student or student/student relationships, parent social organizations, rigorous structures within school to provide benefit to the child.	Should not include aspects of networks or social capital.
COVID-19		
Local School Response	Parent states or alludes to local school response to, preparation for, or lack of preparation for COVID-19.	
COVID-19 Concerns	Parent states or alludes to worry or concern about COVID-19 and its impact on	

	health, safety, learning, school environment, or student well-being.	
Code/Subcode	Description	Notes
Finding the Right Fit	Parent states or alludes to desire to meet child's needs, or interests, find programmatic, academic, or social "fit" for student, describes need to feel welcomed, fit in, feel in place, or school that has the right feel or right combination of possible benefits.	