

# Choice, Charter Schools, and Household Preferences\*

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*Objective.* Previous research indicates that minority and low-SES households have different preferences for schools than Anglo and high-SES households. Some fear that in a system of school choice, these differences will result in segregation by race and class. *Methods.* This research analyzes new data generated by 1,100 interviews of choosing parents. *Results.* While there are differences between racial/ethnic and income groups in terms of their preferences regarding their children's schools, the differences do not extend to the parents' common concern for academic excellence. Where value sets do differ, they seem to do so because of differences in the "real-world" circumstances faced by these two groups rather than due to a failure to value school quality, as previous research sometimes implies. *Conclusions.* These data do not support the argument that the central educational preferences of households differ by race and/or class, nor the implication that school choice programs will promote racial and class segregation.

One of the persistent grounds for opposing school choice has been the belief that it will increase school segregation (Smith and Meier, 1995; Henig, 1994, 1996, 1998; Ascher, Fruchter, and Berne, 1996). One argument is that simple racial aversion will cause choosers to avoid schools in which their own racial or class group is not in the majority (Henig, 1996). More relevant for this report is a second argument that focuses on differences in preferences for schools that are mediated by race and class (Martinez, Godwin, and Kemerer, 1996; Godwin, Kemerer, and Martinez, 1998; Wells, 1993, 1996; Carnegie Foundation, 1992; Lee, Croninger, and Smith, 1996). That is, minority and low-income households actually want different things from schools than Anglo, high-income households do (Schneider, Marschall, Teske, and Roch, 1998).

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The data generated by interviews of more than a thousand charter-school parents in Texas can help clarify the issues in this debate. To the degree that previous fears of school choice rest upon survey results (Carnegie Foundation, 1992; Lee, Croninger, and Smith, 1996), these data provide some reassurance in that they show little difference based on race and class in what parents say they want from schools.

## The Literature

A problematic assumption of market-oriented education reforms is that all households seek the same thing from schools—quality education. Serious questions have been raised about the validity of this assumption (Smith and Meier, 1995; Schneider, Teske, Marschall, and Roch, 1998; Lee, Croninger, and Smith, 1996; Hassel, 1998).

Several researchers have argued that race and class differences among households correspond to differences in preferences for schools. One common version of this argument is that minority, low-SES households value things other than education quality, such as compatible cultural styles, discipline, or safety (Wells, 1993, 1996; Henig, 1996; Lee, Croninger, and Smith, 1996). Wells' study of thirty-seven inner-city black households in St. Louis highlights the fact that school quality is only one of a number of motives for choosing schools that include feelings of racial safety and individual responses to dominant white culture. Henig's study of several hundred transfer requests in Montgomery County, Maryland, found that white parents predominantly chose schools with higher percentages of white students and minority parents chose schools with higher percentages of minority students.

Schneider, Marschall, Teske, and Roch (1998) find that households do have differences in preferences that are structured by race. Specifically, minority respondents and those with no more than a high school education in their sample are *more* concerned with the quality of the schools as defined by tangible measures such as test scores and the maintenance of discipline. They are less concerned with matters such as values and racial diversity.

## This Study

This study is based upon the evaluation of open-enrollment charter schools in Texas commissioned by the State Board of Education (Taebel et al., 1998). Respondents to the survey that generated the data for this report have made a choice to send their children to an alternative to the conventional public schools. This fact conditions the conclusions we can reach about the factors that influence school choice.

Specifically, observing these parents cannot tell us much about the differences between choosers and non-choosers because there are no non-choosers in the survey. The results, therefore, suggest answers to questions such as "Do minority choosers value different things in schools than white choosers," or "Do low-income choosers look for different things in schools than high-income choosers."

The descriptive data for the Texas charter schools suggest, however, that certain of the fears about the differences between choosers and non-choosers may not be realized. In particular, there is little indication that charter schools in Texas are havens for white households seeking to isolate themselves from contact with minority groups. If anything, the opposite appears to be true. In the charter schools, 45% of students are Hispanic and 29% are African American. In the traditional public schools, 37% of students are Hispanic and 14% are African American (Taebel et. al., 1998).

One of the reasons that Texas charter schools enroll such a high percentage of minority students is the emphasis the state has put upon schools that serve "at-risk" students. Such schools comprise well over half of the charter schools operating in the state. At-risk schools draw more heavily than non-at-risk schools from minority student populations.<sup>1</sup>

Even if we focus only on the schools that serve primarily non-at-risk students, however, there is little indication that choosers overall represent a white elite. White students are about as likely to be found in non-at-risk charter schools (49%) as in the conventional public schools in the state (46%).

Unfortunately, these data do not give any indication of the importance of racial concerns in the choices that charter-school parents make because no question of that nature was included in the survey.<sup>2</sup>

## The Data

The data on educational preferences of charter-school parents were generated by some 1,100 parent surveys conducted in 1997 and 1998 by the Survey Research Center of the University of North Texas. During the interview, parents were asked these questions:

- How important was educational quality to you when you chose your child's charter school?

<sup>1</sup>Regression results (not reported) indicate that the at-risk/non-at-risk distinction does not make any difference in the importance that parents place on various school characteristics.

<sup>2</sup>The lack of questions about the racial preferences of charter-school households may not be as great an oversight as it might initially appear. In their survey, Schneider, Teske, Marschall, and Roch (1998) found that the percentages of parents citing racial factors were so low that they did not merit analysis, or even comment in some instances. Sixteen percent of respondents identified racial diversity as an important characteristic of schools, but less than 5% said it was important that their children attend schools with other children of the same race.

- How important was class size?
- How important was your concern for your child's safety?
- How important was the location of the school?
- How important was it to choose a school where your child had friends?

The possible responses to these questions were "very important," "important," "not too important," and "not important at all."

These questions cover a useful variety of motivations. The importance of educational quality in parents' decisions is obviously a critical concern for this research. This question poses a problem, however, insofar as few parents can be expected to say that they do *not* consider education quality important in choosing their children's schools. Most respondents probably know that they are supposed to say that education quality is important. Education quality, like racial equality, is an abstract value to which most respondents will pay lip service.

Class size, on the other hand, is a specific measure of education quality.<sup>3</sup> Parents may know that they are supposed to place importance on education quality, but it is not clear that they know that they are supposed to prefer smaller classes. If patterns of preference for class size are similar to those for education quality, it makes the latter more credible.

Safety is one of the overriding concerns that parents have for schools (Schneider, Teske, Marschall, and Roch, 1998). Some observers contend that the concern for safety rather than quality distinguishes minority and low-income households from middle-class Anglo households (Lee, Croninger, and Smith, 1996). It is important, therefore, to determine if such a difference is present among the charter-school households in the sample.

Finally, concerns about school location and the possibility that students have friends at a particular charter school are likely to be orthogonal to parental concerns about education quality. If racial and income groups differ systematically in the importance they place on these two factors relative to school quality, the possibility increases that differing preferences might lead to sorting on race and income.

Before responses to these questions were analyzed, they were weighted to reflect the distribution of racial and ethnic characteristics in the charter schools. Inevitably, response rates for charter-school telephone surveys are higher among Anglo households and higher-income households in spite of frequent callbacks and other measures. In order to bring sample racial distributions in line with the distributions in the schools, the following weights were used: 0.68 for Anglo respondents, 0.83 for Asians, 1.02 for African Americans, and 1.33 for Hispanics.

<sup>3</sup>This proposition is accepted without much dispute in the education-production-function literature. See, for instance, Ferguson and Ladd, 1996.

TABLE 1  
 Percentages of Racial and Income Groups Finding Each Factor  
 Important or Very Important

	Anglo	Black	Hispanic	Low Income	Moderate Income	High Income
Education quality	93.5	95.8	95.2	96.4	94.8	95.2
Class size	87.9	86.4	86.0	82.9	88.2	87.6
Safety	62.8	73.8	80.4	80.8	80.4	68.3
Location	52.6	70	78.1	78.8	70.6	62.7
Friends	31.6	31.9	48.5	51.4	39.6	32.4

## Results

The distributions in Table 1 support several observations. The first is that the concern for education quality does not appear to be mediated by race/ethnicity or by income. No matter how the data are parsed, 93%–96% of respondents say that education quality is important or very important to them. Furthermore, education quality is thought to be important or very important by a higher percentage of respondents than any of the other factors in *every* race and income grouping.

Indeed, ranking factors in order of the percentage of respondents who consider them important or very important produces the same ordering of factors for each of the six subgroups. Each group considers education quality the most important concern, followed by class size, safety, the location of the schools, and the presence of students' friends at the school.

This homogeneity of preferences persists when one turns to the class-size variable. The largest difference—5.3 percentage points—is between low-income and high-income respondents. All other differences are smaller, and the range of values is from about 83 points to about 88 points. Substantial majorities of *all* subgroups say that class size is important in making decisions about their children's schools.

The pattern of responses to the question on class size indicates that parents are not only uniformly concerned about the abstract notion of school quality, but that uniformity extends to one of the more concrete indices of school quality as well.

As one considers the responses to the question about safety, the uniformity in preferences begins to break down. Responses to this question are mediated by race and income. A larger percentage of African American respondents than of white respondents says that safety is important in their choice of schools; and a larger percentage, in turn, of Hispanic respondents says that safety is important or very important. And though low- and moderate-income respondents are nearly identical in the percentages that

consider safety important, a much smaller percentage of high-income respondents places similar emphasis on safety. This finding should be qualified in three ways.

First, in each of the six subgroups, safety is cited as important or very important by a majority of respondents. Even among Anglos, six parents out of ten indicated that safety was prominent among their preferences for their childrens' schools.

Second, it is important to remember that these respondents are making decisions to *leave* the schools that their children are in as well as picking the schools to which they want their children to go. What they want for their children's educational future is almost certainly conditioned by their previous educational experiences. The fact of the matter is that black, Hispanic, and low-income students are more likely than Anglo students to go to inner-city schools that have been heavily penetrated by weapons, drugs, and social pathologies. High-income, Anglo parents don't express as much concern about safety because their children are less likely to have gone to dangerous conventional schools.

Finally, if the overriding concern is that differences in household preferences will lead to sorting by race and class, the central question becomes whether differences observed here on the issue of safety will promote such sorting. The simple fact is that good schools are also safe schools. The set of schools in which academic quality is high but crime runs rampant in the halls must be very nearly empty. Parents who search for safe schools will also find good schools, and vice versa.

School location is a concern for a majority of charter-school parents regardless of the income or racial subgroup in which they may fall. That being said, there are clear differences among groups with respect to the percentages for whom location is important or very important. Hispanic parents are more likely to place importance on school location than black parents, who in turn are more likely to say that location is important than Anglo parents. Similarly, low-income parents are more likely than moderate-income parents to be concerned about school location, and moderate-income parents are more likely than high-income parents to say this is a concern. As with safety, however, the interpretation of these results should be tempered by an appreciation of the realities parents face. Lower-income, minority respondents are likely to have fewer resources to transport students to faraway schools than higher-income white respondents.

Only one of the six subgroups has a majority (51.4%) of respondents for whom the "friends" factor is important or very important—low-income households. For the other five subgroups, less than half say that it is important to them that their children attend school with friends. This is the only variable that fails to be important to a majority of respondents in each of the six subgroups. It is also interesting that this is the only one of the five variables that might be considered frivolous. It is not conducive to

higher educational achievement, nor does it reflect any compelling constraints that parents must factor in to their choice of schools. It has nothing to do with children's safety or with the way the bills get paid. It is true, however, that income and race do appear to mediate parental preferences in this area. There is no difference between black and white parents on this issue, but it is important to a much higher percentage of Hispanic parents. Also, as income increases, there is a monotonic decline in the percentage of respondents who find this variable important.

### Questions Not Addressed by These Data

The data do not permit us to address whether the racial composition of schools is itself a factor in the decision calculations of choosing households. Henig (1996) finds considerable evidence of racial aversion in the school choices made by different racial groups. The evidence from Montgomery County indicates that white families are likely to send their children to predominantly white schools in well-to-do neighborhoods, while minority families are likely to send their children to predominantly minority schools in neighborhoods with lower-income households.

Henig's conclusions, however, are not based on survey responses, but on the requests that parents made for their children to transfer to particular magnet schools. This analysis does not resolve the question of whether unfettered choice leads to increased segregation. To do that, we would have to determine if the schools that children transfer to were more or less racially distinctive than the schools that they were leaving.

Suppose, for instance, that we find that white parents send their children to the charter schools that have the highest percentages of white students. That alone does not demonstrate an increase in segregation over the conventional public schools. Specifically, if the schools that white children leave have higher percentages of white students than the charter schools to which they transfer, the result would be a decrease in segregation, even though those schools had the highest percentages of white students among the group of charter schools. Henig does not make that determination in his analysis, and we cannot make such a determination from the data we currently have.

An additional weakness of Henig's analysis is the failure to control for the locations of the schools. For instance, Henig's analysis notes that minority students are more likely to transfer into schools that have higher percentages of minority students and that are located in economically depressed neighborhoods. Henig's analysis does not rule out the possibility that the schools that minority students are transferring out of are located in the same neighborhoods as the magnet schools into which they transfer. If this were the case, it would cast the results reported by Henig in a

considerably different light. Again, such determinations about the influence of location cannot be made from Henig's report or from our data.

## Conclusion

At this point, it may be useful to summarize these results.

- No matter what the racial/ethnic or income group, almost all parents say they choose charter schools in the hope of providing better educational quality for their children.
- No matter what the racial/ethnic or income group, large majorities of parents choose charter schools for the promise of smaller class sizes.
- Within each subgroup, substantial majorities of parents choose charter schools hoping that they will be safer than conventional schools. Differences among groups correspond with differences in the likelihood that their children might actually have been endangered in the conventional school they attended.
- Within each subgroup, a majority of parents say that school location is important. Those who are most likely to say that location is important are also those who are least likely to have resources to support daily transportation to a faraway school.
- The only variable that is not a concern for a majority of parents in each subgroup is the "friends" variable. For all but the low-income group, less than half think this factor is important or very important.

These results are open to the criticism that they are based on survey responses. When they were presented at a workshop on minority education, one observer remarked, "I am persuaded by *behavior*." We would note that the consistency of the responses provides some reassurance. Not only do all race and class groupings value education quality, they value it in very nearly the same proportions. Furthermore, they value education quality in the abstract, and they also value the more tangible marker for education quality, small class size. Also, every group has exactly the same preference ordering with respect to the five factors considered in this report.

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